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Innocent Initiations: Female Agency in Eroticized Fairy Tales

Obscene and bawdy folklore has suffered a long history of neglect and censorship. In 1965 Gershon Legman lamented the “prudery-ridden” reception of Aleksandr Afanas’ev’s *Russian Secret Tales*—a collection of bawdy Russian folktales with a troubled publication and translation history (xi). In 1998 Alan Dundes, in his foreword to Afanas’ev’s tales, echoed Legman’s frustration with “narrow-minded censorship” (n.p.). He states: “bawdy folklore is badly underrepresented in the totality of folklore publication. It is the exception rather than the rule when a sampling of bawdy folktales finds its way into print” (n.p.). Bawdy folktales, like fabliaux and toasts, are difficult to study because of their underrepresentation in collections and the lack of scholarly attention given them. This difficulty extends, with certain differences, to the study of eroticized fairy tales: there exists a wealth of scholarship on fairy tales, but only some of it deals with explicit sex.¹ In this article, I define and explore eroticized fairy tales in relation to classic and literary fairy tales, focusing on the contemporary erotic tales’ depictions of women, sexuality, and agency.

There is some precedent for eroticism in literary fairy tales, such as sexual scenes in Giambattista Basile’s *Pentamerone* and the *Arabian Nights*. Lewis Seifert remarks that although love is depicted psychologically and not physically in most French tales—explicit depictions of sexuality so rare as to seem prohibited—a few tales contain “sexually suggestive (as opposed to erotic) descriptions or allusions” (118). My focus here is not on literary tales that are erotic or sexually suggestive, but rather on contemporary tales that eroticize formerly

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nonerotic or latently erotic classic fairy tales. Eroticized tales privilege the erotic encounter as a focal point of the plot, though the degree to which sex forms the plot is variable. Whether sex is the pretense for the plot or merely a happy side effect, graphic descriptions are the standard result in eroticized fairy tales. Content is one of the main ways that eroticized fairy tales differ from most other fairy tales: there is little explicit sex to be found in most literary fairy tales, especially the classic tales of the Grimms, Charles Perrault, and the French *conteuses*. The overt sexuality of eroticized fairy tales, however, could be viewed as a carnivalesque inversion, making the implicit explicit. Since so many fairy tales end in marriage—to the extent that Vladimir Propp has marriage as the fairy tale's ultimate function—sex is an underlying concern of fairy tales, though it rarely comes to the forefront as it does in erotic literature. By exposing sex, authors of eroticized fairy tales open new areas of discussion that intersect with current concerns about fairy tales.

The eroticized fairy tales that comprise this study are at the same time a literary phenomenon—subject to the whims of editors, consumers, and other market forces—and a postmodern phenomenon. They fit within a larger matrix of ideologically charged literature that conveys numerous messages, and part of this genre's ideological significance derives from its fairy-tale connections. Cristina Bacchilega, in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, calls fairy tales “ideologically variable desire machines” (7). Fairy tales deal with desire on several planes, including but not limited to desire for material goods, power, and sexual union. It is sexual desire, often intertwined with the desire for power over another human being, that comes to the forefront of eroticized fairy tales. Since fairy tales have been incorporated into children's literature over the past two centuries, there is also an element of gleeful perversion in eroticized fairy tales. As Karen Rowe phrases it, the mass popularity of erotic (as well as gothic) fairy-tale fictions “testifies to a pervasive fascination with fairy tale romance in literature not merely for children but for twentieth-century adults” (210). At the risk of disregarding the nuances developed by feminist fairy-tale scholars over the past thirty years (see Haase, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship”), I ask: what is the power and appeal of eroticized fairy tales? And how do they portray and affect women?

Related genres, such as romance novels and postmodern fairy tales, can offer some clues. Romances, like fairy tales, typically deal with a series of fantastical transformations that end in heterosexual marriage. Though romances often feature spunky or rebellious heroines, they ultimately choose to be in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, conforming to patriarchal norms. Janice Radway, in *Reading the Romance*, suggests: “despite the utopian force of the romance's projection, that projection actually leaves unchallenged the very system of social relations whose faults and imperfections gave rise to the romance and which the romance is trying to correct” (215). While romances and post-

modern fairy tales may or may not be erotic or explicitly sexual depending on their authors and audiences, I would argue that unlike romances, postmodern fairy tales tend to problematize the desires they represent. I would further argue that the category of postmodern fairy tales can encompass eroticized fairy tales, but the uncritical portrayal of desires separates eroticized fairy tales from other, more radical postmodern fairy tales such as those of Angela Carter. According to Bacchilega, “some postmodern revisions may question and remake the classic fairy tale’s production of gender only to re-inscribe it within some unquestioned model of subjectivity or narrativity” (23). The subtype of eroticized fairy tales I shall discuss in this article conform to Radway’s and Bacchilega’s notions of stories that appear to dispute certain, often sexual, standards, but on a deeper level leave them uncontested.

