

# Introduction: Fairy Tales and Other Horrors

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## 1. Parental Advisory: Fairy Tales Can Be Really Scary

In a Christmas 2017 interview with the British magazine *Fortean Times*, the celebrated Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro described ‘*Hansel and Gretel*’, ‘the original *Cinderella*’, and ‘*Little Red Riding Hood*’ as ‘a horror story’, before affirming that ‘horror and the fairy tale walk hand in hand’ (del Toro 2017, p. 35).<sup>1</sup> This statement is hardly surprising coming from a director whose oeuvre includes such films as *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Shape of Water* (2017), which strive to merge fairy-tale and horror visuals, mechanics, and tropes. Hardly surprising is also del Toro’s choice of the fairy tales that, according to him, should be (re)classified as horror stories. Mentioning ‘*Hansel and Gretel*’, ‘the original *Cinderella*’, and ‘*Little Red Riding Hood*’, del Toro is most likely referring to the versions collected by the Brothers Grimm in their *Children’s and Household Tales*—first published in 1812 and then extensively revised until the seventh (1857) standard edition—which contain an assortment of scenes that, with their violent imagery and gory descriptions, can indeed be categorised as ‘horror’ or at the very least be considered as a starting point for the development of a successful horror story. ‘*Hansel and Gretel*’ features a cannibalistic and predatory witch who lures the eponymous protagonists into her house made of bread, cake, and sugar with the aim of fattening and cooking them—with a particular penchant for eating Hansel—only to be eventually pushed into the oven by Gretel and burn to death ‘in a horrible way’ while ‘screeching dreadfully’ (Grimm and Grimm [2004] 2012, p. 84). Although the most popular variant of ‘*Cinderella*’ is the one adapted for cinema by Disney Studios (1950) based on Charles Perrault’s ‘*Cendrillon*’ (1697), del Toro’s comment on ‘the original *Cinderella*’ probably refers to the Grimms’ version of this tale, ‘*Aschenputtel*’, which includes bloody acts of bodily violence such as the stepsisters’ self-mutilation of a toe and the heel of the foot to fit into *Cinderella*’s golden shoe and doves pecking out their eyes as horrific punishment for their wickedness. Similarly, while Perrault’s literary variant of the story of ‘*Little Red Riding Hood*’ (1697) is disturbing in its unhappy ending where the little girl is eaten up by the wolf (and there is no hunter in sight), it is the Grimms’ canonical version that is characterised by a gruesome description of physical violence, in which the huntsman ‘took a pair of scissors and began cutting open the belly of the sleeping wolf’ to liberate *Little Red Riding Hood* and her grandmother (Grimm and Grimm [2004] 2012, p. 152), before skinning the talking wolf and going home with its pelt.

Blood, bodily violence, monstrous appetites, mutilation, physical pain, and other horrors are extensively represented in the Grimms’ fairy tales, not only in the well-known tales discussed above but, more significantly, throughout the seven editions of their *Children’s and Household Tales*. The best illustration of the Grimms’ proclivity for horror is, arguably, Maria Tatar’s summary, in her *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, of the wide-ranging examples of murder, brutality, and cannibalism that can be found in the collection. The following is only a small taste of what Tatar ([1987] 2019, p. 4) calls a ‘litany of atrocities’:

In ‘*The Juniper Tree*’, one of the most widely admired of the tales, a woman decapitates her stepson, chops his corpse into small pieces, and cooks him in



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a stew that her husband devours with obvious gusto. [...] ‘Darling Roland’ features a witch who takes axe in hand to murder her stepdaughter but ends by butchering her own daughter. [...] The singing bones, in the tale of that title, is whittled from the remains of a fratricide victim; when the bone reveals the secret of the scandalous murder to the world, the surviving brother is sewn up in a sack and drowned. [...] In ‘The Robber Bridegroom,’ a young woman watches in horror as her betrothed and his accomplices drag a girl into their headquarters, tear off her clothes, place her on a table, hack her body to pieces, and sprinkle them with salt. (pp. 3–5)

