Transformative Narratives: Resisting and Reinforcing Patriarchy in Reimagined Fairy Tales

By Jade Visos-Ely

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Folklore

Memorial University of Newfoundland

October 2024

St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract

Traditional fairy tales, myths, and legends have been reimagined as a way to resist patriarchy; however, tale adaptations can also reinforce patriarchal beliefs even as they try to subvert them, demonstrating a complexity that is often overlooked. This thesis seeks to examine the nuanced dynamics of gender, power, and narrative innovation in reimagined fairy tales, focusing on how these stories engage with and challenge traditional gender binaries. Through a comparative analysis of folklorist Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens" and psychologist Sharon Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin," among other stories, the study reveals how storytellers reinterpret traditional elements to convey new meanings and shift the narrative focus, transforming the tales in the process. Blackie's work in particular offers insights into the intersection of fairy tales and the self-help genre, underscoring the power of audience agency when interpreting story meaning and integrating it into their lives. The thesis concludes with a queer re-reading of Blackie's "Wolfskin," exploring the transformative potential of shapeshifting figures through a transbiological lens, which challenges conventional gender binaries and invites new ways of thinking about identity and belonging.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes out to everyone who has helped me on my journey, who supported me and gave me the courage to pursue my dreams. I got to travel to a new country, where I adventured through the little city by the sea that I called home for two years. My time in St. John's was truly transformative; I experienced personal growth, discovered joy in the simplest moments, and was embraced by so many. There are countless individuals to whom I owe my gratitude for their support, whether through long-distance encouragement with friends and family back home or the friendships and mentorships I formed on the island. However, I must first express my thanks to the land that welcomed me and continues to hold a piece of myself, awaiting my return. I respectfully acknowledge that the campuses of Memorial University are located on the traditional territories of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit peoples, and I honor the rich histories and cultures of these Indigenous communities that have shaped Newfoundland and Labrador. I am thankful for the opportunity to learn and grow on these lands, and I recognize the significance of this place in shaping my academic journey.

In addition, I wish to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the faculty of the Folklore department for making my graduate experience truly remarkable. Thank you for inspiring me in countless ways and for challenging me to see beyond the surface. Through your encouragement, I have learned to listen, to engage, to live, and to dream even bigger than I imagined I could. I am particularly grateful to my supervisor, Daniel Peretti, for his guidance, invaluable insights, and unwavering support throughout my research journey. I am grateful for your constructive feedback, your encouragement, and particularly for your patience as I navigated various twists and turns throughout this journey.

Looking back on the past few years, I must also say how deeply grateful I am to have such a wonderful family. Your love and support, whether it was helping me pay for school books and tuition or whether it was the many conversations we shared or the words of encouragement, helped me believe in myself. To my husband, Erich, thank you for always believing in me even when I struggled to believe in myself. To my parents, Sarah and Tim, who introduced me to folklore long before I understood it as an academic pursuit—thank you for instilling in me a love for storytelling. To my stepparent Jesse, thank you for asking such thoughtful questions and for always reminding me to embrace the best version of myself. To my siblings Timothy and Violet, and to Amy as well, thank you for your encouragement as well as the welcome distractions. I am also grateful to my grandparents for their steadfast support throughout not only this academic journey but through every stage of life which led me here. To Grandma Chris, thank you for your constant love and the enjoyable phone conversations. To Grandpa Mike, I appreciate your guidance and your efforts in keeping my bookshelf well-stocked. To Grandma Joy, the family's original folklorist, thank you for reminding me of my roots. To Grandpa Doug, I am thankful for your encouragement and the dinners we got to share. I would like to give special thanks to my Grandpa Larry and Grandma Becky, whose encouragement of my academic pursuits and financial support have made my education possible. Your generosity has provided me with countless gifts that have enriched my life beyond my imagination.

Lastly, I would like to extend my appreciation to my friends. To Chris and Elainie, thank you for welcoming us into your home and giving me a place to work through my thesis revisions. Your hospitality helped me finally close the chapter on this academic adventure. And to my folklore colleagues who made my master's experience so special, thank you for your encouragement, helpful discussions, and moral support. Thank you for the coffee dates, the post-

class chats, for late-night stargazing, and all the seemingly little yet profoundly meaningful moments that made my time in Newfoundland more magical. Your friendship filled this journey with moments of joy I will always remember.

Contents

Introduction

In writing this thesis, I often found myself lost in the academic woods, wandering through twisting trails of scholarship in search of a deeper understanding of the shapeshifting woman and her enchanted transformations. Her story has been told in countless ways throughout history, shapeshifting across legends, myths, and fairy tales. It is easy to become disoriented amidst her kaleidoscopic transformations. Whenever I strayed too far, I reminded myself of the reason I began this journey: the storytelling. It is the storytelling that has always guided me. My entry into folklore studies was not as a folklorist but as a writer, driven by a desire to uncover deeper truths about the nature of storytelling. I believe, as I did at the beginning, that folklore holds profound insights into the power of stories in our everyday lives. My reasons for gravitating to folklore are echoed by Kimberly Lau: "It's the stories. Always the stories," she says in "Girl: Stories on the Way to Feminism":

> Folklorists, myself included, range far beyond narrative, but I know for certain it's the stories that led me to folklore. Fairy tales, folktales, fables, personal narratives, historical legends, memorates. Beyond my research, they are my mode of communication, my way of remembering, of knowing, you, me, others, everyone (Lau 2009, 19-20).

So, it is fitting that this thesis begin with a story—one that has wandered through time, journeyed across different lands, and been told in many tongues. It is the story of a woman who is also an animal shapeshifter. In myths and legends of Northern Eurasia, she appears as a winged swan maiden who descends from the heavens (Hatto 1961, 326–52). In Scottish, Celtic, and Icelandic myths and folktales the shapeshifting woman is a selkie dancing in the ocean's waves with her seal-women sisters (Puhvel 1963, 327). And other incantations of the animal bride proliferate, such as a wolf-woman in Croatian tales whose pelt is stolen and nailed to a mill wheel (Wratislaw 1890, 290-91). She is the swan maiden and the selkie and the wolf-woman of

folklore who is captured by a man who steals her skin, and in so doing keeps her captive as his wife for many years. Yet, it is also a story of her resilience, her unyielding quest to reunite with her stolen skin, and her eventual liberation. This is a tale of choosing joy and freedom over sacrifice and conformity, steeped in feminist and queer possibilities and ripe for contemporary reimagining.

Author and psychologist Sharon Blackie taps into this well of potential and frames her interpretation within a self-help context that emphasizes the power of storytelling in our daily lives. Stories possess the ability to shape our identities and perceptions of others, engaging with themes of power, wish fulfillment, wonder, and enchantment. However, they can also reinforce normative beliefs, perpetuating damaging stereotypes about who is considered to belong to certain groups and who is alienated. In fairy tales, happy endings confer heroic status but they also define who is valued and who is not, who is worthy and who is punished. The stories explored in this thesis follow similar well-worn patterns but also diverge in interesting ways, demonstrating folklore scholar Barre Toelken's insistence on the dual role of conservatism and dynamism in the folklore process, the "twin laws" (Toelken 1979, 34-39). Certain traditional elements are passed down, such as the recurring capture motif in ATU 400 "Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife," which features the stolen animal skin or magic garment. Within these traditional elements are opportunities for authorial innovation, as seen in the contrasting approaches of Jacobs and Blackie to the heroic quest or the value attributed to the enchanted skin.

The potent symbol of the shapeshifter's skin is a central focus of this thesis, linking the oral folktale to contemporary retellings that echo themes of theft and capture, as well as reunion and liberation. As a folklorist with a writer's heart, I am intrigued by how this symbol is diminished by authors like Joseph Jacobs, who prioritizes the male quest over female liberation, while,

conversely, it is brought to the forefront by authors like Sharon Blackie, who frames her retelling within a self-help and ecofeminist context to inspire transformation in the lives of her readers. I have chosen Blackie's work specifically for the insight it provides into the intersection of fairy tale scholarship with the self-help genre. When viewed from this intersecting point, intriguing parallels between the fairy-tale narrative and the self-help genre emerge. In Blackie's work, traditional narratives reimagined for modern audiences are melded with her personal experience narratives and Blackie's insights as a psychologist who uses narrative therapy in her practice. From these woven strands, I have learned that the fairy-tale, with its abundance of curses and happy endings, is similar to the problem-solution format of the self-help genre. Both fairy tales and self-help literature ultimately seek wish-fulfillment and transformation. The shapeshifting woman of folklore is at home in the self-help genre as she dons her skin and gains her independence—a feminist success story for contemporary audiences.

In Chapter 1, I outline the motifs that make up these tales of transformation, establish the feminist foundations and queer trajectory of my interpretive lens, and explain important terminology. In Chapter 2, I conduct a comparative analysis of Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens" and Sharon Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin" so as to demonstrate how patriarchal versus feminist perspectives shift the focus of the literary fairy tale. Although these tales are intended for different audiences, they are well-suited for comparison due to the authors' innovative approaches to the traditional narrative form. In Chapter 3, I look at the ways that storytelling is often gendered in both fairy-tale and self-help narratives. This chapter is about contextualizing Sharon Blackie as a self-help teacher speaking to an audience of readers as learners, a relationship which folklorist Sandra Dolby has explored in her study on the intersection of folklore and the self-help genre. In Chapter 4, by engaging with reimagined fairy

tales within the larger context of Blackie's self-help literature, I explore the complex relationship between author, text, and audience. I adhere to a subjective methodology that acknowledges that the folklore scholar is also a reader with their own interpretation. In tandem with this approach, I evaluate Blackie's performance by looking at reader reviews and responses to Blackie's self-help books and the ideologies she disseminates. Storytelling is powerful, but how is that power negotiated? This chapter dissects the beliefs that Blackie presents to her audience, and highlights audience agency and resistance. When looking at the context that surrounds Blackie, not just in her reimagined tales but expanding to other mediums like self-help and podcast interviews where she discusses her writing process, guiding beliefs, and lays bare her intended audience, it becomes clear that harmful gender binaries are perpetuated and queer experiences are denied. Thus, to challenge her limiting beliefs of womanhood, Chapter 5 engages with queer methodology. I conduct a queer re-reading of Blackie's short literary folktale "Wolfskin." Following in the footsteps of Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill, I tap into an even deeper well of queer, transbiological potential presented by the shapeshifting figure. Like Kay Turner's skeletal witch in flight (2023), this chapter abandons the well-trod path to adventure into more subversive realms, taking to the air like the swan maiden or sinking into murky depths like the selkie. This chapter insists on the power of the audience in shaping story interpretation, affirming that it is the audience who determines what is meaningful in a story.