The eroticized fairy tales I chose to study are marketed as such in short story collections. The four collections that inform this article are: *Once Upon a Time: Erotic Fairy Tales for Women*, edited by Michael Ford; *Erotic Fairy Tales: A Romp through the Classics*, by Mitzi Szereto; *The Empress’s New Lingerie and Other Erotic Fairy Tales*, by Hillary Rollins; and *Naughty Fairy Tales from A to Z*, edited by Alison Tyler. These are selected from a handful of English-language erotica that contain fairy tales in their titles. Many of the tales conform closely to fairy-tale plots, whereas others utilize fairy-tale motifs in a pastiche plot. Among the tales included in the four collections, I was able to identify a dozen tales that follow a similar theme, which I have termed the “innocent initiation.” The innocent initiation tales feature a sexually naïve heroine who, as a part of the plot, is thrust into a sexually charged situation. She is initiated into sexual pleasure without knowing precisely what is going on, and she unconditionally enjoys the event. The focus of these stories is on the experience of the female protagonist, yet the structure of these stories—because of their similarity to fairy tales—calls into question the heroine’s agency.

A few examples of this type of tale will suffice. The first is titled “The Twelve Months,” and it appears in Szereto’s *Erotic Fairy Tales*. The plot is that of ATU 480, *The Kind and Unkind Girls*, specifically the subtype *Strawberries in the Snow*. In this story, the heroine, Maruska, is repeatedly sent out from her stepmother’s trailer to seek things that are impossible to find in winter: first violets, then strawberries, and finally red apples. Each time, Maruska wanders into a circle of a dozen rocks, where men personifying the twelve months of the year reside. The twelve months help Maruska attain each objective, but first she must pleasure them individually. The author describes how the heroine straddles each month’s lap, feeling “something rigid burrow[ing] into her tender place, making it wet and sticky and even a little sore” (304). After the sex sequence, the author concludes: “Never had Maruska imagined that sitting upon a lap could be so enjoyable” (304). The heroine’s sexual initiation is presented as pleasurable

though not as a result of her conscious decision. Additionally, the heroine's sexuality, specifically her lack of sexual experience, is what motivates the donor figures to aid her. This can be seen as an instance of women's sexuality serving as a token of exchange in a cultural context where men have power and agency and women do not (see Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" for a theory of sexual exchange).²

A second example of an innocent initiation tale is a version of Cinderella (ATU 510A). Titled "Down in the Cinders," this story is by Marcy Sheiner and it appears in *Once Upon a Time: Erotic Fairy Tales for Women*. In this version, Cinderella enjoys her downtrodden state, since she derives pleasure from taking on a submissive role. The stepsisters in this story enjoy taking a dominant role in a bondage context. Cinderella's sexual initiation, however, is noteworthy not only for the overtones of sexual dominance and submission, but also because she does not understand her own feelings of sexual arousal. The author details the immense pleasure Cinderella feels when doing menial work for her family, which leads her to "lie down among the cinders where she slept, and touch herself until she reached satisfaction. She had no idea what this was or why it happened, but she knew for sure it was wicked" (278–79). The plot progresses with this submissive, agoraphobic Cinderella pushed by a kindly neighbor woman to attend the ball, where the prince falls in love with her and promises to wed her. Yet on the wedding night, Cinderella's stepsisters intrude to teach the prince, who is also a submissive type, how to properly appreciate Cinderella's unique charms. Again, the heroine does not make sexual choices for herself. The stepsisters provide an interesting contrast to Cinderella, as they are active characters and, moreover, are not villainized as in many other versions of ATU 510A; their meanness is accounted for by their particular sexual leanings, and in the end they help Cinderella. This collapses the helper and antagonist roles, a conflation that is common in contemporary revisions of fairy tales. This tale illustrates the complexity of women's roles in eroticized fairy tales, although an overly optimistic reading of the tale is problematic because the stepsisters and Cinderella are necessarily (for the plot to work) presented as oppositional and essentialized.