For those who expect nothing but fairy magic, brave princes and beautiful princesses, and the customary formula ‘happily ever after’, the encounter with the violence inherent in certain fairy tales, more appropriate for graphic horror films such as James Wan’s *Saw* (2004) or Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005), can be disconcerting. If horror and fairy-tale elements are so easily intermingled, and graphic horrors feature so prominently in fairy tales, can horror then be considered as a distinctive feature of the literary fairy tale? This Special Issue on *Severed Limbs and Monstrous Appetites: (Re)Defining Fairy-Tale Horror from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* attempts to answer the above question. It investigates the roles, functions, and meanings of horror in a fairy-tale narrative, while also discussing the evolution of fairy-tale horror in its various forms and iterations as well as its repurposing in different periods, national-linguistic traditions, literary genres, and media.

Previous studies on fairy-tale horror have mostly focused on the literary and cultural context in which the Grimms’ tales were first recorded and then significantly reworked, namely the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries, a period characterised by the literary dominance of the Gothic novel and of a very specific brand of horror: Gothic horror. Building on Tatar’s analysis of the horrific aspects of *Children’s and Household Tales*, in her two essays devoted, respectively, to fairy-tale horror and the Grimms’ representation of terror, Piatti-Farnell (2018, 2021) has recently demonstrated the influence of Gothic horror tropes and plot mechanisms on the brothers’ collection. Piatti-Farnell (2021, p. 286) claims that ‘The scenarios of Grimm fairy tales are distinctly Gothic, and pivot on human experiences of suffering, punishment, and isolation’. Not only did the Grimms introduce Gothic imagery of violence and brutality into their tales to place a more significant focus on the terror felt by their characters, but, from the first to the seventh edition of their collection, they also ‘made a conscious decision to add elements that would enhance the gothic qualities of their tales’ (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 286). The Grimms’ fairy tales would thus be a literary product of their (Gothic) time, with, however, one major exception compared to Gothic literature: the objectives of their narrative use of fear. Gothic literature tends to be morally ambiguous in its representation of terror and horror; fear is the result of an exploration of physical otherness and moral and psychological aberration in a fictional world where the customary interpretations of good and evil are frequently put into question. In Gothic literary works, there are usually no predetermined ‘good’ or ‘bad’ choices that, if not made, result in horrific punishment: violence occurs randomly, often to innocent and terrorised victims who, eventually, are not the recipient of a resolutive and restoring happy ending. Fairy tales, on the contrary, belong to a fictional world constructed on well-defined dichotomies such as right/wrong and hero/villain, and possess an explicit purpose to educate children; as a result, ‘elements of fear, otherness, and darkness [...] do not appear to be structured with the intent of creating terror and gloomy atmospheres’ (Piatti-Farnell 2021, p. 281). Piatti-Farnell’s evaluation of Gothic horror in what she deems classic fairy tales—namely, the Grimms’ tales and Hans Christian Andersen’s *Fairy Tales Told for Children. First Collection* (1835–37)—is in the same critical vein. Discussing the use of physical horror in fairy-tale representations of fair punishment following the transgression of a norm, she maintains that ‘Violence is not presented for its shock value, as it is often in contemporary popular narratives’; conversely, fairy-tale horror has an important figurative meaning aimed at ‘uncovering the powerful social and psychological relationships that lie at the center of the fairy tale’s educational value’ (Piatti-Farnell 2018, p. 97). The

relationship between horror and the fairy tale has thus largely been explored through the critical lens of the Gothic, with the aim of tracing Gothic motifs in fairy-tale narratives or, contrarily, fairy-tale elements in Gothic literature and locating differences and similarities. Various works have been dedicated to establishing a theoretical framework for Gothic readings or reworkings of canonical fairy tales, including [Armitt's \(\[1998\] 2009\)](#), [Hart's \(2020\)](#) and [Hubner's \(2018\)](#). The latter text in particular considers the fairy tale and the Gothic as interweaving modes of creating horror in films, such as del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*. While underlying its strong relationship with Gothic anxieties, [Hubner \(2018, p. 39\)](#) also recognises fairy-tale horror as a separate, simpler form of expressing universalised fears and concerns, in which 'Everyday horrors and real life atrocities can be alluded to on a symbolic or metaphorical level, opening up a dialogue with repressed and sometimes taboo subject matter'.

