

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 23 | Issue 1

Article 7

2021

Fracturing the Mirror: *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*

Abigael Good

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Good, Abigael (2021) "Fracturing the Mirror: *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol23/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Fracturing the Mirror: *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*

Keywords

fairy tales, retelling, symbolism, queer, Snow White, Girls Made of Snow and Glass, Snow White

Fracturing the Mirror: *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*

Abigail Good

Maria Tartar emphasizes the multiplicity of fairy tale variants that create “kaleidoscopic variations with distinctly different effects” (ix). For example, Little Red Riding Hood may be eaten in one variant, rescued in another, or slay the beast herself in a third (ix). We think of these variants as having developed naturally through parallel thinking in different cultures and through the mutating of tales within and between cultures, but there are also by now a proliferation of *retellings*—new variants which are intentionally different, rather than incidentally different. While a variant assumes it is a valid, or even the only valid, telling of the tale, retelling assumes that there is a more authentic original tale at its base and draws its meaning from this relationship. How elements of the original are retained, excised, or turned slantwise create meaning in the retelling. Retellings of every popular story in the public domain exist (and even of stories not in the public domain, if one considers fanfiction), and many retellings bring a queer subtext or queer reimagining to the surface of the new story. Young adult fantasy authors have been especially prolific in this area. For example, Malinda Lo’s *Ash* and Kalynn Bayron’s *Cinderella is Dead* each use Cinderella as a base for stories in which two girls fall in love with each other. Fairy tales lend themselves particularly well to queer retellings because their high level of familiarity allows them greater flexibility to be queered and yet still recognizable, to be bent out of shape and yet still resonate within our collective unconscious,

our shared understanding of the meaning of symbols. I will explore the potential of fairy tale symbols to be queered by examining Melissa Bashardoust's retelling of "Snow White" in her novel *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*.

While there is scholarship on fairy tales in general and on feminist criticism in particular, it is harder to find queer retellings and examinations of queer retellings. I argue that this gap demands more attention. If any kind of retelling reveals the enduring power and importance of fairy tales to our modern world, as so much academic literature is interested in discussing, it is the queer retelling. When it comes to how far fairy tale symbols can stretch and still retain their meaning, queer retellings are both a challenge and proof of the fruitfulness of answering that challenge; they suggest revelatory uses of those symbols and in their execution demonstrate their full potential as literary shorthand for important concepts that permeate our culture. Christy Williams approaches the topic of feminist retellings in much the same way: "retellings that pull fragments rather than plot structure from fairy tales have more possibilities in conceptualizing gender because they are removing recognized fairy-tale elements from their expected context, thereby invoking a particular fairy tale without reproducing the source tale's ideology through plot and other patterns" (3). I approach these fragments somewhat differently—I believe they invoke not only their fairy tale of origin but also the tale's ideology. However, through manipulation of carefully chosen symbols, an author can invoke the ideology of these tales—heteronormativity, feminine passivity, the all-important beauty—and then systematically dismantle that ideology. This is economical storytelling: the author need not first flesh out such an ideology in order to then destroy

it—she can use the symbols already familiar to Western culture.

Because fairy tales are so commonly associated with childhood nowadays, and queerness is still largely restricted to the realm of adults (as wrong as it is to assume that queerness is too explicit for children to learn about), using fairy tale symbols for a queer story is a greater challenge than a feminist retelling, and a higher-impact pairing. And, yet, to tell a story of love between women, it is just as necessary to tell a tale of women's emancipation, so Bashardoust's retelling is also strongly feminist. I will now examine Bashardoust's use of "Snow White" fragments such as the mirror, snow and blood, the kiss, and others throughout her novel in service of emancipating and queering Snow White.

