Tales Retold: Fairy Tales in Contemporary European Visual Art

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"Many are the deceivers," announces Anne Sexton (1971:p73), immediately striking doubt as a foretaste of the treachery that is to follow. Her statement, however, broadly encompasses the deceit of societies and individuals, of tale tellers and history, and not least, the wolf: "Long ago / there was a strange deception: / a wolf dressed in frills, / a kind of transvestite" (Sexton, 1971:p73). This cast of doubt runs through Sexton's poems in dark parody of the Grimms' tales she appropriates. And it is this deceit that unites the fine art practice of a number of European artists responding to the traditional fairy tale as a conduit to address wider truths and expectations of gender in Euro-American society in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In this chapter the subversive strategies to rethink gender codes and conventions employed by fine artists referencing fairy tales in their work will be examined. Our understanding of the anti-tale and how this is played out in the re-visions, as well as the undermining, or reconstruction of gender, in those re-visions will challenge our expectation of fairy tale femininity, and ask what it is to be the innocent persecuted heroine, the good fairy godmother or the wicked stepmother. Revelation, by way of deception and ambiguity, is practiced by the artists and the tales they tell. Fairy tale expectation of the feminine is undone; morality, agency, intelligence and performance are examined in what follows to reveal an alternative future for the three models of womanhood embedded in the traditional tales.

Although pre-twentieth century female authors and their tales are few and little known in comparison to their male counterparts, the female presence in fairy tales is indisputable. Either as protagonists or storytellers, the female is a pervasive presence and has become mythologized as the archetypal taleteller. The female storyteller evidently had a voice, but until the late twentieth century an anonymous one. In the twentieth century, and particularly since the 1960s and 1970s (parallel to the rise of feminism, other rights movements and the disciplines of cultural and media studies), cultural conditions have shifted. In a politicised postmodern era the fairy tale has been adopted by female authors as a tool to redress, predominantly, the gender inequalities that have become a legacy of the Grimm Brothers' collections. This adoption of the genre indicates the resuscitation of the female voice, an audience not necessarily of children, and the recognition of the fairy tale as a potential medium for communicating wider truths of social position and behaviour. In the very late twentieth and early twenty-first century the female voice has been strengthened with the addition of female fine artists that have taken on the mantle of sooth-sayer and through their work explored the possibilities of gender representation in the visual fairy tale. These women artists are radical in their retellings, sisters of their literary forebears, their protagonists speak of independence, action, courage, dissent, rebellion and darker motivations that do not align easily with the female characters that have dominated the popular fairy tale.

The traditional performance of gender, specifically femininity, that has been re-told for centuries is now being overthrown for a number of alternative readings which, in visual format, are the subject of this chapter. This critique of alternative fairy tale femininity affords the viewer of these works to consider an unconventional possibility, where the young and more mature women of fairy tales reject their traditional selves and reveal something more defiant, morally questionable, and altogether more ambiguous than those we are comfortable and familiar with. Through the works analysed here we encounter a wolf-hooded Little Red Riding Hood, a menacing Blue Fairy, and the wicked step-mother stripped of all but a collar of lamb's hearts.

Anti-Tales

The traditional European fairy tales featuring a female protagonist were broadly based on caution and deeply embedded modes of comportment for the young female of the period whilst also espousing warnings against the corruption of the mature female in society. These values, conveyed by endless iterations of the tales, have endured in both the tales and in the societies receiving of them. Of the best known European authors and collectors of tales, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Anderson and Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm were stark in their warnings, the latter pair toning down the punitive measures in later editions to suit the sensibilities (and sensitivities) of their readership. In the twentieth century Disney adopted the popular tales, sanitised them and devised a formulaic utopian vision of what life might be like if one abided by the codes set down in the tales. However, this utopia has, arguably, metamorphosed in the late twentieth century, to become a dystopia for the young woman in Euro-American society[1]. Where once the passive, obedient, beautiful yet mute girl was a position to be rewarded, considering the accomplishments of feminism, this position is now a veritable dystopia, a prospect that disempowers the active and independent agent the young female in society has become. As Jack Zipes (2012) comments, the aspirations of the 1960s women's movement were not fully achieved:

> 'virtually none of the wishes and dreams of the 1960s' generation have been fulfilled. Instead we wallow in a world filled with conflict, false promises, corruption and material greed. As a consequence of the deterioration of social, political, and cultural conditions, numerous artists have employed the fairy tale, not to encourage utopian urges, but rather to pierce artificial illusions that make it difficult for people to comprehend what is happening to them' (p.137).