Stories fitting the innocent initiation subtype include revisions of Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White, plus a pastiche tale called "Earthly Delights" that references fairy-tale motifs without adhering to any particular plot. These tales have some characteristics in common that distinguish them from other eroticized fairy tales and from nonerotic fairy tales: passivity on the heroine's part, and actions by other characters that awaken and appreciate the heroine's inner lusty nature.

Other eroticized fairy tales, when they feature a female protagonist, sometimes place her in the role of seductress or villainess rather than naïve initiate. Red Jordan Arobateau's "The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces" in *Once Upon a Time*

features twelve princesses who indulge their deviant lesbian fantasies every night upon their escape from their parents' palace. Carol Queen's "Puss in Boots; or, Clever Mistress Cat" in the same volume is about how a servant, Kitty, asks her destitute mistress for a pair of boots by which to make their fortune; after becoming a successful courtesan, Kitty teaches her mistress how to also ply that trade. Both of these heroines are sexually empowered when they choose to become lovers and continue in their trade, despite the stigma associated with prostitution.

The revision of "Little Red Riding Hood" in Hillary Rollins's *The Empress's New Lingerie* reveals tensions between sexual undercurrents in classic and updated fairy tales, particularly ATU 333. Feminist criticism, notably Jack Zipes's *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, has demonstrated that many canonical versions of ATU 333 make Red responsible for her fate, paralleling the popular victim-blaming defense of rape. Rollins's "Red," which opens her collection, follows this pattern. Described as extremely attractive, Red is told by her mother not to "spill [her] treasures into the lap of some stranger along the way" (17). As though the double entendre were not clear enough, the mother admonishes Red: "Uh uh uh, don't you deny it, young lady. I've seen the way your hips sway when you walk to the market. I've seen the way you yield to the caress of the wind on your thigh or the sting of icy water on your hard little nipples when you bathe in the stream," and so on (17). After her mother's lecture, Red reflects on her changing body and secret desires, feeling shamed by these impulses that she is unable to satisfy by herself. When Red meets a threateningly wolflike man on the path, she succumbs to his seduction. She does not seem to know what is happening: "But for reasons she could not comprehend, her entire body trembled" (20). She is compared to a rag doll and to a caught and trussed-up rabbit. Defenseless, she feels that "no one had ever worshipped her fiery ringlets like this before, and even as she feared it, she thrilled to his violent touch" (21). The man eventually pleasures Red (in her grandmother's bed, even), yet contradictorily the parallels to rape are visible in the text.

This eroticization of violence parallels the eroticization of the folktale. The belated appearance of a woodcutter indicates the influence of the Grimm version of the tale over the Perrault version. The woodcutter, however, does not save Red from the wolf's ravaging. He watches, gaining voyeuristic pleasure from the experience, only deciding to use his axe at the time when Red cries out. She is, however, enjoying herself sufficiently to tell the woodcutter "No." This tale's statement that Red does not need rescuing by the woodcutter, and moreover can articulate such, is a subversive comment on patriarchal intertexts and prior versions of ATU 333.

Like many well-known fairy tales, eroticized fairy tales feature highly stylized descriptions, focusing on bright colors, well-defined shapes, and intense emotions. Max Lüthi's work is an example of the dialogue that can exist between

nonerotic and erotic fairy tales. In *The European Folktale*, Lüthi claims that folktales are practically asexual, yet in emphasizing their idealized and stylized aspects, he perfectly describes eroticized fairy tales. These stylistic features, in addition to the sensual writing style, obscure the question of why the female protagonist's first sexual encounter should be so unrealistic. In my sample of eroticized fairy tales there are almost no *male* protagonists who experience a sexual initiation, and indeed, the assumption underlying the heroine's experiences is that their male initiators *must* have had more experience than them. The sexual asymmetry is ideologically charged. Moreover, the heroines in these tales do not in general initiate sexual contact; instead, the secondary male (and occasionally female) characters do. This aspect of innocent initiation tales brings up the question of agency, or the condition of exerting power or acting. If a female character does not act with agency, she is not a subject; she is an object. And if the main character of a story is objectified, not acting but being acted upon, then readers are forced to identify either with the protagonist only as a sexual object, or with the performer of the sexual acts.