Although horror is commonly associated with the Gothic, it 'can occur independently of the Gothic mode', as [Corstorphine \(2018, p. 2\)](#) has noted. Set in a faraway, enchanted land and featuring one-dimensional, stock characters that follow predetermined narrative arcs, fairy tales can be interpreted as figuratively representing archetypal horrors that would be difficult to portray in other literary forms, including the Gothic. Universal themes such as murder, violence against women, domestic abuse, incest, infanticide, and child abandonment, to name but a few, transcend languages, cultures, and ages and are therefore commonly found in fairy tales, which have also historically crossed national–linguistic, cultural, and chronological boundaries. And yet, fairy tales are also linked to the culture that produced, rewrote, or adapted them, reflecting the particulars horrors—as well as the set of values, norms, and punishments—of that specific period and culture. Ogres, witches, anthropomorphic wolves abound: there is a plethora of monsters in fairy tales, and, like all monsters, they reflect the anxieties, concerns, and fears of the times in which they were created. As [Cohen \(1996, pp. 4–5\)](#) writes in his fundamental introduction to monster theory, 'The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. [...] Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary–historical) that generate them'. Fairy-tale monsters are no different. Take the Grimms' version of 'Hansel and Gretel', for example. The child protagonists are abandoned in the forest by their father and stepmother (mother in the first three editions of the collection) because they are not able to provide for their children in a time of famine. Not only is the story's background realistic in its depiction of the horrors of starvation and child abandonment, but it also mirrors the realities of nineteenth-century food shortages in Germany, and more broadly in Europe. As Jack Zipes argues in his discussion of this tale, 'there were many famines in the period between 1810 and 1857 that caused great misery [...]. In this regard, the Grimms' fairy tale sheds light on social realities of the times' ([Zipes 1997, p. 49](#)). The predatory witch determined to feast on the flesh of children can thus be interpreted in the light of the shortage of food described in the opening of the tale. The enchanted, timeless forest of the fairy tale, however, transforms a realistic, contemporary fear of starvation into what the narrator of Angela Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride' calls the 'earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment' ([Carter \[1979\] 1995, p. 67](#))—in the case of 'Hansel and Gretel', the fear of being devoured by a cannibalistic monster that dwells deep in the dark woods. At the same time, the moral mechanics of the fairy tale are such that the evil witch is punished for her monstrous appetite and so is the (step)mother, who at the end of the story dies, for her monstrous lack of maternal care in forcing her husband to abandon his children.

But there are other literary fairy tales with cannibalistic monsters which use gruesome imagery with a more specific purpose: to scare and intimidate readers into behaving properly or making the right decisions. One of these tales is Perrault's version of 'Sleeping Beauty' (1697), which features Sleeping Beauty's mother-in-law, the Queen Mother, as a frightening ogress with 'horrible desires' to devour children ([Perrault 2009, p. 94](#)), to the extent that 'when she saw small children going by she found it almost impossible to prevent

herself from jumping on them' (p. 93). She is described as an animalistic monster capable of recognising the smell of human flesh, and, most importantly, also of remorselessly eating her own grandchildren and daughter-in-law. The ogress' plans are eventually foiled by a steward helping Sleeping Beauty and her children, and she dies horribly by throwing herself into a cauldron filled with venomous toads, vipers, and serpents. The peculiarity of this type of horror lies in its cautionary and educational aims as expressed in the moral following the story. The second moral of the tale, addressed in particular to 'Young girls' longing for marriage, states the following: 'Lovers lose nothing if they wait, / And tie the knot of marriage late; / They'll not be any less content' (Perrault 2009, pp. 96–97). The character of the ogress is thus used by Perrault as a symbolic figure that shows the intrinsic dangers of a hasty marriage, in this case with a rich and handsome prince whose mother is, shockingly, a bloodthirsty monster who yearns to devour the flesh of her grandchildren. In this and many other cautionary tales of the Western fairy-tale tradition, horror images are employed *precisely* for their shock value, the latter having, however, a specific didactic aim. These images are designed to provoke fear and disgust, consequently attempting to influence the behaviour of the young readers. After years of Disney's monopoly on the fairy tale, today the fact that fairy tales may be scary is still surprising to some, as an article that appeared in the 15 December 2015 issue of the British science magazine *New Scientist*, entitled 'Why Fairy Tales Are Really Scary Tales', demonstrates. The article's subtitle reveals what can only be described as astonishment at discovering that fairy tales are far from being 'innocent' stories: 'Everyone assumes fairy stories are innocent cautionary tales, but their universal and enduring appeal is far more horrifying than you think' (Sarchet 2015). A more precise formulation of the above sentence would be that fairy tales are horrifying precisely *because* they are cautionary tales, devised to frighten children (and adults) into following accepted standards of conduct. Tatar (1992) describes cautionary (fairy) tales as promoting a 'pedagogy of fear and terror' (p. 39), generating not only dread but also, perhaps surprisingly, pleasure: 'If the pedagogical grounds were often a mask for sadistic impulses, the moral grounds were usually little more than a pretext for gratifying the audience's need for chilling scenes of savage violence' (p. 31).