Chapter One: Mapping the Narrative

Animal Skin Allomotif

Joseph Jacobs, prominent collector and publisher of English folktales, included "The Swan Maidens" in *Europa's Fairy Book* (1916), adapting ATU 400 for a 20th-century audience familiar with folktales aimed at young audiences. In contrast, contemporary author and psychologist Sharon Blackie reimagines the shapeshifting woman for a 21st-century audience of adult self-help and literary readers. However, both Jacobs' and Blackie's tales are the literary descendants of folklore myths, legends, and wonder tales across the world in which the shapeshifting woman appears in different animal and avian forms. As Barbara Fass Leavy notes in her compendious study of the shapeshifting woman, "Not all swan maidens are swans; some are doves, or ungainly geese, ducks, or cranes. Seal maidens abound in Scottish and Scandinavian tales, and in Russia the stolen wolf's skin evokes werewolf legends" (Leavy 33). This thesis explores the supernatural woman in these three forms, as a swan-hybrid in Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens," as well as the selkie and the wolf-woman in Blackie's retellings. Because of the allomotific equivalence in these tales, no matter the shapeshifter's form, the tales can be analyzed in conversation with one another. In addition, all three tales share touchpoints. These features include the capture motif through skin-theft (Motif D721.2), children who aid in their mother's reunion with her skin, and a transformation that liberates the supernatural woman.

The motif of marriage by capture, whether it be achieved through the theft of a skin, clothing, or another magical item, is well-documented in folklore across the world. There are several classifications provided, from ATU 413 Stolen Clothing,[1] to motif D721.2, Disenchantment by hiding skin (covering) (Thompson 1885). It is notable that "skin," "clothing," and "covering"

---

[1] See also K1335. Seduction (or wooing) by stealing clothes of bathing girl (swan maiden).

become interchangeable in these classifications. Turning to the narratives themselves, even more

variances occur. In "The Swan Maidens" by Joseph Jacobs both "feather dress" and "feather

robe" are used interchangeably (Jacobs 1916; 98); and in "The Drummer" in *Household Tales by

Brothers Grimm* the swanskin is characterized as "white linen" and as "dress" (Grimm, Jacob,

Wilhelm Grimm, and Margaret Hunt 2011, 841). Contrastingly, in selkie tales, the animal hide

(sealskin) is emphasized over notions of clothing as textile (Simpson 1972/2004, 100). Thus,

some tales emphasize an animal nature and themes of wildness, while others emphasize clothing

as cultural artifact through word choice like "dress" or "robe." However, despite these

differences, all can be treated as meaningful in relation to each other, both functionally and

symbolically equivalent. In "The Symbolic Equivalence of Allomotifs: Towards a Method of

Analyzing Folktales," Dundes explains that "symbols consistently placed in the same motifemic

slot are equivalent" and become interchangeable (Bronner 2007, 318). Various textile-motifs

abound in fairy tales and myths alike. For example, in fairy tales like "Donkeyskin" the textile

motif of three celestial dresses become "talismans" and "catalysts of rebellion" (Bacchilega

2017, 11). Clothing and other garments, including animal skins, proliferate in folktales of all

genres. The tools of the textile trade—such as spindles, spinning wheels, distaffs, and thread—

also appear with great frequency. The numerous references speak to the prevalence of textile

work throughout history, but particularly in the lived experiences of women. As folklorist

Marina Warner attests, the very metaphors we use to describe storytelling are rooted in women's

craft, such that we "weave a plot" or "spin a tale" (Warner 1995, 23). Emmi Flodin, in her study

of the relationship between clothes and human bodies states that "Clothes become a second layer

on the human body when they are worn, also seen as a second skin" (Flodin 2019; 1). The

concept of the "second skin" underscores the metonymic potency that links skin and cloth,

portraying them as interconnected forms of protective covering. Flodin also highlights the intimate relationship between bodies and clothing. Skin and clothing come into contact with each other, and in the process distinct boundaries between skin and environment break down, demonstrating a more porous interaction. Likewise, as feminist folklorist Kay Turner states in her queer study of the witch, skin is the "site of both erotic and traumatic touch" (Turner 2023, 10). This dual nature of skin, both to protect and confine, as well as a medium for pain and pleasure, is important to keep in mind.

It is no coincidence that tales of shapeshifting women imbue the garment allomotif with particular symbolic significance, after all, it is the clothing, skin, or feathers that allows for both her subjugation and liberation through acts of disenchantment and re-enchantment. While there is variance in the type of garment or skin (i.e., swan feathers vs. sealskin vs. cloth garment), the motif, structurally speaking, acts the same regardless of specific material. Indeed, the lines between animal skin and human-made cloth are incredibly blurred, even in contemporary society. Our clothing mimics the animal world in pattern and material, and for all of history into the present animal skins have clothed human bodies. While the shapeshifter's skin may be locked away, forgotten, or destroyed by the male protagonist who claims her as his wife, the swan maiden and her shapeshifting sisters remember their stolen skins and seek them out even after many years have passed. While the symbolic significance of this garment is minimized in stories with a patriarchal perspective, it is often upheld—if not the central narrative concern—in tales that present feminist perspectives.

The Capture Motif

The tale adaptations explored in this thesis all begin with the capture motif. The opening scene that depicts the supernatural woman at home in her environment and at peace in her body is disrupted by the presence of a male voyeur, often as a hunter or fisherman, who steals the garment and uses it to force the maiden to be his wife, after which he hides the garment where she cannot find it so as to keep her bound to him. Even in instances where a choice is given, the choice is an inherently manipulative one, for if she refuses then she will be forever separated from her true skin, separated from her sisters, from the home where she belongs, and from her fully embodied self. And so she remains with her captor, if only to be close to her skin. Like many animal bride tales, her skin is hidden or destroyed by the hunter-husband who claims her for his bride-prize. However, in these tales capture is only the first element in the story. By the end of the tale, the shapeshifting woman reunites with her skin and flees her husband's world for her own realm.

Literary scholar Barbara Fass Leavy, in her extensive folkloric study of the runaway wife, defines the dominant narrative of the supernatural maiden from the maiden's perspective:

> Her story is that of a being from a supernatural realm who is constrained to marry, keep house for, and bear children to a mortal man because he retains her animal covering, an article of clothing, or some other possession without which she cannot return to the otherworld. When she regains her prized belonging, she flees her husband and children (Leavy 1994, 2).

Leavy details how the shapeshifting maiden has been found "in virtually every corner of the world," which she attributes to an historical dominance of patriarchal ideology in the majority of the cultures where the story is found, in which "woman *was* a symbolic outsider, was the *other*, and marriage demanded an intimate involvement in a world never quite her own" (1994, 2; italics in original). The capture motif sets in motion the discovery of the skin later in the tale,

resulting in the maiden's re-enchantment. I call this reunion with the skin the liberation motif, understood as inversion of the capture motif. This motif is emphasized by Blackie, revealing powerful themes of transformation which speak to a deeper understanding of what it means to reclaim one's body.

Feminist Foundations

My investigation into the shapeshifting woman finds its roots in the ever-expanding tree of feminist and queer fairy-tale scholarship. The feminist dialogue surrounding topics of gender in fairy tales is a far-reaching one, its inception traceable as far back as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), and later, to the controversial publication of Alison Lurie's "Fairy Tale Liberation" in 1970, which solidified a long-lasting debate about the relationship between women, fairy tales and the socializing power therein (Haase 2004, vii). As fairy tale popularity increased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the literary fairy tale was born and has continued from the time of the *conteuses* to the modern and postmodern iterations that create a dialogue between the traditional narratives of the past and the subversive methods of contemporary authors and storytellers in the present.

Debates surrounding Lurie's "Fairy Tale Liberation" (1970) sparked critical investigation into what fairy tales tell us about the relationship between gender and culture. As fairy-tale scholar Donald Haase explains in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, "one of the achievements of feminist fairy tale scholarship has been to reveal how women have—for three hundred years at least—quite literally used the fairy tale to engage questions of gender and to create tales spoken or written differently from those told or penned by men" (Haase 2004, ix). There is a counter-tradition here that challenges the male-dominated texts, often collected by

men and featuring male protagonists more predominantly than female characters of agency. Prevalent contemporary fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes notes that beginning in the twentieth century, "More than ever before in history we have fairy tales about fairy tales, or fairy tales that expose the false promises of the traditional fairytales" (Zipes 2006, 106). Prominent contemporary fairy-tale scholar Jeana Jorgensen also notes that feminist folklorists have shifted toward "more complex discussion of how gender and ideology interact in the production, transmission, and reception of fairy tales" (Jorgensen 2019, 37). However, even when retellings are intended to be subversive, patriarchal undertones can creep in, creating tension that must be negotiated by readers. Storytelling highlights the power of voice, of speaking one's truth, but while some voices are given prominence, others are often silenced. When approaching interpretation, then, it is necessary to untangle the complex relationships between gender and power within reimagined tales.