The rejection of the traditional tale in its sanitised and popular state is what connects the artists addressed in this paper. If the works analysed here can be described as dystopian, in many ways the dystopia is favourable to the somnambulant utopia peddled by the conventional telling of the popular tales.

The adoption and subversion of the traditional fairy tale by fine artists is undertaken through two methods, the first is an explicit referencing of the popular or most well-known tales. The second method is to draw fragments from fairy tale narratives and appropriate tropes into artworks more obliquely (Zipes, 2012:p.137). Through these methods, Zipes suggests that the artists 'have endowed the fairy tale with a more profound meaning through the creation of dystopian, grotesque, macabre, and comic configurations' (Zipes, 2012:p.136). Despite reinforcing negativity in his choice of adjective, Zipes identifies some of the parodic and extraordinary re-vision strategies practiced on fairy tales once familiar to us. However, visual responses to the fairy tale can be subtle, understated and not the primary intention of the artists; one such work is Cornelia Parker's collaboration with actress Tilda Swinton entitled *The Maybe* (1995) (fig.1). In this installation piece, Swinton slept eight hours a day in a glass case in the Serpentine Gallery, located in Hyde Park, London. The work is reminiscent of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* in part due to the inert female figure, but also for the location of the installation; here read city parkland for fairy tale forest. The casting of Swinton is an interesting choice not only for her prowess as an independent film actress, but for her role as Orlando, the gender-bending time traveller from Virginia Woolf's novel (1928) of the same name. Further, this piece invites the viewer to become voyeur of Swinton. The complex relation of protagonist, props and setting is successful in questioning expectations of gender and genre, as well as contemporary society's customary voyeuristic tendencies. In this work, royalty is exchanged for celebrity, an alternative currency in the twenty-first century. For a work of subtlety and quietude, one that is ostensibly about the passage of time, this piece is an excellent example of how the fairy tale narrative pervades the collective unconscious, and how we seek new and alternative expressions of the tales that have shaped our cultural imaginations.

[Insert figure 1 here]

The anti-tale, as these artworks might be described, is a term that was first coined in 1929 in André Jolles' study *Einfache Formen: Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz*. As a genre, the anti-tale is accepted to have existed alongside the traditional fairy tales (MacAra and Calvin, 2011:p.4). The anti-tale did not exist in opposition to the traditional tales; as Catriona McAra and David Calvin (2011) explain, 'the anti-tale takes aspects of the fairy tale genre, and its equivalent genres, and re-imagines, subverts, inverts, deconstructs or satirises elements of them to present an alternate narrative interpretation, outcome or morality' (p.4). In this description of the anti-tale we can locate both of Zipes' methods in the application to artistic practice. The anti-tale offers a number of strategies to undo, undermine and present alternative readings than those reinforced by every iteration of the traditional tale.

In what follows, the alternative interpretations of the traditional tales by Vanessa Jane Phaff, Paula Rego and Alice Maher all bring difference to the conventional outcomes of fairy tales. Gender expectation and the possibilities of ambiguous morality are explored through subversive repetitions of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Pinocchio* and *Snow White* respectively. Implementing Judith Butler's theories, analysed in *Gender Trouble* (2006), of gender

construction and, further, her analyses of how the construction maybe deconstructed is useful in relation to these works and the fairy tale genre more broadly. Butler theorises that gender is constituted of a repeated performance of gendered qualities discrete to the feminine or the masculine. The re-iterative nature of the performative acts means that the gender performed is internalised, naturalised and consensually agreed, through this reiterative practice the acts are taken for being normal. However, the normality of these roles is entirely dependent on the performance of them according to the expectation of the time and place they are being performed. Within the normative state of compulsory heterosexuality in the developed western world, the performances of discrete femininity and masculinity are essential to maintain the (procreative) stability in society. To be outside of the gender duality, in other words, to perform otherwise (or fail to perform), is to transgress the norm and upset the binary distinctions that are reiterated with every performance.