The important role of entertainment and audience gratification in a horror narrative, after all, should not be underestimated. Frequently, fairy-tale violence is not bound to any educational purposes but obeys the same rules of entertainment as other forms of horror, creating an atmosphere of anxiety, darkness, and fear. The following passage is once again taken from Perrault's version of 'Sleeping Beauty' (1697), but it would not be out of place in a nineteenth-century Gothic novel:

the son of the king then ruling [...] went hunting in that region. Seeing some towers rising above a tall dense wood, he asked what they were. Everyone present answered according to what he had heard tell. Some said that it was an ancient castle where ghosts were seen to walk; others, that all the witches round about held their sabbaths there. The commonest opinion was that it was where an ogre lived, and where he brought all the children he could catch, in order to eat them in peace without being followed, since he alone had the power to make his way through the wood. The Prince did not know what to believe. (Perrault 2009, pp. 87–88)

The setting of the ancient castle where ghosts and monsters are said to be dwelling serves to create a sense of expectation and fear that introduces the subsequent brave act of the prince, who dares to venture into the dark, enchanted forest. But the encounter, once he enters the castle, with what he first believes to be a great number of corpses sends chills down his (and our) spine:

He came into a great forecourt, where everything that met his eyes was such as to freeze his blood with fear. The silence was terrible, and the look of death was all around. Nothing was to be seen but the bodies of men and animals lying stretched out, who appeared to be dead. (Perrault 2009, p. 88)

Only after this macabre description, whose function is to create tension in the narrative, does the prince discover that the people he saw in the forecourt were not dead, but simply sleeping.

Fairy tales may be synonymous with Disney in contemporary popular culture, but this does not mean that they are only synonymous with innocuous ‘happy endings’ or with didacticism, moral dichotomies, simplicity, and standardised beauty. Fairy tales can be really scary: they are the site of terror, horror, and violence, reservoirs of frightening subject matter and anxieties that can be universal as well as cultural and time specific. Indeed, there are horrors peculiar to the fairy tale: a ‘fairy-tale horror’ specific to its educational function as a vehicle of rightful—and often violent—punishment and to its symbolic nature as a tale set in an imaginary land and time where everything—from magical acts to the most atrocious deeds—can happen. Moralistic and entertaining, shocking and gratifying, metaphoric and realistic, local and universal: these are the contrasting qualities of fairy-tale horror that continue to this day, returning in different ages and cultures with different meanings and forms, always reinventing themselves while also remaining recognisable as such, as the articles included in this Special Issue demonstrate.

## 2. Form and (Re)Appearance of Fairy-Tale Horror

The late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries are a special time in the history of the fairy tale. It is a period which saw the publication of canonical versions such as the Grimms’ *Children’s and Household Tales* and Andersen’s *Fairy Tales Told for Children*, witnessing the rise of the fairy tale as a literary genre particularly devoted to the entertainment and education of children. But this is also a period when in Europe fairy tales began to be available to a wider public in many other forms, collected in volumes including narratives from various (and occasionally non-Western) cultures and traditions, published as illustrated stories in magazines, cheaply printed and sold as chapbooks for a working- and middle-class readership. In this early age of mass circulation, certain editions of fairy tales show the degree of familiarity of an audience with monsters introduced from other languages and traditions. An anonymous English translation of Perrault’s ‘The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood’, published in Manchester by A. Swindells most likely in 1800, twice uses the unusual spelling ‘Ogree’, while also feeling compelled to include in a footnote the following description of a scary and horrific ogre for the unacquainted young reader: ‘An Ogree is a Giant with long teeth and claws, with a raw head and bloody bones, who runs away with naughty Boys and Girls, and eats them up!’ (Perrault n.d. [1800?], p. 6).