Jorgensen, looking at transgressive and transformative bodies in the Grimms' fairy tales, opens with a powerful question: "What do bodies mean in fairy tales?" Jorgensen suggests that "Bodies are disrupted … by many forces: violence, death, and transformation," which reveal within the narratives the presence of "authoritarian and subversive ideologies" (Jorgensen 2014, 127). While Jorgensen is concerned primarily with the Grimms' corpus, I suggest that bodies and the meanings attached to them are central to many fairy tales, and in particular, are seen in wonder tales where transformation calls direct attention onto the body. What Jorgensen discovers through her qualitative approach is that "masculinity and femininity are written on bodies in different ways … [that] uphold a dichotomous view of the sexes that correlates to mind-body dualism, trapping women in their bodies and skins" (2014, 128). The shapeshifting woman reveals these gendered themes; she is a woman controlled through force and contained within a

woman's skin which limits her access to her full, embodied self. The female body thus becomes its own prison: "In an impossible double bind, woman is trapped in her body, and her body is trapped in 'woman'" (Conrad 2021, 9). Folklorist JoAnn Conrad emphasizes the need to pay attention to how the body is gendered in narrative genres in her examination of abducted, contained, and disappearing women within traditional narratives. Conrad defines containment as "the active, pervasive, and persistent corporeal, social, sexual, political, psychological, and cultural constraints imposed on women that work to our diminishment, dissolution, and delimiting" (Conrad 2021, 8). From this perspective, these narratives engage with "omnipresent underlying threats of violence" which work to "normalize patriarchal privilege" (2021, 8). It is an unfortunate fact that this tendency for narratives to contain female-coded bodies through implicit and explicit violence is mirrored in the real world. Conrad points out that in Europe "1 in 3 women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15" and that "50 women die every week from male domestic violence" (2021, 8). In the United States, one in ten women are raped by an intimate partner. Statistics show that almost half of female (46.7%) victims of rape in the US were raped by an acquaintance, and of these, 45.4% were raped by an intimate partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence). It is worth noting that these statistics cannot fully quantify the number of unreported cases that also occur each year, nor do statistics fully encompass a variety of gender identities outside of the prescribed male or female, therefore there is much that goes unaccounted for despite very real lived experiences. Thus, the tale of the shapeshifter as a woman who is forced into marriage calls attention to the reality that marriage does not always constitute happily ever after. As Warner reminds us, "The happy endings of fairy tales are only the beginning of the larger story" (Warner 1995, xxv). Not all fairy tales continue past the marriage-as-happy-ending, but for swan maidens and selkies and

other supernatural maidens forced into marriage by the theft of their garment, their marriage is just the first act in a larger tale.

De-Centering Heterosexual Marriage

Leavy's work is unabashedly feminist. She tells us specifically: "I am a woman trying to analyze women's importance in the narrating and collecting of stories" (1994, 27). She thus gives primacy to women's voices and women's perspectives that have been pushed to the margins. This same motivation compels my research. However, while Leavy does give attention to relationships outside of the heterosexual marriage paradigm, the dominant attention on the relationship of the marriage suggests that these tales are intrinsically heterosexual when, as I argue, it can be seen as deeply queer and transgressive. In acknowledging that the marriage is achieved through force and manipulation, the tale subverts the power and claims of "happy endings" that institutionalized marriage promises. In addition, self-reclamation and transcendence suggests a queer kinship between women and nature that often gets overlooked when scholars focus solely on the "gender-based struggle for power within the love relationship" (1994, 36). While I agree with Leavy that it is difficult to "rid the swan maiden tale of the real and symbolic dependencies that underlie the struggle between man and woman" (36-37), I contend that it is not impossible, and that in fact to delve into the other elements of the tale is to assert that there is more to be understood about the other relationships within the tale, mainly, the relationship the supernatural woman has to her own self and the skin that she seeks, as well as her relationship to other women, her children, and nature.

I am not suggesting that the marriage relationship is not worth studying, nor suggesting that it is not a valuable interpretive angle to pursue. What I am suggesting is that much has already

been said on this topic[2]—much by Leavy herself, and with great depth and knowledge–which is why I choose to delve into the other elements of the story in search of its queer possibilities, the elements that have been relegated to the periphery. In addition, contemporary versions often de-emphasize the love relationship, instead focusing on the maiden as sole protagonist. These shifts in the tale's focus are worthy of study because they reveal shifts in societal beliefs about womanhood or, more broadly, the relationship between humans and the natural world, demonstrating how culture shapes storytelling. Thus, authors like Sharon Blackie offer opportunities for understanding the shapeshifting woman's importance to contemporary readers, revealing the ways in which storytelling, inversely, shapes society.

Queer Trajectories

While I began inquiry into the topic of the shapeshifting woman from a feminist perspective, as I engaged with scholarship like that of Kay Turner, Pauline Greenhill and Lewis C. Siefert, I discovered queer interpretations that led me to a queer re-reading of Blackie's tale "Wolfskin" so as to open up a critical dialogue about how Blackie defines womanhood and how she determines who is privileged within that folk group and who is excluded. As Siefert details, "*queer* involves the questioning of dominant forms of social and political relationships while deliberately resisting any prescription of what those relationships should look like" (Siefert 2015, 16). While Blackie approaches her retellings from an ecofeminist perspective, in the process she prescribes binary logic to her definitions of womanhood, proposing for her audience what a relationship between women and nature should look like. Chapter 5 of my thesis resists these biological

---

[2] See, for instance, the 1987 article by Carole Silver: "East of the Sun and West of the Moon: Victorians and Fairy Brides."

prescriptions, challenging normative constructions of gender as presented by Blackie. It is necessary to destabilize binaries of feminine-masculine, animal-human, and wild-civilization, and the shapeshifting woman offers queer trajectories which make this possible through her ontological resistance and non-normative desires. A queer re-reading, following the trajectory set forth by Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill in *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (2012) as well as Turner's influential presidential address at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, "The Witch in Flight" (2017), I affirm that it is necessary to expose "notions of "normal" gender and sexual identities as myths" (Siefert 2015, 16). While Blackie and Jacobs reinforce these normative structures through their storytelling, the shapeshifting woman herself is unbound by the restrictions they place upon her. Turner and Greenhill call this subversive interpretation "reading anew and askew" (2012, 13) while Siefert describes this type of interpretive work as "reading against the grain" (2015, 16). The fairy-tale waters are not always clear, so I strategically descend into the shadowy depths and chase strange ripples of light in order to uncover queer trajectories.

Goals and Objectives

This thesis aims to achieve three primary goals:

1. Comparative Analysis: I compare Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens" with Sharon Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin" in order to examine the impact of gendered perspectives, concentrating on the representations of embodiment and disembodiment in both stories.

2. Examining the Relationship Between Fairy Tales and Self-Help: Taking into account both Blackie's self-help books and her retold stories, I assess how audiences respond to Blackie's storytelling, indicating that readers have agency in the storytelling relationship.

3. Queer Re-Reading: A queer re-reading of Sharon Blackie's "Wolfskin" is performed from a transbiological perspective to challenge the reinforcement of traditional gender binaries, reclaiming queerness for the shapeshifting woman.

I am interested in fairy-tale bodies and the skins that clothe them, paying particular attention to the gendered components they present, whether by upholding gendered oppositions or resisting them. Through my research and investigation into literary case studies using folkloristic methods and resources, I demonstrate just how complex gender power dynamics can be in reimagined tales. A tale adaptation is not simply "feminist" or "anti-feminist," but rather presents a spectrum of resistance and reinforcement. This inevitably complicates the relationship between author, text, and audience. In addition, my methodology crosses genre boundaries, exploring the intersection of myth, fairy tale, personal narrative, and self-help. In order to conduct an extensive case study that reveals contemporary fears and desires, I analyze three pieces by Sharon Blackie, including two self-help books and one short story collection. Beliefs around gender, particularly womanhood, are explored in more depth in Blackie's self-help books, so discussing her non-fiction in conversation with her fiction allows for a more complete picture of how Blackie uses folklore and folklore processes to inspire transformation in her readers.

This thesis aims to uncover the transformative potential embedded within the stories of shapeshifting women, revealing how they challenge, reinforce, or subvert traditional gender norms. By examining these tales through a feminist and queer lens, and by analyzing their intersection with the self-help genre, we can better understand how these narratives resonate with

contemporary audiences and empower readers to take away from the texts what they deem important in their lives.

Terminology and Definitions

It is important to clarify key terms early on in a cross-genre study. Concepts such as "embodiment" and "ecofeminism" are fluid and multifaceted; their meanings evolve based on context, discipline, and interpretation, spanning across academic genres, from feminist theory and ecology to psychology and wellness studies. The following sections explore these terms in more detail, providing an overview for a shared understanding.

Embodiment – A Wellness Perspective

The term "embodiment" does not have a fixed, clear definition, but rather varies according to the context in which it is used. Merriam-Webster gives the vague definition of "One that embodies something" or "the act of embodying: the state of being embodied" (Merriam Webster, s.v. "Embodiment"). However, this definition is too ambiguous to work with effectively. Scholar Anna Harris corroborates the fluid nature of the term, saying that the concept is one in "constant motion" which threads through many disciplines from literature to anthropology to philosophy and psychology (Harris 2016, "Introduction"). Because of the unfixed nature of embodiment, it becomes important to parse its meanings within this thesis. In its most basic form, I use embodiment to reference sensory experiences, that is, the engagement between the sensing body and the external environment. In terms of its anthropological uses, Harris gives a broad definition of embodiment as a "way of describing porous, visceral, felt, enlivened bodily experiences, in and with inhabited worlds" (2016, Introduction). When fairy tales explore bodies and their transformations, they also highlight the impact of sensory experiences and examine the fluid,

interdependent relationship between humans and nature. Sharon Blackie, coming from a background in psychology, sees embodiment as antithesis to being in one's head. Blackie critiques modern psychology practices that keep people "trapped" in their heads, constantly intellectualizing their internal processes and overanalyzing childhood trauma. Important to Blackie's use of embodiment is the understanding that we must treat our individual psyche in relationship with "the physical sensory world around us and our place in it and our relationship with it, and specifically with the places where our feet are actually planted" (Geesaman Rabke 2020, *Embodiment Matters* podcast 00:05:50- 00:06:55). This insistence on being present in the body, in the environment in which we actually stand, is paramount to Blackie's motivation to entangle the relationship between the body and nature. Her understanding is fluid, based on interchange: "we are flowing into the world and the world is flowing into us" (00:09:00-00:09:12). From a psychological perspective "Embodiment may refer to a centering and acknowledgement of the felt and physical body as an active agent in the experiencing, processing, and interpretation of one's environment" (Mori 2022, 1). When one is embodied, they recognize their agency, but for one who is disembodied, their engagement between their body and their environment is disconnected, passive.

Issues surrounding (dis)embodiment have been evaluated from feminist perspectives. In Western thought, the feminine body is often "positioned as prerepresentational, silent, negated, and violently objectified by an active male reason" (Bray and Colebrook 1998, 37). As Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook explain in their article "The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment" (1998), "The concepts of "disembodiment" and "embodiment" function dichotomously such that "disembodiment" is frequently coded as a phallocentric fantasy" (47). In addition, from this dualistic understanding, disembodiment is often "aligned

17

with alienation" which further uphold mind/body separation (48). In tales of the swan maiden, the selkie, and other shapeshifting women, the hunter-husband keeps the maiden in a disembodied state wherein his beliefs of womanhood are imposed upon her. The home she inhabits is one of patriarchal control, and she is separated from embodied experiences that connect her to her true form and the natural realm. For Sharon Blackie, embodiment is found in relationship with nature, in the intimate interaction between the body and ecology. This manifests in the text with the maiden's reunion with her skin. Re-enchanted, she is liberated from captivity, able once again to enjoy her wild realm. This acknowledgment of the mutual engagement between sensory experience and place ties into Blackie's ecofeminist stance, which also deserves a brief introduction.