As Butler (2006) suggests, as long as the performance is uninterrupted the gender dichotomy is maintained. Any divergence or disruption of the performance brings punitive measures against those that do not meet the accepted standard of the performance. The performative enactment of visible homosexuality (effeminate men and butch lesbians) highlights the ambiguity of gender specification and often functions to exclude the person from dominant culture. Thus, the successful performance of gender initiates and legitimises that specific expression until history shifts, invoking another expression. Such change is fluid and is imperceptible through the naturalising consensus of dominant heterosexuality (p.192-193). Butler continues, that despite the conviction of performativity, gender remains a consensual condition:

> ‘Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction compels our belief in its necessity and naturalness.’ (p.190)

The consensual repetitive act of this performance means that any defection from it is punished and stigmatised as not meeting the necessary standards and behaviour of legitimate gender. The accepted standards of gender are conveyed through various media transmitters, not least the fairy tale in popular culture. When heroines and heroes are described as beautiful and behave according to specific gender norms, the performance of gender is legitimised to the individual and the collective.

But what of the anti-tale? According to Judith Butler’s theory, the alternative depiction, or act of gender, interrupts the conventional and consensual reading of gender, exposing the artifice of the construct. As Butler (2006) stresses, ‘[g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of*

acts' (p.191). In these terms, fairy tales are ideal candidates for gender subversion. The fairy tale genre is a historically fluid cultural form where gender identity is repeated in an exterior space (each individual tale), but informs an interior understanding in the reader/viewer. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993, p.15), Butler asks what it would mean 'to "cite" the law to produce it differently, to "cite" the law in order to reiterate and co-opt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?' The re-articulation of gender norms constructed from within the fairy tale genre is to cite the law differently—the heterosexual matrix may then be reconceived of as 'the temporalized regulation of signification, and not as a quasi-permanent structure' (p.22). Through the mis-repetition of the visual fairy tale, the regulatory signification is revealed as temporary.

The visual interpretations of fairy tales addressed below have drawn on repeated tropes and themes from fairy tales, albeit subversively. Such repetition involves the use of parody, a common strategy of subversion or critique. However, as Butler (2006) notes, parody in isolation is not subversive (p.189). She posits that 'certain kinds of parodic repetitions [are] effectively disruptive, truly troubling,' in contrast to those 'repetitions [that] become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony' (p.189). In what follows, the analysis of three anti-tale art works will reveal how fairy tale narration in parodic and subversive visual form begins to unpack and destabilise some aspects of gender performance.

The Innocent Persecuted Heroine

An expression of a fine art anti-tale endowed with possibility and ambiguity in relation to gender construction can be found in a re-visualisation of the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale by British artist (working and living in the Netherlands) Vanessa Jane Phaff. In *Rotkäppchen* (2002) (fig. 2), a series of 36 silk screen prints, Phaff has altered the narrative flow of the tale, disassembled the cast, introduced new locations and fundamentally challenged the role of both the girl and the wolf. In a graphic style and using only red and black on a white ground she reconsiders the narrative and function of the tale. Her use of closely framed images inhibits a wider contextualisation yet Phaff introduces symbols, variations in scale and visual devices such as multi-layering to suggest alternative possible contexts. The piece is displayed in a grid of nine by four panels, slightly off-centre are four images, white lines on a red ground, that act together to make a line drawing of the wolf in front of the girl, both confronting the viewer with an unobscured gaze.

[Insert figure 2 here]

Moral ambiguity plays a role in this work from the ostensible beginning (determined only by the reading of the work left to right, top to bottom). In the first panel (top left), a diminutive female figure in a hood and cape considers herself in a mirror, her features are blank in this panel, there is an open door beside her. Continuing to read the panels along the top row the viewer can deduce a possible act of truancy, the rejection of time and day-dreaming in the forest. Already the tone of moral instability is set. References to other tales are made such as

the one of the hooded girl holding a bird, resonant with Disney's animated film *Snow White* (1937). In one panel the girl is a cut-out, with notches so that she can be made three-dimensional, a potential subject for customisation. Elsewhere, the house as haven is rejected with an ever-larger red cross, targets are identified, dreams and reality merge. Using a very simple language Phaff seems to reduce the traditional tale to component parts, but intermingled with these, parts of her own making. The girl makes friends with the wolf, she dodges a target, she is marked for amputation in one panel and in another lies asleep in bed with the wolf. Phaff's visual language is spare yet complex.