Many were also the adaptations of fairy-tale narratives in other literary genres, such as poetry and the novel, and media, including in particular Gothic reworkings of fairy tales that focus on violent subject matter. One of the fairy tales most reworked in the nineteenth century is Perrault’s tale of domestic horror ‘Bluebeard’ (1697). ‘Bluebeard’ is a story concerning a serial killer of wives and his violently controlling behaviour towards his latest spouse which is widely adapted starting from the late eighteenth century, not only in literature but in theatre, opera, and later cinema as well. The first Gothic rewriting of the Bluebeard tale is probably George Colman the Younger’s *Blue-Beard; or, Female Curiosity!* (1798), a play which amplifies the story’s visual horrors introducing supernatural figures and gory imagery. In the nineteenth century, Gothic adaptations of ‘Bluebeard’ also focused on the psychological aspects of the relationship between Bluebeard and his wives, critiquing the power dynamics represented in Perrault’s tale and repurposing the terror felt by the latest wife, turned into a means of female empowerment (see Cabiati 2023). A century later, writers like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood would spearhead the efforts to rework fairy tales, including the Bluebeard tale, through a Gothic Feminist lens. ‘Bluebeard’ (and its horrors) can be interpreted through multiple lenses and recontextualized in infinite ways, as Carolin Jesussek’s article ‘The Tales of Bluebeard’s Wives: Carmen Maria Machado’s Intertextual Storytelling in *In the Dream House* and “The Husband Stitch”’, featured in this Special Issue, demonstrates.



This Issue discusses the forms and (re)appearances of fairy-tale horror in the nineteenth century and beyond. A variety of critical and theoretical approaches are taken into account by the authors included in this collection of essays, investigating fairy tales from different—and occasionally hybrid—cultural, literary, and cinematic perspectives. Exploring the merging of elements of folklore, fairy tales, and horror in a hybrid cultural context, in ‘The Devil’s Marriage: Folk Horror and the *Merveilleux Louisianais*’ Ryan Atticus Doherty discusses the ‘Louisiana gothic’, described as ‘the locus where the fairy tale meets the burgeoning Southern Gothic’. Doherty examines tales from the late nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century written in English, French, and Creole, considering the Louisiana Gothic as a subgenre that simultaneously derives from and seeks to subvert established norms of the Gothic and fairy-tale traditions.

Contemporary cinema, television, and literature have also frequently combined fairy-tale and horror elements, introducing twentieth-century horror visuals into fairy-tale narratives and reinterpreting characters and settings of the fairy tale through a horror lens. Examples include Gothic retellings of the ‘Snow White’ story, such as Michael Cohn’s *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997), or the various horror adaptations of ‘Hansel and Gretel’, including Pil-Sung Yim’s film *Hansel and Gretel* (2007), where, as Cristina Bacchilega argues, ‘the topoi of horror mix with those of morality tale and thriller’ (Bacchilega 2013, p. 100). Similarly popular has been the transformation of Little Red Riding Hood’s wolf into a werewolf, featuring in Carter’s short stories ‘The Werewolf’ and ‘The Company of Wolves’—part of her collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979)—but also in Neil Jordan’s film *The Company of Wolves* (1984), based on Carter’s short story, and, later, in Catherine Hardwicke’s 2011 film *Red Riding Hood*.