Ecofeminism

The roots of ecofeminism can be traced back to the 1970s to Françoise d'Eaubonne, who first coined the term in her 1974 publication "Le Féminisme ou la mort" (Gates 1996, 9). However, the term has evolved into "a multiplicity of overlapping dialogues" (Carroll 2018, 1). The subject engages with various forms of feminism and ecological or environmental debates. It is driven by both activism and ideology. Sharon Blackie upholds a late twentieth century idea of ecofeminism as it pertains to the relationship between women and nature. Basically, "the way Western culture understands and treats women is similar to and reinforces the way it understands and treats nature" (2018, 2). However, as the term moved into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, debates about biological essentialism added important critique to the subject. Blackie falls into old-school conceptions of ecofeminism, as she feeds into the idea that women are closer to nature, existing in a privileged status handed down by biological determinism. Blackie's perspective of ecofeminism is worthy of critique, but equally worthy of further

exploration, for she is the voice for many women who engage with her storytelling and non-fiction work. The dialogue that forms around her ideological motivations and her storytelling offer insightful ways to engage with the shapeshifting woman of folklore as she manifests for modern audiences.

Chapter 2: A Comparative Analysis

Introduction

This chapter sets out to conduct a comparative analysis of two tale adaptations: Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens" and Sharon Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin." Both stories begin with the capture of a supernatural woman whose freedom is bound to her animal skin—an enchanted object stolen by the male protagonist. In each tale, a daughter aids the mother in reuniting with her skin, facilitating a return to her wild realm. Additionally, both narratives feature a hero's quest, but the treatment of these shared motifs differs distinctly between the two authors. These differences are underpinned by gendered hierarchies.

In Jacobs' adaptation, the male hero is privileged, while the swan maiden is marginalized to a peripheral role, reflecting a phallocentric point of view that centers on the male gaze and agency. Conversely, Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin" begins with a male perspective but subverts the conventional emphasis on the male quest. It shifts focus to the selkie's journey to reclaim and remake her destroyed skin, re-centering the narrative around her quest for liberation and belonging. This chapter will explore why one character is favored over another, how these choices reflect the author's sympathies, and the implications these perspectives have for understanding gender dynamics in fairy-tale adaptations.

A particular point of interest in this analysis is how each tale frames the concept of "happily ever after" and whether the motif of liberation—embodied through the reunion with the skin-garment—is upheld or undone. The endings of fairy tales are critical moments where judgments are cast, wrongs are righted, and moral values are affirmed. If a narrative perspective is phallocentric, it often renders the feminine perspective passive or disembodied, thereby

reinforcing a gendered hierarchy that privileges male experience and authority. In contrast, a feminist perspective seeks to subvert these valuations by uplifting and emphasizing feminine and embodied elements within the narrative. Blackie does this with her selkie protagonist and the epic quest she must go on to regenerate herself in the wild realm.

The next section introduces Joseph Jacobs, then delves into "The Swan Maidens." In particular, I address the passivity of the daughter, the silence surrounding the swanskin, and the maiden's disenchantment, which is presented as a happy ending. Then, I introduce Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin," followed by a reflection of how these same elements—generational aid, skin, quest, and happy ending—differ from Jacobs' interpretation of the shapeshifting woman. I end with a discussion on skin and embodiment to deliberately re-center the importance of this symbol in tales of transformation.

Joseph Jacobs

Joseph Jacobs, one of the most popular English-language fairy tale adapters of the nineteenth century, in a letter addressing his granddaughters, to whom he dedicates his book *Europa's Fairy Book: Restored and Retold by Joseph Jacobs* (1916), situates himself within a matrilineage of nurses and mothers who pass tales on to their children:

> Many, many, many years ago I wrote a book for your Mummy — when she was my little May — telling the fairy tales which the little boys and girls of England used to hear from their mummeys, who had heard them from their mummeys years and years and years before (Jacobs 1916, vi).

By framing his collection within a lineage of mothers and nurses who pass stories down through generations, Jacobs positions himself as a preserver of tradition. He addresses his granddaughter Peggy in particular, and tells her that the collection is meant to be a "fairy-tale book for your own self," a book of her "very, very own" (1916, vi). However, despite this heart-warming

personal introduction to the tale collection, the reader may suspect that Jacobs' granddaughter is not his *sole* audience. His audience clearly also includes other "English-speaking children" (vii). With this young audience in mind, Jacobs is willing to modify and mollify the tale if it seemed to him "too crudely primitive for the children of the present day" (viii). This process of sanitization is typical of the time period, as many tale collections followed in the footsteps of the Grimm brothers, whose reinforcement of fairy tales as household tales for children set the scene for numerous collections to follow, still influencing modern conceptions of fairy tales as "childish." Certainly, children were not Jacobs only audience, as many adults have and continue to enjoy literary fairy tales as well. Jacobs' audience is comprised of explicit audience members, like children, as well as implicit adult audiences comprised of, for example, parents, teachers, and literary critics. This audience is left unspoken, of course, as Jacobs uses rhetorical strategies to offer an intimate perspective to his taletelling. This confers an air of authenticity as he attempts to mimic oral tale-telling methods.

Joseph Jacobs' approach to "The Swan Maidens" and his broader collection of tales in *Europa's Fairy Book* reflects both the conventions and cultural expectations of his time. Jacobs details how he is motivated by a search for the Ur-text—a mythical, idealized original—Jacobs says that he has "retold in such a way as to bring out the original form from which all the variants were derived" (1916, vi). This conception of fairy tales stemming from one original source is problematic. Jacobs' statement that "one cannot but assume that the original form of the story was hit upon by one definite literary artist among the folk" (vii) attributes folk narratives to an idealized (and fictionalized) past. This perspective overlooks the reality that tales are continually adapted and reimagined in each retelling, thus disregarding the dynamic and innovative nature of folklore. As prolific scholar Marina Warner explains, "no story is ever the

same as its source or model, the chemistry of narrator and audience change it" (1994, 418). The tale is touched by Jacobs unique tone and how he chooses to cast the characters, Additionally, Jacobs' audience—his own grandchildren as well as the broader literary world, which at the time viewed fairy tales primarily as children's narratives—also influences the story.

The following section will delve into Jacobs' specific adaptation of "The Swan Maidens," examining how his narrative choices align with broader cultural and ideological underpinnings. This analysis will further explore how Jacobs' interpretation perpetuates gendered hierarchies that situate the male hero as superior to the shapeshifting woman.

Exploring the Text: "The Swan Maidens"

Out of all Jacobs' collected tales which he deems "best fitted to survive," "The Swan Maidens" appears as twelfth in the collection. A black and white illustration with simple line work is the first item the reader encounters. Depicted is a young girl kneeling to retrieve a pair of limp white-feathered wings; a secret discovered (See Fig. 1).

Figure 1 The Child Finds the Feather Dress. Illustrated by John D. Batten (1916).

The story begins: "There was once a hunter…"

From the first line, the swan maiden is made to be subordinate within her own story as Jacobs assumes the male's perspective from this first sentence. It is interesting to note that though the title of this fairy tale is "The Swan Maidens," the aforementioned are not shown, instead it is the daughter who holds the stolen wings. Thus, in her own story, the swan maiden is doubly relegated to the periphery. The opening illustration is not of herself but of her daughter, and the first sentence of the tale opens from the eyes of the hunter who captured her. There is emphasis that the scene is occurring at night (mentioned twice in the first paragraph), for the hunter often "spend[s] the whole night stalking the deer or setting traps for game" (Jacobs 1916, 98). I emphasize the duration that the hunter spends in the woods setting traps and stalking prey because it betrays a certain obsession within the hunter. Just how often is he in the woods and what is it that motivates him? Is it hunger or something closer to mania? When does he sleep? If he is always in the woods, does this make him more beast than man?

The scene continues with the hunter waiting, hidden in the bushes, for ducks that he "wished to trap" (1916, 98). Could this reveal his motivation, a tendency toward a certain kind of violence? The details betray the pleasure he gains from capturing and killing prey. As he hears the "whirring of wings" he prepares his weapon (bow and arrows). However, to his surprise, instead of the expected ducks, the man sees "seven maidens all clad in robes made of feathers." These maidens "alighted on the banks of the lake, and taking off their robes plunged into the waters and bathed and sported in the lake" (98). The textual image is one of youthful feminine innocence that veils an unspoken, deeper feminine intimacy.[3] They are light, graceful, and yet

---

[3] It is interesting that many capture motifs feature an opening saturated with sisterly affection. In this case, there is a vulnerability and innocence underscored by the swan maiden's playfulness. Narratively, this introduces tension between the maiden's goals (joy, community) and the hunter's goals (ownership, separation). Even in this tale adaptation so focused on the masculine

their "plunge" once freed of their robes indicates a certain freedom and joy that is often kept at arms-length from many female characters who populate fairy tales. However, despite the possibilities of feminist subversion in this opening scene, from the phallocentric view of this adaptation, a different perspective unfolds. There is something Other about the swan maidens, something *animal*. Effectively equated with prey within the narrative, the story proceeds with the logic that the hunter can capture what is in his domain.[4] This is ultimately reflective of the larger systems of patriarchy at play in culture. The history of marriage is a history rife with power dynamics of ownership, entangled with structures of colonization. In patriarchal culture, women are literally and figuratively owned by their husbands.

The patriarchal lens of Jacobs' tale is further revealed in the next lines, which describe all seven maidens as "beautiful" but labels the "youngest and smallest" as the most desirable, the one that "pleased most the hunter's eye" (1916, 99). It is not uncommon for the youngest sister to be chosen by the hunter or by default for not being able to find her feathers after her other sisters find theirs. The youngest child, male or female, is often the one favored over their siblings in European folktales[5], so it is the specific mention of "smallest" that stands out. For one, it seems to impart a moral imperative that women and girls, in order to be beautiful, must be young and small—naïve of life and taking up as little physical space as possible. One could argue that Jacobs' choice to feature the youngest and smallest maiden is motivated by his desire to appeal to his audience of English children, who would identify more with a younger character.

---

protagonist, feminist possibilities can be found. This opening scene is ripe for feminist reinterpretation.

[4] Patriarchal logic functions in a similar way in societal institutions that give husbands authority over their wives, which is seen as a "natural" hierarchy.