In Bashardoust's retelling, her Evil Queen begins life simply as Mina. Though beautiful, Mina is an outcast: she is the daughter of a ruthless sorcerer who saved her life as a child by giving her a glass heart and, as a side effect, the magic of manipulating glass. Bashardoust chooses to give her Evil Queen power over glass because through this she can control mirrors, turning the tables on the original story, in which the Queen is controlled by her mirror. While Mina is obsessed with her reflection, it is because she is cognizant that others only value her for her beauty and that it is therefore her only source of non-magical power. Her mantra, repeated throughout the book, is: "If they love you for anything, it will be for your beauty" (11). Love here refers not only to romantic love, but also to the love of the court and people she will eventually rule over, translating into respect from or power over them. Her anxiety over retaining her beauty is not merely frivolous and vain or rooted in hatred of other women, as is so common in

the stories we tell; it comes from a sensible and acute fear of being powerless without it. Bashardoust acknowledges that women who care about their appearance have been influenced to do so by their surroundings, and does not condemn them for it—in contrast to the original story which values beauty so highly while villainizing women who seek to retain their beauty. In the original tale, a woman ought to be beautiful but never to want, acknowledge, or work at it. In *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*, beauty cannot go unacknowledged; it is a force constantly shaping the characters' lives, and the reader is forced to critically confront its influence.

When the king's wife dies, Mina's sorcerer father creates a daughter for him out of snow and blood, in the exact image of his dead wife. The sorcerer is as much obsessed with this act of creation as the king is with how much his daughter resembles his wife, both of them invested to an unsettling degree with Lynet's unnatural origins and beauty. Blood is so strongly identified with women, and both women and blood identified with giving life (Gilbert and Gubar 292), that it stands out as particularly strange that it is a male sorcerer who creates this girl out of blood and snow, a man who harnesses the feminine symbolism of virginal blood on pure snow to create a child. By bringing a child into the world, the sorcerer transgresses the boundaries of gender. His infringement reveals how flimsy those boundaries are. Lynet has no true mother, only artifice and fathers. Her femaleness, like her person, is entirely constructed, specifically constructed by men to be beautiful and delicate. She is a symbol of the social construction of womanhood in our world, where one might add that womanhood is also constructed to be heterosexual. Lynet will eventually defy all of these expectations.

In payment for his daughter's creation, the king invites Mina and her father to live at Whitespring Castle, the frozen capital of the kingdom. Encased in endless winter for hundreds of years, this is a world perpetually on the brink of spring, of change, yet never changing at all. There, Mina tries to prove she can love and be loved despite her glass heart by seducing the widowed king. To practice loving someone, she turns her mirror into a man made of glass, an act of creation that parallels Lynet's creation out of snow. However, while Lynet was created to be the platonic ideal of a woman, Mina makes her huntsman gentle, obedient, and devoted, in contrast to the prototypical Western idea of masculinity. Unlike her father, who used one woman as a mold for another, Mina's creation breaks the mold. While the novel repeatedly asks what makes a woman, the glass huntsman forces the reader to also consider what makes a man. The book suggests that perhaps a man is not so different from a woman; both of them are constructed by the other in the image of past men and women, with no true original, as Judith Butler would write.

Though the king seems to come to love her, he insists that Mina never grow too close to his daughter, though young Lynet loves Mina wholeheartedly. He worries that idolizing Mina will prevent Lynet from growing into the perfect copy of his late wife. On their wedding night, an incident between Lynet and the sorcerer who created her causes the king to regret marrying Mina, and he distances himself from her, giving her the South to rule but telling her they are husband and wife in name only. Miserable, Mina turns to her glass huntsman for comfort, a twisting of the Evil Queen's obsession with her mirror. Mina's 'mirror' does not control her by

taunting her with another's beauty; rather he is under her control and considers her the most beautiful woman in the world because he loves her. The huntsman, her rule of the South, and Lynet's love are Mina's only consolations as she and her husband come to despise each other.

The figure of Snow White is filled by Lynet, the young princess. Though everyone praises her uncanny resemblance to the late queen, Lynet longs to be like Mina, and harbors a secret fear of becoming like her dead mother. Her prince figure is not a prince at all, but a young surgeon named Nadia. When Nadia arrives at Whitespring, she reveals to Lynet the secret of her creation. This revelation shakes Lynet to her core: "Made, created, shaped—all those words meant the same thing: she was something artificial. She was a duplicate, created to live out all the days that had been stolen from her mother [...] Had Lynet ever had anything of her own? Was she even a person?" (Bashardoust 56). Lynet's fears raise questions about the formation of womanhood. Is a woman who was made, created, shaped by the patriarchy even a person? Does she have anything of her own, or only what the world tells her to have? Does she have a purpose beyond beauty and having children? Because Lynet's formation symbolizes the formation of womanhood to benefit men, it is significant that Nadia, her future love interest, is the one to reveal to her that heteronormative womanhood is constructed. She raises the possibility that Lynet, and any woman, can choose to reject that kind of womanhood, and she embodies one option they can turn to: romantic love of women.