The transformation of the Little Red Riding Hood tale into cinematic material is a topic approached by Peter Vorissis in his article ‘Fairy Tale Sources and Rural Settings in Dario Argento’s Supernatural Horror’. Vorissis’s discussion of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ is contextualized within his analysis of the use, by the Italian director Dario Argento, of the fairy-tale imagery of the dark, enchanted forest to represent the supernatural—and convey related ancestral fears—in his *giallo* horror films *Suspiria* (1977), *Phenomena* (1975), and *Occhiali neri* (*Dark Glasses*, 2022). The audio-visual boundaries between the genres of the fairy tale and horror are also questioned by Dorothea Trotter in ‘Facing Your Fears: Navigating Social Anxieties and Difference in Contemporary Fairy Tales’, an essay that employs the critical tools of disability studies to investigate the depiction of physical difference in three contemporary fairy tales for cinema and television: Ana Lily Amirpour’s ‘The Outside’ (2022), Paul Fleig’s *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), and Domee Shi’s *Turning Red* (2022). Trotter explores the bias associated with mutilated human physiognomy and its historical representation, in both horror and fairy-tale narratives, as a marker of wickedness and otherness, arguing that the aforementioned films and series challenge the aesthetic and moral conventions of traditional representations of bodily difference.

### 3. Fairy-Tale Gender Horror

The story of the fairy tale is a tale of transformation, of liminality and boundary crossing. Possibly the first porous boundary that is often crossed is that between oral folktales and authored fairy tales, which has long been debated and complicated by the existence of tales that cannot be classified quite as unambiguously as folktales or literary fairy tales (such as the Grimms’ collection). Boundaries between national traditions and media have also been disrupted, as the fairy-tale tradition is no longer conceived of as a strict Western chronology of a series of mainly male authors (at least until the last few decades, of course). Bacchilega (2013, p. 35) reads contemporary fairy tales as adaptations woven in an intertextual/hypertextual web: ‘the fairy tale web is not only an inter/hypertextual, but also an intermedial and multimedial, symptomatic, and possibly transformative reading practice’. It is now impossible to avoid thinking of fairy tales transculturally and transnationally, as local retellings want to be included in global culture and reshape national imaginaries (Gutierrez 2017, p. 33). As Warner (2018, p. 49) has conveniently summarized, ‘Fairy

tales [...] have no more sense of nation or native tongue than swifts or butterflies, and have proven stubborn and repeating emigrants, always slipping across the borders (and back again)'.

Another disruption of boundaries is that between creation and interpretation—feminist readings of traditional fairy tales do not just, as Vanessa Joosen has written about Gibert and Gubar's seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 'practice in theory what many fairy-tale retellings perform in fiction with regard to their traditional pre-texts' (Joosen 2011, p. 291): authors intermingle new fairy-tale versions with their critical reflections on them. It is the case, for example, of Carter's 'Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost: Three Versions of One Story' (1987) in which the first version of the story is not a retelling but a series of speculations on the Grimms' 'Cinderella'; of A. S. Byatt's 'The Story of the Eldest Princess' (1994), in which the princesses metafictionally challenge their foreshadowed destinies; or, more recently, of Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019), discussed in this Issue ('The Tales of Bluebeard's Wives'), in which mini-essays on fairy tales are inserted in her memoir. With this story and destiny in mind, it may not be too far-fetched to consider 'gender horror' (the kind of horror experienced by a female fairy-tale character in an abusive domestic situation) a distinctive feature of retold fairy tales of the 'Carter generation' and beyond. Horror is not a phenomenon that has been introduced recently in fairy tales, to be sure, as the generic boundaries between classic fairy tales and the Gothic are well-established and well-researched (Piatti-Farnell 2018, 2021; Tatar 1992, 2004; Armitt [1998] 2009) but occasionally porous when it comes to plots or plot segments, themes, spaces, and characterisation: escape, imprisonment, and abandonment; castles, forbidden rooms, and other sites of seclusion; monsters and monstrous husbands; persecuted younger heroines and older women/men persecutors; death and mutilation; symbolic, attempted or real sexual assaults (one only needs to think of a few classic Italian and French versions of 'Sleeping Beauty'), all of this driven by fear and often based on an enigma. *Jane Eyre*, for example, is a classic case of a novel that sits at the crossroads of bildungsroman, gothic, and fairy tale. A nest of fairy tales, in fact: 'Cinderella', 'Bluebeard', 'Beauty and the Beast', and 'Rapunzel', as Aileen Miyuki Farrar's article 'Gothic Fairy-Tale Feminism: The Rise of *Eyre*/"Error"' in this Issue investigates. Fairy tales do not only 'affect the making of who we are and of the world we live in' (Bacchilega 2013, p. 3), they also conflate fairy tale narrative elements with traumatic/horrific female experiences. This may happen in an entirely fictional context, as in the case of *Jane Eyre* with its intrafictional narrator or when YA novels, for example, voice contemporary concerns about young women's identity/sexuality, or in memoirs describing real life distressing events. Fairy-tale narrative is so 'elastic' that it is not surprising that it should include and accommodate the intrusion of traumatic female experiences: the persistence of Bluebeard as an archetype of the meeting of the Other in a violent domestic space in contemporary versions is evidence that revisions, by pulling a story into the present, actively update horror codes and cautionary elements. In Atwood's novella 'Alien Territory' (1992) and Amélie Nothomb's *Bluebeard* (2012), for example, the new spin is given by the fact that the wives *already know* that the Bluebeard figure is a serial killer—they accept the danger and the Gothic *frisson* of sharing a house with the monster. The mystery and the enigma have been displaced on the mystery of the way the wives' corpses have been disposed of, or the mystery of what has already been established as a seriously disturbed psyche. It is a different kind of cautionary tale, but no less horrific than the canonical versions. The heroines are still victims of trauma, but traumatic experiences enfold in a different way and in a different context from the early versions.