[5] Maria Tatar explores the character of the youngest son and the youngest daughter in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2019), p. 157.

However, while Jacobs' narrative aligns with his intended young audience by featuring the youngest and smallest sister as the hunter's target, this choice simultaneously reinforces patriarchal ideals that value women based on their youth, size, and perceived vulnerability. The focus on the hunter's perspective and his subsequent actions further amplify this imbalance of power. Having fixated on his chosen maiden, the hunter's approach to capturing her is marked by predatory intent, reflective of his stealth and control over her fate. The hunter, once he has determined his prey, "crept forward" and "seized her dress of plumage;" the hunter is marked by his stealth and speed, while "seized" connotes a sense of authority over the skin-garment. Unspoken, then, is the violence of this act. The hunter retreats back into the bushes and continues to watch the maidens until they had "bathed and sported to their heart's delight" (99). While this scene could be interpreted subversively as a way to suggest that male voyeurism is itself a type of violence, Jacobs denies this possibility in his alignment with the hunter, whom he views as "the superior of the fickle, mysterious maid" (Nutt, Alfred, and Joseph Jacobs 1891, 371). His sympathy for the hunter-captor betrays deeper beliefs about gender dynamics and hinders his ability to empathize with the swan maiden. This carries further implications for his young audience. Jacobs professes to be writing to the young girls of his family specifically and English children more broadly. Because the husband is not presented as villainous, Jacobs thus condones his behavior and uses the maidens passivity as a model that instructs young women to similarly yield to their husbands for the sake of domestic harmony.

As the story continues, the perspective does shift slightly towards the maidens for a brief moment. The sisters go to the bank of the water to put on their feather robes. A long search for the youngest sister's robe ensues, which lasts all night, only ending with the dawn's light, the hunter all the while watching and waiting. After their long search, the sisters must give up,

declaring, "'tis the dawn; you meet your fate whatever it be'" before flying away (99). Once the

youngest maiden is truly alone, the hunter reveals himself with her robe in hand. He has

succeeded in separating the girl from her sisters, severing her from her connection to that

intimate community as well as her own autonomy to make choices for herself. The maiden

"begged and begged" for him to return it, but instead he gives her his cloak[6] and "made her

promise to marry him, and took her home, and hid her feather robe where she could not find it"

(99). In this instance, the hunter's cloak functions as another garment imbued with symbolism,

though in this case, it symbolizes patriarchal control and ownership rather than transformation.

After the hiding of the wings, a temporal shift occurs as the narrative jumps ahead in time by

several years. The duration in this text is rendered ambiguous; we are told only that "they were

married and lived happily together and had two fine children" (99). But this point is not

emphasized, rather the narrative jumps to an indeterminate "one day." The children are playing

hide-and-seek, perhaps functioning as a nod to their hunter-father's ability to seek out his prey,

even when it flees and hides from him—a foreshadowing of the events that will transpire. The

youngest girl, while hiding from her brother in the wainscoting of the house, finds "a robe all

made of feathers," and she takes it to her mother (100). The reader is not given much to

determine how the daughter feels about this discovery, but the narrative does tell us that she

immediately brings it to her mother. Whether out of fear, excitement, or a deeper understanding

or intuition, the reader can only infer. What is clear is that the swan maiden, once reunited with

---

[6] The hunter who gives the maiden his cloak can be compared to courtship rituals in Western culture. For instance, the practice of "pinning" in Greek society across college campuses reinforced notions of domestic ideals of womanhood (Gorgosz 2014). Likewise, purity rings and Lettermen Jackets or even just a girlfriend wearing her boyfriend's hoodie denotes ownership within heterosexual relationships. These traditions reinforce patriarchal understandings of marriage and home life.

her wings, does not hesitate to put them on and fly away—an emphasis that is found across many tale versions. Hesitation is not a trait of the swan maiden nor her shapeshifting sisters. Once they have the chance to escape, they take it, and return to their realm with joy.

From here, the narrative turns fully to the hunter's quest to find his wife in the "Land East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon," wherein, on his journey, he helps the King of the Beasts and is told to find the King of the Birds and then the King of the Fishes, wherein he learns from a dolphin that the place he is searching for is at "the top of the Crystal Mountain" near the Wild Forest (101).[7] Along his journey, the hunter takes the reader through questing motifs, such as acquiring through cleverness several magical items that will aid him later (102-103). I intentionally skim through the hunter-husband's quest; he is of little interest to me. Once introduced to the King of his wife's land, the hunter demands his wife back, detailing "how he had *won* her" (104, emphasis added). The King requests that the hunter select his wife amongst her sisters, another common motif attached to the quest (Suitor Tests: Motif H310-H359). The Hunter replies:

> 'If I may take each of them by the hand I will surely know my wife;' for when she had dwelt with him she had sewn the little shifts and dresses of her children, and the forefinger of her right hand had the marks of the needle (104).

From this response, we learn that the swan maiden's time on earth has physically altered her, leaving her scarred in comparison to her sisters. These pinprick scars are the only evidence the reader is given of the changes she has experienced on earth as wife to the hunter. Unspoken and unseen are the changes to her body from giving birth and raising children, or the trauma of rape and isolation, but for those inclined to empathize with the swan maiden, these needle marks offer

---

[7] This sequence functions as a parallel to the patriarchal-colonialist motivation for man to subdue and control nature, making it subservient to his desires.

stepping stones to greater understanding of the maiden's plight. The scars mark not only her

body but also the passage of time—the duration of her earthly captivity separates her from her

sisters.[8] In addition, we get a glimpse into the domestic labor required of her during her captivity

in the patriarchal home. As Joan Radner explains in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's*

Folk Culture, "In most cultures, it [home] is the woman's arena, her domestic domain, where she

has traditionally maintained the greatest power. Yet when women live in households with men,

that power is often hedged and restricted" (Radner 1993, 31). It has long been recognized that

patriarchal norms designate women as solely responsible for domestic labor in the home, as well

as being subservient to the husband. Despite contemporary social and economic changes, this

ideology still influences Western society today. Sewing would have been just one of many daily

tasks required of the swan maiden, in addition to raising the children and keeping home for her

husband. Her lack of a thimble, a common tool used for centuries by women to prevent the

needle marks the swan maiden now wears, suggests that she does not have access to this

womanly knowledge and this vital and yet simple tool. This speaks of her isolation.

    Viewed from one angle, this reunion of husband and wife is romantic, as he chooses her

among her sisters.[9] Viewed from another vantage point, we see how the patriarchal framework of

the narrative insists on the de-valuation of woman as possession. From this view, the swan

maiden's father becomes complicit in her captivity. Structurally, this is meant to resolve a

patriarchal imbalance in the narrative. In the start of the tale, the hunter acquires a wife through

---

[8] The damage to the body as evidence of ownership could, from a patriarchal perspective, hint at notions of purity. For instance, the stealing of the skin connotes a "deflowering" (from a feminist perspective: rape), aligning with outdated notions that once a woman's hymen is broken, she is no longer a virgin. A symbolic equivalence between the needle that breaks the skin and the male phallus which makes the woman bleed could be constructed within this schematic.

[9] The choosing of the "correct" woman is not unlike the crowning of the tiara in contemporary women's pageants, an example of patriarchal valuations of what it means to be a "real" woman.

his own means, rather than through negotiation with her father—the hierarchy of male authority has been broken. In this construction the father is the one who possesses the daughter; she is his property to give away. Thus, the hunter needs to seek out not the maiden but the blessing of the father in order to legitimate himself as husband and "rightful" owner. His claim to her is revealed through evidence of her domestic labor in the hunter's home—the marks of the needle betray her. These two perspectives speak to the multiplicity of readings that can be applied to fairy tales.

After having "claimed her for his own" (104), they are sent back down the Crystal Mountain with unspecified gifts from the King. The story ends: "And after a while they reached home, and lived happily together ever afterwards" (104). This ending is immediately suspicious when one considers both possible readings. For instance, the narrative does not return to the subject of the feather robe. Does she get to keep it? The narrative slyly avoids the question, and in its silence suggests that she does not. That the King sends them on a "sure way down" the mountain suggests that she does not have her wings, for if she had then she could have flown. The silence surrounding her feather robe trivializes what it symbolizes (flight, agency, full embodiment). This narrative sleight of hand indicates that the logic of this tale version is dominated by patriarchal structures and valuations. The story ends with an accompanying full-page illustration depicting the line of seven maidens in the process of being inspected by the hunter (See Fig. 2). The chosen maiden and the hunter are foregrounded while her sisters fade into the background, their heads bowed as they look back toward their youngest sister. The swan maiden stands taller than her sisters, but her face is turned slightly away from the hunter, whose eyes she does not meet (105).

Figure 2 The Hunter Selects His Wife, illustration by John D. Batten (1916).

In his notes regarding "The Swan Maidens" Jacobs states, "The Swan Maidens occur very widely spread and have been studied with great diligence by Mr. E. S. Hartland" (1916, 240). Hartland, in search of "traces of primitive thought and custom" takes a literal interpretation of the tale, arguing that they are "actual swans" with the feather robe being added later, a point which Jacobs counters, contending instead that the "story as a story depends upon the seizure of a separate dress involving the capture of the swan bride" (240). Despite this statement which highlights the importance of the maiden's garment, Jacobs' adaptation does not return to the feather robe at the end of the tale. From this perspective, the story depends on the theft of the skin, but not on reunion and liberation. Jacobs trivializes the skin-garment motif by ignoring it altogether.

Domestic Obedience as Happy Ending

The so-called happy ending in Jacobs' adaptation reinforces the valuation of patriarchal marriage, imparting to a young audience that a woman's rightful place is within the domestic

home, subdued under the confining cloak of her husband. The narrative's disregard for the maiden's enchanted skin—the very garment that grants her the freedom to embody her autonomous self—reveals its lack of importance within this patriarchal framework. The woman's relationship to her body, her desires, and her freedom are irrelevant compared to her relationship to her husband and her role within the domestic sphere. By omitting any mention of the swanskin's fate after her reunion with her husband, Jacobs implies that her right to fly, to be fully self-actualized, is inconsequential. One could interpret the loss of her swanskin as a form of punishment for her perceived "fickleness," a trait Jacobs attributes to her, suggesting a need for correction by the men in her life—her husband and, by extension, her father. Through this lens, she is literally brought back to Earth, where ideals of domesticity and obedience strip her of her wings and autonomy.