The objectification of innocent heroines is a problem that extends beyond eroticized fairy tales. Agency is a relevant topic in discussing nonerotic fairy tales as well, but fairy-tale scholarship has generally been slow to adapt this term.³ However, Angela Carter's fairy-tale fiction has invited enough feminist analysis that it can provide a model for this discussion. Her work treads the erotic border, and has attracted a great deal of scholarship that repetitively claims that Carter rewrites fairy tales with a feminist agenda.⁴ According to Stephen Benson, emphasizing the "feminist" endings of Carter's tales disregards "the many folktales that offer instances of just such female agency" (48). Which folktales display female agency, and just how much agency, remains a tricky question. In Jack Zipes's collection of feminist fairy tales, *Don't Bet on the Prince*, he simultaneously celebrates folktale heroines who are active and aggressive while acknowledging that because of historical and market factors, oppressive patterns have both developed and lingered in fairy tales (7). I think it is safe to say that some folktales contain self-sufficient heroines, while other, often literary renditions of the tales depict more passive heroines. Even more recent revisions of fairy tales frequently complete the circle by returning to independent heroines—except, I would argue, in the case of eroticized innocent initiation tales. One interesting point about eroticized fairy tales is that while the heroines only sometimes require rescue as a result of plot complications, they always require sexual attention. Since sex, or at least erotic sensation, is usually the expectation in erotica, it makes sense to have present a sexual partner (or seven, in "Snow White"). From a feminist perspective, the difficulty arises when the heroine does not imitate either folktale or revision models and discover her pleasure for herself, but instead conforms to the fairy-tale passivity that has rightfully come under attack.

It is significant that most of the innocent initiation eroticized tales in my sample are based on well-known fairy tales from the Grimm collection or from Disney films. Thus, authors of innocent initiation tales start from texts that already show patriarchal bias. Since these authors deliberately evoke certain associations, intertextuality becomes a key notion in my analysis. Even the act of choosing to rewrite one fairy tale instead of another, or choosing one version's title over another, is meaningful. As Alessandra Levorato points out in her book *Language and Gender in the Fairy Tale Tradition*: "rewritings are built on prior texts, and they often rely on the reader's knowledge of earlier versions in order for their full meaning to be carried across" (193). The prior texts informing the stories in my sample four collections of eroticized fairy tales have varied origins beyond folktales and fairy tales, from nursery rhymes to legends. Yet as I mentioned earlier, all of the tales that fit the innocent initiation type, with one exception, build on familiar fairy tales. Interestingly, they also primarily feature heterosexual couplings. Not all of the eroticized fairy tales in the four collections of stories are heterosexually oriented, so the innocent initiation stories actually stand apart from some of the other stories on the basis of their sexual encounters being predominantly heterosexual.

I would argue that tale characters' heterosexuality is one among other conservative elements drawn straight from fairy tales. While not all of the sex occurs in a marital situation, often, such as in the eroticized rewrites of "Sleeping Beauty" and "Cinderella," marriage is the implied or stated next step in the narrative. Some of the sex in these stories involves multiple partners, as in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves." There is bestiality in the retelling of "Little Red Riding Hood" and sexual power play in "Cinderella," noted earlier, as well as in "Rapunzel" and "Rumpelstiltskin." I mention these sexual elements not to be gratuitous, but rather to draw a comparison between them and similar elements in Angela Carter's collection *The Bloody Chamber*, which is hailed as a feminist work. Yet Carter problematizes sexual desire by the way she evokes it in her tales, whereas the authors of innocent initiation tales leave certain questions about desire unasked. Thus, the incorporation of unconventional sex into a rewritten fairy tale is no guarantee of the story being progressive.

The fact that eroticized fairy tales are meant as entertainment does not lessen their ideological impact or importance. As Bacchilega points out, fairy tales employ narrative strategies that, among other things, naturalize certain types of desire while negating others. These strategies can be visual as well; Zipes states in "Breaking the Disney Spell" that Disney "animated the fairy tale only to transfix audiences and divert their potential utopian dreams and hopes through the false promise of the images he cast upon the screen" (74). Eroticized fairy tales make sexual desire seem natural and inherent to practically everyone and everything, but innocent initiation tales in particular portray female characters

as though their sexual desires have lain dormant until just the right moment. In the two versions of *Sleeping Beauty* in my sample, the protagonist is literally dormant until the prince awakens her—and her desire—with a kiss located such that Freudian displacement comes to mind. This initiation is extremely metonymic, equating subjectivity with the ability to desire, because the heroine and her sexuality are simultaneously awakened. In other tales in my sample, the heroines experience sexual urges without understanding what they are, and only their initiatory sexual experiences truly fulfill these urges. Often the initiations occur without the girls understanding what exactly is happening, but they enjoy the sensations nonetheless. Nor do the female protagonists initiate sexual contact—in the rewrite of “*Rumplestiltskin*,” for example, the heroine is abducted to be the king’s pleasure slave, where she shamefully finds herself aroused despite her impending rape. The message behind these tales is not only that the heroine lacks the agency to make choices about when and where and with what or whom she has sex, but also that she cannot make decisions about whether or not to be a sexual being.