In other cases, the violent subtexts of the traditional tale are fleshed out and interrogated. For example, retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood' discussed in Nicola Welsh-Burke's article 'All the Better to Eat You with: Sexuality, Violence, and Disgust in "Little Red Riding Hood" Adaptations', vary from cautionary tales of werewolves that attack young women when, intoxicated after a night out, walk home without (male) protection (thus reproducing, amplified and very much brought to the foreground, Perrault's moral about female responsibility) to other versions in which empowered protagonists discover that their

senses and strength are heightened during their menstrual cycle, which helps defeating werewolves—a more explicit critique of victim-blaming tendencies. In the contemporary versions, the wolves-as-men allusions have become real, and these terrifying assaults are emphatically sexual as well as murderous. The subtext has become an ‘overtex’—not just an uncovering of hidden/symbolic meanings, but an amplification of those meanings and a visual display of horrors. A lot of contemporary fairy tales have explored precisely the revelation of the subtext and the grotesque exposure of the implications of odd fairy-tale situations—in Carter’s ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ (1979), for example, the horrific experience of a prince that kisses a 100-year-old corpse who then springs to life (in a nutshell, the ending of the canonical version of ‘Sleeping Beauty’) has morphed into a story of vampirism; in Neil Gaiman’s short story ‘Snow, Glass, Apples’ (1994), based on ‘Snow White’, the prince is attracted to Snow White because he is a necrophiliac. In these and other retellings, women project themselves in the symbolic structures of the domestic horror that is already inscribed in the early versions, but add a contemporary, eerie, twist. The refashioning of horror suggests a form of simultaneity of traumatic experiences across time and space, as past destinies are reactivated by new versions of the tales. It is as if horrors had been strewn in the fairy-tale field as mines—some exploded long ago, in the past, and some, by insisting in different zones of the minefield, can only be detonated now.

So, gender horror has become global and queer horror, a horror that can be experienced beyond national imaginary but also beyond rigid categorization of gender—in Machado, domestic abuse, for example, is perpetrated by a partner of the same sex as the victim: Bluebeard is a mask that can be worn even by a woman. In these contemporary retellings, then, one can escape the curse of repetition—as happens to Carter’s ‘Lady of the House of Love’, one can pick a new card from the pack—fairy-tale gender horror rituals can change, characters can play different roles, stories can have a different ending, other hidden mines can be exploded, as new monsters are invited to play at the Gothic card table, generating new hands and new games.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although this editorial is the result of a collaborative venture between two scholars (and fairy-tale enthusiasts), Alessandro Cabiati is the author of the sections ‘Parental Advisory: Fairy Tales Can Be Really Scary’ and ‘Form and (Re)Appearance of Fairy-Tale Horror’, and Laura Tosi is the author of the section ‘Fairy-Tale Gender Horror’.

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