Jacobs' adaptation reinforces patriarchal order, legitimized through the hunter's quest and his symbolic reclamation of the swan maiden from her father. The hunter's journey to retrieve his wife is not a quest of love but one that reasserts his ownership, reducing her to a possession to be claimed rather than a person with agency. Her disembodiment is sustained by her disenchantment. This imbalance in power reflects deep-rooted cultural narratives that sustain patriarchal ideas that a woman's value is tied to her relationship to men rather than her intrinsic worth. The narrative not only trivializes the possibility of the swan maiden's liberation but also reinforces cultural norms that dictate a woman's submissive role within marriage, suggesting that her return to the domestic sphere is both inevitable and desirable. By glossing over this critical detail, Jacobs' tale subtly communicates that a woman's aspirations for independence and autonomy are secondary to her role as a wife and mother. The happy ending serves as a reminder

to young audiences that marriage is more important than freedom, thus perpetuating narratives that privilege male authority and control over female agency.

In the next section, Blackie's selkie protagonist takes center stage while the husband is moved to the periphery. Through her agency she is the antithesis to Jacobs' swan maiden. Importantly, she is given space within the narrative to experience grief as she mourns the destruction of her skin, which speaks to the violence perpetrated against her. In addition, the selkie is the hero on a quest, rather than the husband who seeks to get her back. Both Jacobs and Blackie utilize the quest motif to expand on the original capture motif, though in drastically different ways which reflect the cultural moments in which they are writing. Paying attention to how Blackie subverts and reimagines the shapeshifting woman's role in the transformation tale, the next section explores "The Selkie's New Skin" and the self-help context, while noting key differences in how Blackie portrays the mother-daughter relationship, the quest motif, and the happy ending as reunion not with a husband but with her fully embodied self.

Resistance and Conformity in the Self-Help Genre

Scholar Debra Grodin conducted some of the first reception studies on the relationship between women readers and the self-help book genre. Because the self-help genre is closely associated with notions of self-reliance, it is not surprising that readers use self-help narratives for personal empowerment. It is interesting to note, then, as Grodin explains in "The Interpreting Audience: The Therapeutics of Self-Help Book Reading" (1991), that "Readers often read for the purpose of extricating themselves from patriarchal authority and establishing personal autonomy" (Grodin 1991, 404). This endeavor for personal transformation is bolstered by a modern preoccupation with wellness, which Grodin pinpoints as a "modern response to the deterioration of traditional social order and sense of place" (1991, 405). Language today reflects

this turn toward wellbeing through the incorporation of psychological terms such as "gas lighting," the concept of the "inner child," or even the hyperbolic use of "trauma" in everyday speech. Eva Moskowitz, in her historical analysis of self-help in culture, makes the bold statement that "Today Americans turn to psychological cures as reflexively as they once turned to God" (Moskowitz 2001, 1). For Moskowitz, this preoccupation with psychological wellness functions like faith, "a program for individual and social development" which has "crossed the line between religion and cult, faith and obsession" (2001, 2). In particular, Moskowitz details the dueling messages of empowerment and conformity. Since its inception, the self-help genre has purported to help women heal and find happiness, while simultaneously reinforcing a dependence on conformity. For instance, while women's magazines in the 1950s and 60s proposed the idea that "women had the right to be happy" in their marriages, lurking within these same magazines was "an unstated loyalty to more traditional cold-war values" (2001, 173). As Grodin details in a similar study on women who read self-help (1995, the genre has seen significant feminist critique, particularly when themes "seem to mirror rather than resist conditions of patriarchal society" (Grodin 1995, 125). Clearly, a tension in gendered prescriptions of empowerment and domestic happiness lie at the heart of the genre.

Sharon Blackie and the Self-Help Fairy Tale

Before delving into the text, the self-help fairy tale must first be defined and contextualized. Fairy-tale scholar Jeana Jorgensen notes a branching out of fairy-tale subgenres in contemporary tellings. She classifies the subgenre of the wonder tale that she is interested in as "fairy-tale torture porn," where she explores the ways that trauma and healing are depicted in contemporary fairy-tale adaptations (Jorgensen 2021, 1). The self-help fairy tale is one of these off-shoots. Like

Jorgensen, I also delve into the depictions of trauma and recovery that the selkie protagonist in Blackie's story experiences. As Jorgensen says, "happily ever after is meaningless without the conflict and strife that precedes it" (2021, 1). Conflict is essential to fairy tales, but how authors depict trauma, its aftereffects, and the healing process provides interesting insights into why people read fairy tales to inspire personal and communal healing.

Blackie uses the self-help genre to frame her reimagined selkie tale. Her psychological self-help book *If Women Rose Rooted: A Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* seeks to challenge patriarchal mythologies while encouraging her audience to root themselves deeper into the Earth. From interviews, Grodin finds that encountering psychological self-help books "often resulted in a profound sense of possibility and opportunity, an awareness that there are alternative ways of living one's life" (1991, 409). It is this very potential that Blackie taps into as well. Resistance and liberation are baked into the self-help genre, so it is no surprise that the shapeshifting woman finds a home there. Blackie's reimagined selkie tale serves as a compelling example of the self-help fairy tale, where the shapeshifting woman—embodying both resistance and renewal—finds a voice. Blackie not only critiques patriarchal structures but also offers alternative pathways for personal growth, inviting her readers to consider how the metaphor of skin can open up discussions on trauma, identity, and healing. In the following section, I conduct an in-depth analysis of "The Selkie's New Skin," exploring how Blackie's adaptation speaks to contemporary concerns around autonomy, ecological consciousness, and the reclamation of the divine feminine.

Exploring the Text: "The Selkie's New Skin"

Blackie sets the opening scene of "The Selkie's New Skin," which appears in *If Women Rose Rooted*, at "an island to the far west of these lands, close to the end of the world" called Tir nam Ban, the Isle of Women, a place where the Old Woman of the World resides in the seaside cliffs. In this wild realm live supernatural seal-women called selkies, and "for one night every month, on the night of the full moon, they can take on human form if they choose, and it is said that on those nights they slip off their sealskins and dance on the beach under the moonlight" (2016, 83). Similar to Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens," the fisherman functions as an unseen voyeur who spies on the dancing women. This parallel highlights yet another allomotif in ATU 400— where the fisherman mirrors the hunter in terms of his structural and symbolic role as the captor. The allomotif establishes a gendered hierarchy of man/predator having power over woman/prey. Despite his awareness of the "old tales," the fisherman's "strange yearning" compels him to take a selkie's skin, knowing it will sever her from her home and sisters (2016, 84). As the selkie desperately searches for her stolen skin, one by one her sisters leave her, echoing themes of abandonment present in many transformation tales. Both the swan maiden in Jacobs' telling and the selkie in Blackie's are abandoned by their sisters to the cruelty of the man who finds her. This emphasis speaks to the trauma that the shapeshifting woman experiences during the separation from her home and family.

One notable divergence from "The Swan Maidens" is Blackie's avoidance of specifying age or hierarchies among the selkie sisters. In Jacobs' tale, the youngest sister is singled out and captured, emphasizing a youthful innocence that has been claimed or subdued by masculine power and reason. In contrast, Blackie describes the fisherman choosing a skin at random, waiting until the other selkies have departed to see which sister he has captured. This shift is

significant, as it speaks to Blackie's narrative choices: while Jacobs emphasizes innocence and youth, Blackie refers to the selkies more generally as "women," placing them within a more mature age category. Both authors, however, highlight the shapeshifter's beauty and playfulness. Blackie describes the selkies as "a small group of women dancing in the sea" with hair that "shone like the moon," glistening eyes like stars, and skin that "shimmered like milk." She also describes their bodies as "long and graceful" and their voices "soft and lyrical" as they laughed and played together in the water (83). These descriptions are more detailed than Jacobs' introduction of the swan maidens, perhaps offering a more eroticized interpretation and rendering the fisherman's lust more explicit. This heightened sensuality aligns with Blackie's adult audience, who may have experienced their own complex and possibly coercive sexual encounters, making them more likely to relate to the selkie's fear and lack of agency under the control of a strange man, but also his magnetism. In Blackie's adaptation the blurred line between romance and coercive sexual practices is more prominent than in Jacobs' tale.

However, as Jeana Jorgensen's research on femininity in fairy tales suggests, this type of detailed physical description often perpetuates limiting gender norms. She identifies a pattern where "women's bodies are bounded by expectations of beauty," a double bind that constrains femininity and gender norms (Jorgensen 2019, 37). While Blackie does not subvert the traditional depictions of the shapeshifting woman's ethereal and untamed beauty, she inadvertently reinforces normative gender standards and ideals of feminine beauty. Her portrayal of the selkies, with their moonlit hair, fair skin, and lithe bodies, upholds a Eurocentric and heteronormative conception of beauty. As Jorgensen reminds us, "paleness occupies a privileged place in Western conceptions of beauty" (2019, 50). Therefore, the capture motif in Blackie's selkie adaptation continues to reinforce these traditional standards rather than dismantling them.

Her adaptation not only retains the mysterious allure of the shapeshifting woman but also replicates the patriarchal dynamics surrounding her captivity and objectification. While Blackie's work aims to provide psychological and feminist empowerment through self-help frameworks, this narrative choice complicates that goal, as it fails to fully interrogate the problematic aspects of beauty standards and power dynamics at play in the tale.

As the capture motif unfolds, other similarities between the tales can be seen. The fear of the shapeshifting woman when first confronted by the hunter is evident in both tellings. Additionally, similar language that hints at coercion can be seen in both texts. In "The Swan Maidens," the youngest maiden "begged and begged" for her skin back (Jacobs 1916, 99). The hunter ignores her and instead "he *made her promise* to marry him" (1916, 99; emphasis added). Likewise, in Blackie's selkie adaptation the seal-woman shrinks away from the fisherman. He responds with slow, careful movements "as if he were gentling a wild animal" (Blackie 2016, 84). Despite her evident fear, when he looks into her eyes, she softens, and they strike a deal that she will remain with him for seven years, at which point he will let her decide if she wants to leave or stay. This is reminiscent of the promise that the hunter extracts from the swan maiden, both narratives making clear that choice is just an illusion: "Reluctantly, then, the woman went with him, understanding that without her skin she could do nothing. She had no choice" (2016, 84). However, while both tales acknowledge the coercive tactics of the husband, representations of trauma are handled quite differently.