Little Red Riding Hood has traditionally been considered the epitome of cautionary tales and the trend is not bucked here. However, where the traditional tale taught girls to be obedient and good, to be afraid of wolves (in all their guises), Phaff redirects the cautionary message. The figure we are uncertain of in this visual narrative is Little Red Riding Hood. Vanity and narcissism are established in the first panel aligning her with the queen from *Snow White*, a message reinforced with the open door to the forest. The wolf is not presented as the aggressor, rather the girl approaches the wolf, offering her hand for it to take her scent. It is impossible to sustain a consistent narrative or establish a message or meaning in this piece of work; absence, exile, tenderness, companionship and aggression can all be identified, the later enacted by a panel of children seemingly yelling at Little Red Riding Hood. It seems that the girl finds comfort in the company of the wolf, both outcast from society, both considered other; as bed-fellows they sleep peacefully.

[Insert figure 3 here]

The dreamscape design of some of the panels, where multiple layers are combined to such an effect is reminiscent of Neil Jordan's filmic adaptation of Angela Carter's tale *The Company of Wolves* (1984). A similar uncertainty and ambiguity is played out in both versions, neither Phaff nor Jordan's response to the fairy tale tradition offers a conclusion. In Phaff's work, a possible conclusion lies in the panel illustrating the girl cropped by the left edge of the frame so the viewer sees only partial features and one eye narrowed to a slit (fig.3). The most striking, disturbing and contextualising detail of this panel is the wolf hood that hangs from her neck. On seeing this panel the viewer is challenged to accept the complicity of girl and wolf, further, perhaps, the girl's destruction of the wolf, the hood becoming a trophy. The girl becomes the wolf, the girl was perhaps the wolf all along. This image does not conclude a conventional reading of the arrangement of panels, instead, from this work the viewer is invited back into the narrative that becomes circular with no beginning or end, where intention, digression and morality are all rendered ambiguous.

The Fairy Godmother

The fairy godmother in fairy tales is predominantly considered good, excepting some fairy tale characters where a bad fairy serves as a foil to accentuate the moral polarities of the tale. In Italian author Carlo Collodi's serialised literary tale *Pinocchio* (1881-83), a fairy chastises,

advises and helps Pinocchio, becoming his replacement mother figure. She offers advice and guidance and meets the criteria for the good mother figure. In response to a more nuanced application of the properties of good and evil specifically applied to women, the blue fairy from *Pinocchio* (as represented in the Disney animated film version in 1940) is transformed in the hands of Portuguese artist (living and working in Britain) Paula Rego. In Rego's striking and ambiguous image, the viewer's sense of the character from the literary tale is fundamentally undermined.

In *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio* (1995) (fig.4), Rego isolates the pair against a very dark ground. The only light source in the work emanates from the characters. The image shows the blue fairy, considerably larger than Pinocchio in scale, seated and leaning forward to whisper into his ear. Her pose is casual and assured; her left arm hangs against Pinocchio's knee, and in her right hand she holds her wand. Pinocchio stands, back to the viewer, in front of the blue fairy, naked and with hands clenched into fists behind his back.

[Insert figure 4 here]

The combination of his stiff and putatively obedient stance, combined with the discrepancies in scale, serves to enhance the ambiguous power relations and gender roles suggested in the work. The effect is both oppressive and sinister. The ascription of the fairy's power over the male puppet is overt: she is larger and clothed, he diminutive and naked. In this work the blue fairy's putative "goodness" is made ambiguous. Her role may still be disciplinary (he stands as if being scolded), but the primary role of nurturing commonly conferred on the replacement mother is absent in this work. In the discrepancies of scale and attire of the figures, it is also possible to read implied notions of sexual manipulation in this work. Aside from Pinocchio's nakedness and clenched fists, the viewer is ignorant of his expression as he faces the blue fairy. It is she who offers the clues to the possible meanings of this relationship. Although recognisably dressed as a female, there are aspects of masculinity about this figure: physically in the bare feet, strong facial features and phallic wand, but also behaviourally in the dominant and actively powerful position she occupies.[2] The blue fairy's masculine features exaggerate the diminutive position of Pinocchio and draw into question the femininity—and associated notions of care-giver—of the blue fairy.

This work overturns traditional assumptions about femininity in relation to motherhood. Rego offers an image of surrogate motherhood as oppressive and sinister. This ambiguity is derived from the discrepancy between social expectation and visual depiction. In this work, Rego has reiterated a relationship from the original tale but with a difference. The visual mis-repetition of the blue fairy into a morally dubious figure shifts the whole tone of the tale. *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio*, due to its visual organisation, marks a departure from the traditional maternal example that implies a natural connection between femininity and caring. Rego upsets the traditional and socially accepted attributes of maternal femininity by arranging the female in a position of potential threat to the child.