This secret brings the two girls closer together, forming a tentative relationship. But then Lynet's relationship with Mina fractures. Her father

gives Lynet control of the South, Mina's homeland and former responsibility, and then, having finally successfully driven a wedge between his wife and daughter, dies in a hunting accident. He leaves a void in power rightfully meant to be filled by his daughter—but Lynet is young, and everyone knows that Mina has always been ambitious. Lynet witnesses a tryst between Mina and the huntsman and learns of her glass heart, magic, and inability to love. Terrified that the stepmother she never truly knew might kill her to keep the crown, she flees the castle.

Alone and on the run, Lynet discovers she has magic of her own: the power to create new things out of snow. Once again, even while she and Mina are on opposite sides of the conflict, they are aligned symbolically by both possessing a kind of magic. Out of snow, Lynet creates a false corpse of herself, a sort of precursor to the false death of every “Snow White” tale. This is especially interesting in light of Greenhill's assertion that “Woman centering and lesbian orientations signify in the doubling of the female image—reflections in mirrors, for example—or in the reproduction of female counterparts—sisters with parallel but different qualities, mothers and stepmothers, and so on” (9). *Girls Made of Snow and Glass* is full of doubling: Lynet as a copy of her dead mother, Lynet's two mother figures, Lynet's living body and her false snow body, Mina and her reflection reflected over and over again, Mina's living body and her false glass body. Both Lynet and Mina are duplicated again and again throughout the story. Both of them confront perfect(er) images of themselves and ask if this or that reflection is what other people would rather they be. Both of them eventually turn away from these images to embrace themselves as they are:

not the women their patriarchal world wants them to be, but the women they want to be.

While Mina believes she is dead, Lynet heads South to find the magician who made her. She hopes he will know how to make Mina's glass heart real and so heal the rift between them. At this point in the story, one expects Lynet to meet seven dwarves and move into their home for safety. But there are no dwarves in *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*, or any characters one might see as stand-ins for them. This part of the tale, so well-known to the Western audience, is missing. Its absence makes Bashardoust's use of "Snow White" more interesting, because we recognize Snow White without her dwarves. We recognize the story's most powerful motifs—blood on snow, the mirror, the deceptive gift, awakening from death—and the ideas they in turn allude to: awe at the creation of life, the ultimate death that is the death of mothers, beauty and vanity and corruption. Bashardoust does not have to include every aspect of "Snow White." It is enough just to invoke the story, and therefore its cultural weight. These readymade symbols are ideal building blocks for the book because they bring with them a host of already potent meanings which Bashardoust does not have to set up herself before she can subvert them. She can begin manipulating them from the start, trusting in the reader's preexisting knowledge of what they already meant. Bashardoust takes advantage of this when she gives Mina power over glass, for example. But she can also manipulate a symbol by excising it. The absence of the dwarves and their safe domestic space from *Girls Made of Snow and Glass* suggests that safety offered by men is unnecessary, or perhaps nonexistent.

Back in Whitespring, Mina clings to her throne. As she mourns the death of her stepdaughter and distant husband, she realizes that the king would have loved her if she died: “He would mold her memory into a wife he could love, and he would worship her dead body just as he had shunned the living one. *He loves nothing so much as his own grief*” (Bashardoust 215). Thus the prince’s love of Snow White’s dead body becomes the king’s love of dead women in Bashardoust’s retelling, making explicit the message that lies hidden in “Snow White”: the most desirable, most loveable woman is one who has no life or troublesome personality, nothing but an empty vessel to be filled with a man’s imagination of who she is. Especially in a retelling that gives us a female/female romance, the implication that few men truly love women for who they are takes on a queer tint. Greenhill goes further, in her analysis of the fairy tale “Fitcher’s Bird,” by identifying women-focused tales of women-identified women, in which men are the villains, as inherently queer, and I agree that they challenge heteronormativity. Bashardoust’s queer retelling does not make all men villains—the huntsman, who is gentle and devoted, and loves Mina until the end—but she understands that there can be no queer liberation without women’s liberation from the rule of men. Lesbian love cannot be accepted if women are not respected in the absence of a man. *Girls Made of Snow and Glass* stands as much as a testament to the intertwinement of feminism and queer liberation as Greenhill’s analysis of “Fitcher’s Bird,” but in a way that rejects gender essentialism and does not preclude the ability of men to be better.