Depictions of Trauma

Nine months after her capture, the selkie woman births a daughter named Mara after the sea, and she is happy for some time. In the interim years of her captivity, she takes her daughter to

the shore and teaches her "the ways and the lore of the waters, telling her stories of her people and of other mysteries beneath the waves" (2016, 85). The selkie sees herself in the surety of her daughter who belongs equally to land and sea and who "was at home in her skin and knew her place in the world" as the selkie once had when she was young and living with her sisters in the sea (85). Depicted here is a specific nostalgia for a past self, a past life, for a time when the selkie was fully self-actualized. Discontent soon follows. Her husband has grown distant and the selkie yearns for her lost home and the company of her sisters. The passage of time and the weight of her despair mark the selkie as her "skin began to dry up, and her eyes and her hair grew ever more dull" (85). The seven years takes its toll on her body and mind as sorrow festers. Blackie makes clear the link between poor mental state and the physical body—trauma marks the body. Despite her deteriorating state, after seven years has passed her husband does not return the skin.

Worried for her mother's health, Mara learns the secret of the skin and begins to search for it, for she was afraid of the "blank emptiness that had begun to reside in her mother's eyes" (85).[10] When she does find the sealskin in the pocket of her father's fishing coat, dumped and forgotten in the back of the boat since the day he had stolen it, the skin disintegrates from age and lack of care. This moment unveils a deeper violence beyond the initial act of capture. The fisherman's neglect—his failure to care for the skin—reveals his true intentions: he never meant to honor his promise. The deterioration of the skin symbolizes the slow, hidden violence of disregard, abandonment, and separation. The skin's disintegration marks the erasure of the selkie's former

---

[10] It is worth noting that in this telling, the daughter is actively searching for the skin to help her mother, rather than stumbling upon it by accident. The shift is a powerful one because often swan maidens and selkies are criticized for abandoning their children, but in this tale Blackie makes it clear that there is no shame wrapped up in the selkie's desire to return to her home.

life, her connection to her true self, and any hope of returning to her original form. This form of violence—the kind that degrades the mind and body over time—is a metaphor for the corrosive effects of captivity and alienation that the selkie experiences. The selkie's trauma is not only in the initial loss of her autonomy but in the continued erosion of her identity and spirit.

When Mara tells her mother about the destroyed sealskin, the selkie is consumed by despair. Importantly, Blackie gives space to her profound grief, allowing the reader to confront the depth of anguish that the trauma of alienation and a loss of self can bring. She writes, "Her heart was a black hole; there was no help to be found, and her life stretched ahead of her, endless, dark and hopeless. She would never find her way home, never find her place, never again find a way to belong" (87). This passage not only emphasizes the selkie's sense of loss and hopelessness but also illustrates the weight of generational trauma that impacts both mother and daughter.

Intergenerational Relationships

The determination of the daughter to heal her mother is a strong theme in this tale. Unlike the daughter in Jacobs' tale, she is given a name and significance within the narrative. Furthermore, Blackie makes clear that the daughter is motivated by love for her mother, that it is her own agency which compels her to search for the skin, rather than just an accidental discovery. This adds depth to the theme of allyship between women. In fact, Blackie weaves an expansive web of women helping other women in her adaptation. This is a notable divergence from Jacob's telling in which the daughter merely stumbles across the swanskin and seemingly does not register its implications. In Blackie's tale, the selkie is encouraged to embark on a journey to find a new skin not only by her daughter but also by several old wise women who symbolically provide an intergenerational connection between women in various stages of life. Mara relays to

her mother that she must seek out the Old Woman of the World who resides in a cave. The

daughter's assistance ends here, however, for this is not her journey to make. Though the

daughter helps encourage her mother to accept "The Call" to the hero's journey and seek the

cave of the Old Woman of the World, the selkie must ultimately journey alone. After the arduous

trek to the cave, the selkie succeeds in finding the Old Woman, who has this to say to her:

> So your old skin was no use any more… That's the way it goes, often enough. I've heard all the stories they tell of Selkies who find their old skins and slip them back on, and away they go, out into the ocean, and live happily ever after, just as if nothing had ever happened to them, and nothing had ever been learned. That's all well and good, but it doesn't always work out that way, and sometimes it shouldn't (89).

This dialogue is infused with the authority of Blackie's voice as a storyteller. The reference to

other selkie-tale variations provides a valuable intertext. It calls attention to the artifice of story

and reminds the reader that this tale is trying to do something different than the ones before.

Blackie, through the voice of the Old Woman of the World, tells the reader that there is

something more that can be learned from the selkie's story. The selkie's lone journey to the first

cave represents her separation from the old world, as well as her first step toward recovery from

trauma.

Subverting the Quest Motif: The Eco-Heroine's Journey

   Quest Motifs abound in the ATU Index (See H1385.3. Quest for vanished wife). In *If Women*

Rose Rooted, Blackie subverts the typical heroic quest of a man searching for his absconded wife

by recentering the shapeshifting woman's journey and outright ignoring the husband's role.

Blackie redefines the Hero's Journey with a particular feminist slant. Her opinions on the

heroine's journey are worth exploring, for the journey she details influences the structure of her

selkie tale. Comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell published *The Hero with a Thousand*

Faces in 1949, in which he details the archetypal journey of the hero, what he termed a collective

monomyth whose patterns he claimed could be found in all world mythologies. Campbell

explores this concept of the monomyth, a narrative pattern found in myths, legends, and stories

across cultures. The book outlines the common stages of the hero's journey, including the call to

adventure, crossing the threshold into the unknown, facing trials and challenges, achieving

transformation, and returning with newfound wisdom to benefit society. Campbell argues that

this universal story structure reflects deeper psychological and spiritual truths about human

experience, emphasizing themes of self-discovery, growth, and the quest for meaning.

However, folklorists in particular, including Dundes, have criticized Campbell's universalism

and tendency toward source bias in his theory. In fact, according to Dundes, "there is no single

idea promulgated by amateurs that has done more harm to serious folklore study than the notion

of archetype" (2016, 16-18, 25). Blackie follows in the footsteps of Maureen Murdock,

Campbell's student, who first responded to Campbell's Hero's Journey with the Heroine's

Journey (Murdock 1990). Blackie claims that the Hero's Journey, as Campbell and other Jungian

psychoanalysts have used it, has little to offer women.[11] In the feminine archetypes in which

women appear, she is either Temptress who tests the hero or a Great Goddess whose love must

be won by the hero if he is to succeed. Both are oversimplifications, falling into the construction

of women as either defiled or pure. As Blackie states, these archetypes limit women to merely a

destination, representing the "static, essential qualities that the active, all-conquering Hero is

searching for" (25). Denied of personhood, women in the Hero's Journey are merely stepping

---

[11] Like the criticisms against Campbell's Hero's Journey and its universalist limitations, Blackie's reimagining of the Heroine's Quest also falls victim to universalizing and essentializing the role of women. As a folklorist, I cannot help but agree with Dunde's critiques of Campbell, while also finding similar limitations in Blackie's work. The idealized feminine archetypes present in Blackie's remapping of the heroine's journey fail to recognize the true complexity and spectrum of expressions and experiences of womanhood. This will be explored in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

stones for the Hero to reach his ultimate goal after which he returns to his elevated place in culture. In fact, Campbell's student Maureen Murdock has reportedly claimed that Campbell told her "Women don't need to make the journey. In the whole mythological journey, the woman is there. All she has to do is realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to" (Murdock 1990, 2). By claiming that women do not need to make a journey, Campbell denies women individuation and suggests that growth is not possible for women. Blackie disagrees, stating that women do need to make a journey, but with the caveat that their journey is different; "our stories are all our own" (25). Importantly, Blackie infuses her Heroine's Journey with the ecofeminist beliefs that form the base of her storytelling and argumentation; the Heroine's journey must be an Eco-Heroine's Journey. The goal of the Journey is integration with nature rather than power over nature. In Blackie's words:

> [A] journey to understanding how deeply enmeshed we are in the web of life on this planet … a journey which leads us firmly back to our own sense of belonging to this Earth – but after that, it is a journey which requires us to step into our own power and take back our ancient, native role as its guardians and protectors (26-27).

As the selkie enters the cave where the Old Woman tends the brew of her cauldron, she begins the Descent. It is here that Blackie explains the meeting with the dark goddess in the Otherworld which results in the destruction of "outmoded forms of being and prepares us to develop the wisdom we need to give birth to our most authentic self – the self that knows its place in the world, that has its feet firmly planted in the rich loam of the Earth" (Blackie 2016, 129). In this journey deep into the transformative dark, Blackie emphasizes the power of embodiment: "We need to focus on coming back to our bodies, beginning to repossess our instincts, beginning to reclaim our deep connection to the land and its non-human inhabitants," adding that "[t]his is

how we heal" (149).[12] The wild darkness with its feminine symbols of the cave and the cauldron—both womblike, nurturing symbols—offers something that patriarchal culture cannot, for patriarchy denies instinct and embodiment, insists that humans are separate from nature, separate and superior to animals, while the darkness embraces this union. As Blackie explains:

> What we are left with is instinct, the soft animal nature of our physical bodies, the songs our senses sing. The transformation that follows is … in some ways about shape-shifting: about taking on new forms, remembering that we are two-legged animals, learning a new way of being in the world, a new tuning-in to the rhythms and seasons of this planet. Only then can we truly become creatures of this Earth; only then can we begin to feel a sense of belonging to it (2016, 135).

In this context, the selkie's quest to reclaim her sealskin, to return to "soft animal nature" is more than a search for a lost garment—it is an act of self-liberation and a return to her authentic, wild nature. Unlike the swan maiden in Jacobs' telling, whose reunion with her skin is swift and underdeveloped, Blackie offers a more nuanced exploration of the process of reuniting with one's true self. The journey to reclaim her skin is not an easy one, as she meets different conflicts along the way and also relives the trauma of separation from her sisters. This difference in narrative focus highlights a significant shift from patriarchal hero tales to stories that center on feminine agency, resilience, and the healing potential of choosing transformation, choosing change even in the face of loss, fear, and despair.

---

[12] The dark cave of the otherworld can be compared to "The Belly of the Whale" stage in Campbell's Hero's Journey, occurring after the first threshold has been crossed. It is the stage that initiates rebirth. It is when "the hero goes inward, to be born again" (Campbell 2004, 84). Blackie makes her own spin on this concept, veering away from Campbell's religious reference to the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale. Blackie's concept instead uses the feminine symbols of the cave as womb.