The Stepmother

Unlike the fairy godmother (or the Blue Fairy above), and in terms of identity management, the fairy tale stepmother has been used as a device to oppose the absent biological mother, the former carrying connotations of evil, and the latter of goodness. As a mature female of equivalent fertile age as the natural mother, the stepmother does not enjoy the grandmother associations, and is often cast as childless and lacking in the fundamental feminine trait of caretaking skills. Needless to say, the role of stepmother—the adoptive or replacement mother—is complex. In the traditional versions of the tale, Snow White and her stepmother are repeatedly pitted as opposites in age, nature, agency, knowledge, ambition, and moral stature. The stepmother, conversely, is cast as wicked in response to Snow White's innocence. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar subvert values given to both characters: 'the queen […] is a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily, and self absorbed' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, 38-39). Snow White in comparison is a child, passive and docile. The distinctions are clear and Shuli Barzilai surmises that '[w]ere the best woman to win, clearly victory would—that is to say should—belong to the queen' (Barzilai, 1990, 520). It is clear that the sympathies of Barzilai, Gilbert and Gubar lie with the queen.[3]

Irish artist, Alice Maher, explores the traditional stereotyping of the stepmother in her work *Collar* (2003) (fig. 5). Where Paula Rego refers to the fairy tale directly in *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio*, taking visual cues from the Disney film rendition of the tale, Maher refers to the fairy tale *Snow White* obliquely. In this work, Maher alludes to the *Snow White* narrative from the queen's point of view, and the viewer is invited to believe that the queen has overcome Snow White through her display of hearts mounted as a collar. The viewer may surmise that she has overcome a number of Snow Whites, one for each heart on her collar. In this work Maher offers the viewer a photographic image of a mature, but not elderly, woman. The model wears no visible clothing, her hair is tied back but not dressed, she is stripped of make-up and is adorned with a necklace or collar made form the hearts of lambs. The collar is made up of at least five fresh hearts, the blood and fluids from the hearts stain the woman's skin.

[Insert figure 5 here]

Although not a direct reference to the fairy tale it is possible to identify the tropes of *Snow White* conveyed obliquely through this image. When the queen's magic mirror fatefully replies that she is no longer the fairest in the land the thwarted stepmother seeks to destroy Snow White; the girl is no longer her ward but suddenly her rival in the stakes of beauty and desirability, and within this, the narrative of fertility and social value come into play. The queen orders a huntsman to take Snow White to the forest and kill her; he is to bring back her heart as proof of death. Of course, as the heart that is returned to the queen is that of a deer and not Snow White, the queen endeavours to complete the job herself using all the trappings

of vanity and femininity, the hair comb and the lace stays. The poisoned apple, the symbol of stolen innocence, is the more successful of the three attempts, albeit a temporary fate.

An initial reading identifies the woman as the jealous and bloodthirsty queen, collecting her trophies on a collar. However, a more nuanced reading draws on the idea that the hearts represent, for the queen, a grasping of youth. By adorning herself with the lambs hearts the qualities of youth may be transmitted to her ageing body, certainly they could act as disguise, even as talisman against the inevitable physical decline of womanhood. However, even as the hearts stain her skin with a rosy complexion the attempt is futile, no matter how many hearts are threaded onto her collar the queen is rendered powerless. The old adage, *mutton dressed as lamb*, clearly alludes to the distractions and deceits employed to remain youthful and useful in a society that values youth over age in the female body.

Maher's queen figure so becomes ambiguous to us. At once she is a jealous despot with a bloodlust as she gathers her hearts as trophies and symbols of might, she is also an aging woman seeking to retain her youth by extreme measure. The hearts here do not belong to Snow White, they belong to the snow-white lambs that symbolise spring, that speak of becoming. However, a third or extended reading can be made of this piece where, through her misguided vanity, she is punished. The collar becomes a yoke around her neck, a weighty physical reminder of her fading youth. The hearts stain an aging skin, with spilt blood they do not transfer the plump rosy flesh of youth. The queen is condemned by both her own hand and societal expectation to carry with her symbols of what she is not.