In the South, Lynet finds the sorcerer, but he has no desire to heal Mina’s glass heart; he only wants to cut out Lynet’s heart in order to steal

her magic and vitality. Having once spent his own magic and vitality to create her for his own interests, he now feels entitled to her very life. From the beginning, Lynet's fathers created her for their own needs and desires, never thinking of her as an independent human. Is a woman a person, Lynet wondered? The answer is clear: not in her father's eyes. With Nadia's help, Lynet escapes. She has gained a better understanding of how the sorcerer's cruelty turned Mina into the person she is now, as well as a newfound belief in her power. Armed with this knowledge, she believes she can convince Mina of her love and make up with her. If not, she is resolved to kill her to take the throne. Lynet and Nadia return to Whitethorn, racing the sorcerer who still wants her heart.

When the two women confront each other, Mina realizes that Lynet's love is worth more to her than the crown. She rejects the hatred that the king, representative of the patriarchy, tried to instill between them, the hatred that drives the plot of the original tale, "that voice of the looking glass [that] sets them against each other" (Gilbert and Gubar 293). Though Mina has always literally had control of glass, this triumph marks the moment she gains control over all the symbolic representations of glass: the wall that separates two people though they can see each other and the mirror that tells a woman she is nothing more than her image.

But her father acts before she can. He creates an imitation of Mina out of glass and has it give Lynet a poisoned silver bracelet that will put her to sleep while he cuts out her heart. Figuring this out only in time to stop him from operating, and believing Lynet truly dead, Mina snaps and kills her father rather than let him take Lynet's heart. While Mina and the

sorcerer battle each other, Nadia is actually awakening Lynet. Then the girls kiss. Nadia in the prince role reinforces what Bashardoust has been saying all along, that women can save each other, as friends, as family, and as lovers. The story showcases all of these relationships between women. They are bonds that can be warped by competitiveness, manipulated by others, and fall into familiar tropes pitting women against each other. But they can also be fair, resilient, and healing. Lynet is already awake during the kiss. The quasi-necrophiliac implications of the original story have been transferred totally to her father, rather than to her love interest, who loves her far more when she is alive and vibrant than when she is asleep and silent. It is a consensual kiss that frees Lynet not from a sleep like death, but from her father's expectations.

With both of their fathers dead, Mina passes the crown to Lynet, who names her governor of the South. Being a good woman, in this story, does not have to mean giving up power. A powerful woman in Bashardoust's world is not necessarily an evil one. They will rule together, and Nadia will stay by Lynet's side. With her power over snow, Lynet ends the unnatural winter that had frozen the kingdom in place, letting the seasons finally change. In contrast to the traditional beginning of "Snow White" with the ominous image of blood on snow to symbolize new life, the trees of Whitespring begin to bud with new life of their own. The story that began with two men as the most powerful figures in their lives ends with "two girls made of snow and glass who were more than their origins"—that is, more than their fathers meant or wanted for them to be—becoming "two queens who had come together to reshape their world" (Bashardoust 370).

Bashardoust's deft handling of fragments of "Snow White" confronts their meaning in the original tale, challenges them, and ultimately reimbues them with new meaning. Blood is power, mirrors are weapons, and snow is but a blank canvas for a new future to be written upon. This retelling works not in spite of the meaning these symbols carry over from "Snow White," but specifically because they already carried meaning. That contrast, like bright red blood against pure white snow, is the point. Other authors have already discovered this, but few have extrapolated from the heteronormative world of fairy tales to create one in which a girl can be a prince and a princess kiss a girl.

Works Cited

- Bashardoust, Melissa. *Girls Made of Snow and Glass*. Flat Iron Books, 2017.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.
- Greenhill, Pauline. "‘Fitcher’s [Queer] Bird’: A Fairy Tale Heroine and her Avatars." *Marvels and Tales* 22, no. 1 (2008): 143+.
- Tartar, Maria. *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Norton, 1999.
- Williams, Christy. "Re-Conceptualizing Gender through Narrative Play in Fairy-Tale Retellings." Dissertation, University of Hawaii, 2012. *ProQuest*, <https://search-proquest-com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/1347666489/?pq-origsite=primo>.