Clearly, the characters in erotic fiction will have sexual dimensions to their personalities, but the heroines in innocent initiation tales are portrayed dualistically with regard to desire. On the one hand, these heroines are inherently sexual creatures. On the other hand, they are innocent about sex, even after the fact. This duality is a manifestation of the virgin/whore complex, a double bind constraining women to be sexy, but not too sexy; sexual, but not overtly sexual. The emphasis that authors of innocent initiation tales place on their protagonists’ inexperience commodifies innocence. The heroines are sexy—to other characters with whom the readers might also identify—precisely because they are naïve. Innocence thus becomes a trope meant to evoke desire in the reader, because within the story, innocence signifies sexual eagerness that is ready to be exploited. Female characters in traditional folktales at least have the option to refuse to be sexual beings; for example, the protagonist of ATU 510B, *Donkeyskin*, makes herself sexually unappealing and unavailable by wearing an animal fur disguise after her father tries to marry her, and only later casts off this disguise to tease a prince into marriage.

The final point I would like to make about eroticized fairy tales in general is that by making use of certain rhetorical devices, they reinscribe fairy tales within the realm of the feminine. As Marina Warner has discussed in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, women’s contributions to the body of fairy-tale literature has been immense, from the labels of Mother Goose tales and old wives’ tales to the association of fairy tales with children’s entertainment, hence the domestic sphere. Eroticized fairy tales are often written by women, and collections of them are aimed at female consumers, often explicitly. Why women choose to write dis-

empowering tales can be attributed to many factors, ranging from unconsciously following genre constraints and embedded ideologies to actively choosing to write what will be deemed sexy and hence successful, yet it is difficult to make hypotheses without interviewing these authors. If the titillation a reader experiences at depictions of women's innocent initiations provide an experience that the reader values and wishes to consume more of, then the piece of writing can be deemed successful from an economic perspective, providing the rationale to pay writers for more works. Still, it is difficult to generalize about readers' experiences given that the same text can be read in many different ways. Finally, in the case of the innocent initiation tale, women's sexual experiences are commodified even as the main female characters are objectified and deprived of agency. All of these traits reinforce the notions that fairy tales belong to women, fairy tales are about women, and yet fairy tales disempower women by granting them superficial pleasure while denying them any real agency.

In conclusion, eroticized fairy tales are complex revisions of fairy tales wherein the treatment of female agency and desire conveys certain ideological messages. Though these tales are sexually explicit, much of their content simply makes manifest the power relations that are already expressed in nonerotic fairy tales. The coherence of eroticized fairy tales relies upon the underlying assumptions of both writers and readers. Alessandra Levorato describes this phenomenon: "the reader in accepting to construct the coherence of the text in this way is constituted as a subject who accepts this interpretation of gender roles" (118). The innocent initiation type of eroticized fairy tale offers a polarized view of gender roles, which draws on roles already prevalent in fairy tales. These representations of sexuality, including the ideologies fueling them, implicate many people and groups in their productions and reproductions of cultural expressions, including scholars. Folklorists occupy multiple places on the chain of transmission, sometimes unintentionally: for instance, Mitzi Szereto, author of the stories in *Erotic Fairy Tales: A Romp through the Classics*, refers to folklore scholarship—from tale collections to cognates—in her introductions to each tale. Further work using reader response models as well as questionnaire- and interview-styled fieldwork is the next step in understanding not only why writers eroticize fairy tales, but also why consumers purchase and read them, and what kinds of effects these tales might have on their understandings of fairy tales and sexuality. How many of us leave fairy tales in the realm of childhood or, for those of us who study fairy tales, in the workplace? How often and in which forms do fairy tales, as opposed to other cultural materials, fuel people's fantasies? Eroticized fairy tales, distinct from nonerotic and erotic folk and fairy tales, as well as from postmodern fairy tales and romantic fiction, offer intriguing opportunities for scholars of sexuality and intertextuality to explore and perhaps play.

Notes

1. An exception is Lutz Röhrich's entry on "Erotik, Sexualität" in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* and his essay "Erotik und Sexualität im Volksmärchen."
2. See Thomas for an application of Luce Irigaray's work to the commodification of princesses.
3. A notable exception is Lee Haring's "Creolization as Agency in Woman-Centered Folktales."
4. For instance, see Roemer and Bacchilega.

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