In this work the viewer is invited to recognise not just Snow White's stepmother but everywoman. She is one of numerous stepmothers throughout the fairy tale tradition that have sought to fend off old age. Unlike other queens that have consumed and continue to consume hearts, Maher makes this queen human and of this world; the *adornment* of hearts rather than *consuming* the organs offers a tacit nod to the deceit peddled by the beauty industry. Yet, the maturing woman in western society that concedes to this deceit is condemned to wear the yoke of youth as punishment for vanity (albeit a vanity imposed upon them by the standards of physical beauty demanded by western society more broadly).

Conclusion:

In 1971, Anne Sexton wrote about deceivers and cast her net wide to include the tales, the tale tellers and society. Based on the actions and appropriations made by artists[4] since that time the accusation is still well placed over forty-five years later. However, the deceit lies at the door of those that use the traditional tale without pause to consider the messages conveyed about gender.[5] This passive regurgitation serves to peddle out-dated ideas of who and how we should be; these tales perpetuate the passive ideals of femininity to children

living in a world where agency and self-worth are essential attributes for survival. The anti-tale works against this passive perpetuation. What might be seen, on the face of it, as being deceitful (the complicity of girl and wolf, of dubious moral standards in the fairy godmother, and the measures employed by the childless mother to maintain her youth) is closer to an essential truth played out in real lives in the twenty-first century. The message in these anti-tales is about the complexity of personality, the skills needed to interact with and be accepted in society. It is about inclusion and tolerance as much as it is about caution and an intelligent understanding of what that means. Jack Zipes (2012) proposes that the anti-tales in visual form 'are necessary to disrupt and confront clichés and bad habits. They are necessary to shake up the world and sharpen our gaze' (p.136). Kendra Reynolds goes further to warn of the dangers of consuming the formulaic and derivative traditional tale that has been taken out of time and bears little relevance to the society it serves, 'if women keep overdosing on the anaesthetic of fairy tales and patriarchal myths, then ignoring the reality may become fatal' (Reynolds, 2014, 43).

This chapter has dealt with art works made by female artists in Europe and the readings that have been made address alternative expressions of gender. Parker and Swinton, Phaff, Rego and Maher have all interrupted the pervasive nature of the traditional fairy tale genre. Strategies have varied, Phaff and Rego adopt the tales directly, appropriating the existing visual language based in popular culture, Maher, Parker and Swinton have been indirect in their referencing of the tales taking tropes and motifs from the traditional genre. All of the artists have disrupted the accepted reading of the tale, mostly through the strategy of deconstruction. Phaff has reduced the visual language of her work then built up the layers and multiplied meaning; Rego inverts our expectations of what 'motherhood' or the 'maternal' should be by introducing aspects of the masculine and menace to her work. Parker and Swinton undermine expectations of femininity and masculinity, of celebrity and voyeurism; *The Maybe* is absent of gender and that upsets the viewer's understanding of how to look, and to possess through looking. Maher disrobes the queen rendering her everywoman as she wears her trophies as a yoke of youth. The trick these artists have pulled off is to subvert the repetition of gender construction. As Judith Butler stated in *Gender Trouble* (2006, p.201):

> 'The critical task is […] to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.'

By adopting fairy tale narratives and tropes differently, artists are intervening and interrupting the conventional and consensual. What they offer instead is a mis-repetition, an alternative reading of the traditional, thus opening up the possibility to think differently about the constitution and performance of gender.

[1] It is difficult to isolate the European tales and fine art responses from a wider field of fine art practice involving fairy tales; the traditional tales emanating from European authors and collectors have a far reach and have been naturalised in to the western collective imagination. This chapter focuses on the contemporary European fine art response to the tales, however, other, non-European, artists are also employing similar strategies of resistance to the traditional repetition of fairy tale femininity.

[2] It is interesting to note that Rego's depictions of women generally tend towards a masculinisation, particularly in the bone structure. This tendency serves as a device to blur the distinctions of gender; in Rego's work beauty does not signify femininity.

[3] It would seem that there is a parallel trend in defending the stepmother in critical scholarship as well as literary fiction. This level of attention paid to the mature female characters reflects a broader awareness of this demographic in society brought about since the 1960s rights movements and, I would assert, the growing visibility and presence of the mature female in society at the end of the twentieth century generally.

[4] The subversive utilisation of fairy tales in art works is not restricted to fine artists, illustrators, film makers and makers of other forms of popular culture are also using the fairy tale to challenge accepted norms.

[5] This chapter deals with the constitution of gender through performance and fine art practice. However, the fairy tale should be interrogated equally in terms of racial and sexual codes that, in the traditional tales, privilege white heterosexuality above any alternative mode of being.