Transforming Trauma into Liberation

There are many variations in how the supernatural woman is reunited with her skin. Often it is the swan maiden's or selkie's child who finds and returns it, as seen in Joseph Jacobs "The Swan Maidens" as well as Blackie's selkie tale, though with the key difference that the selkie is ultimately solely responsible for finding a new skin. Leavy provides several other examples of how shapeshifting women handle challenges posed by damaged or lost skins, such as one Siberian story where "a bird woman is helped by her fellow geese sisters who pluck their own wings so that the bird maiden can fly away with her children" (Leavy 199, 45). While some husbands keep their promise to care for the skin, in other versions, like Blackie's adaptation, he does not. For example, "A goose girl who "dried [her] goose-skin and put it away" after being captured later finds it and "chewed it till it was soft as when first removed" (1994, 60). So, there is traditional precedence for shapeshifting women who maintain agency in their quest to reunite with their stolen skin. Leavy declares that "it is possible to compare versions in which the swan maiden plays an active part in retrieving her clothing with those in which her discovery is purely accidental" (62). "The Swan Maidens" by Jacobs is an example of accidental discovery, unsurprising given Jacobs' focus on the hero rather than the heroine. Blackie's tale offers a different perspective that places the female protagonist on quest for her true skin as central.

As the selkie arrives at the final third cave, per the Old Woman of the World's instruction, the story takes a tragic turn. In this cave, she discovers the bodies of her sisters who had been "killed and then skinned, and left so that their flesh had disintegrated and all that remained of each of them was a pile of bones, and a skin beside each pile" (89-90). Over the past seven years, her sisters had been rotting in this cave, their magic skin disintegrating over time just like the skin of the selkie. Skin—living thing pumping with blood and life—is converted to "flesh," something

that has decayed. This jarring, graphic scene does several impactful things within the narrative. For instance, the selkie is confronted yet again with the violence that men have enacted on her kind; she is reminded of her prey status in the eyes of the fishermen who covet the seal-women. In addition, she is confronted again with the traumatic loss of her family, abandoned all over again. Only, now that she has undergone a transformative journey, she has been empowered to deal with the trauma differently. Rather than sinking into despair as she did prior to setting out on her journey, she now has the tools to enact healing not only for herself but also for her sisters; intergenerational trauma becomes intergenerational healing.

In the final cave, the selkie sits vigil over the eleven skins of her sisters. She lights a fire in the darkness and sings a lament over their bodies.[13] The narrator tells the reader that "No one knows the language now, and nor is it a language that is usually written, but here are the words she sang":

> Lonn da, ionn do
> Lonn da, od-ar da.
> Hi-o-dan dao, hi-o-dan dao
> Hi-o-dan dau, od-ar de

Aided by the appearance of another old seal who joins in the singing,[14] living skin returns to the bones and the skeletons reform into seals. Except one sister is not revived. The skin of the youngest sister does not transform, but in the sacrifice of the youngest, the selkie finds new hope.[15] With the skin clutched tightly, the selkie returns to her daughter, Mara. Rather than

---

[13] Singing is a deeply embodied act. The sounds she brings from within herself, from the well of her own mourning, connect her across time to her sisters and to the generations of selkie women who came before.

[14] Yet another example of the allyship between women.

[15] It is intriguing that Jacobs emphasizes the youngest maiden in "The Swan Maidens" while, in Blackie's tale, the youngest is the only one who cannot be revived. This could speak to the difference in audience, as Blackie's readers have already left their girlhood behind. From a psychological perspective, Blackie could be hinting at the death—and reintegration—of the inner

slipping away with her revived sisters, the selkie feels compelled to visit her daughter and impart knowledge before she returns to the sea.[16] Her goodbye completed, the selkie sings a final song and her body merges with the new skin, such that "in this merging a new form was created" (90). Every year afterwards, the selkie visits her daughter and teaches her the song, "The Sealwoman's Sea-Joy." Once a song of mourning, now the song is wisdom passed down to her daughter so that "if ever she should so choose, she also could take to the sea. She taught her the song that would sing her soul back home" (91). It is not unusual for swan maidens or selkie's to return to their children, whether to try to take them with them to their realm or to visit them annually, though just as often they are likely to leave without the goodbye that Mara is given. In Blackie's tale it is clear that part of the journey includes "The Return" just as it does for the Hero. What the selkie brings back from her journey is feminine ancestral wisdom passed from grandmother to mother to daughter. The final lines of the story speak to the transformation of sorrow into joy, alienation into belonging: "For all mourning may be transformed into joy if you have endurance enough to make the journey, and courage enough to face the Old Woman in the darkness of her cave" (91). The eco-heroine's journey, then, acts as a model for self-help readers, who step into the skin of the seal maiden and walk beside her on her journey. Whether this journey toward healing can be universally applied to all psychological problems, though, is yet to be seen. Logical application of the cave or the encounter with the Old Woman in modern life is also not readily apparent, either. Thus, the abstract nature of the seal maiden's quest can be molded to a

---

child within the adult psyche. Of course, as will be seen, death is not an end. The youngest selkie will be reborn in the selkie woman, and in this way her spirit still lives on. Death becomes reintegration.

[16] In this way, the selkie of Blackie's tale is similar to the swan maidens that appear in legends wherein they return to impart wisdom to their children even after they make the decision to leave, representative of the goddess as ancestress.

variety of identity problems—but in its universalization, limits efficacy. To try to bridge this gap, Blackie tries to connect with her readers by asking them to think critically about the metaphorical skins they wear.

Skin, Embodiment, and Identity

To Sharon Blackie, selkie tales are women's tales. In her words, "the Selkie's song is our song. It is a song of yearning for a part of ourselves that we feel we have lost" (2016, 92). In her study of the selkie, Blackie pays particular attention to the meanings that skin conveys in selkie tales—and thus highlights the potent themes that skin suggests as important to understanding any tale that features a shapeshifting woman. To inspire engagement with this topic, Blackie follows up the tale by asking her self-help readers a question that encourages personal reflection. She compels the reader to wonder what skins they have lost "to this super-rationalistic world in which we cannot feel at home, in which we cannot feel as if we belong?" (92). To Blackie, women acquire and lose many different skins over their lifetime. Sometimes they destroy their skin because of cultural and societal pressures. In her perspective, many contemporary women "pile on the trappings of the Wasteland," shedding their "own fragile skins" to instead clothe themselves in "the coarser skins of men which do not fit us, or the thick, traditional female skins which suffocate" (92). Using personal experience narratives to connect with her audience, Blackie details how she does not remember a time as a young child when she "felt at home in her skin" (92). Unlike the swan maiden or selkie, her skin was not stolen but hidden away. Blackie brings up her father's abuse of her mother to explain how she did not feel safe as a child. She further writes that she was "a strange little animal," speaking to the alienation she felt from her

own sense of identity. She explains how she "manufactured" a new skin for herself over the years, a skin that was not really skin but a protective shell that she had to work at shedding.

What is lost when we lose or hide our authentic skin? Blackie defines the loss of skin as the loss of feminine power, "the power to create, to guard, to transform," adding that in losing this skin, women "become disconnected from our female body-wisdom and instincts" (92). The term "authentic" pops up frequently in Blackie's rhetoric. The etymology of this word goes back to the mid-14th century, carrying meanings that relate to concepts of origins and authority, but the way that Blackie intends the usage may be closer to the term "genuine" rather than "authentic." In this case, the meaning of genuine from Latin *genuinus* means "native, natural, innate." Both of these meanings, for genuine and authentic, speak to the primacy of the original source, symbolically suggesting a "true self" that is uncorrupted by outside influence. Blackie explains that for the selkie, her skin is her "life-giving, creative power … her unique self" (104). From an embodied perspective, the skin holds olfactory power, for it contains the smell of home and the smell of her "natural wildness." Blackie emphasizes an animal-ness to these embodied qualities. When the inauthentic skin is shed, instinct is what remains: "the soft animal nature of our physical bodies, the songs our senses sing" (135). For Blackie, part of the transformation process is "remembering that we are two-legged *animals*" and only in recognizing this can we feel a sense of belonging to the Earth (135; emphasis added). From this perspective, then, the skin is representative of embodiment, of reconnection with the sensory body and the environment it inhabits. It is through embodiment that transformative healing is achieved. Blackie explains that healing is enacted by focusing on "coming back to our bodies, beginning to repossess our instincts, beginning to reclaim our deep connection to the land and its non-human inhabitants" (149). This is how Blackie actualized her own healing:

49

I began to reacquaint myself with the soft animal object that was my body. Slowly, spending more and more time outside, focusing on the wisdom of my senses rather than on what was going on inside my head, I began to weave myself back into the fabric of the Earth … I was a woman, and I had begun to remember who I was. It was the whole earth (2016, 230).

The phrasing that Blackie uses about a return to the animal self is fitting when considering selkies and swan maidens who do not feel at home until they have returned to their animal state, until they have found their fully embodied self again. The seal-woman is not at home until she slips back into her sealskin and returns to the sea, and the swan maiden is not free until she can take flight again with her own wings. Likewise, as Blackie suggests, women will feel alienated from themselves and from the external world if they remain in their culturally imposed skins of feminine ideals. Perhaps this is why embodied actions like song and dance commonly appear in tales of shapeshifting women, for it brings the body into alignment with the rhythms and patterns of the natural world and speaks to a deeper body-wisdom that is often denied by patriarchal culture. It is not rooted in the head, in rational thinking, but in the body; it is the movement and vibration of sensory experience.

As noted in Chapter 1, skin and cloth are symbolically equivalent in the tales explored in this thesis. In Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens," the skin is a "robe" made of feathers. In Blackie's selkie tale, an animal skin—the seal hide—is emphasized. However, both function in the same way. The selkie's hide and the swan maiden's wings are integral to their essence, the magic garments allow the shapeshifting woman access to the wild realm and unrestricted embodiment. It is vital, then, to consider in more depth why this symbolic equivalence matters. The garment represents the care—or neglect—the shapeshifting woman endures. Both skin and cloth require care and protection, as they are vulnerable to damage from time and violence. Yet, they also possess a profound ability to be restored and transformed, symbolizing a deeper meaning of perseverance

toward self-reclamation. This interplay between vulnerability and strength lies at the core of the symbolic equivalence of skin and cloth.

Living Cloth, Fragile Skins

If anyone understands the vulnerability of cloth, it is the swan maiden and her shapeshifting sisters. As humanities scholar Beverly Gordon tells us in her investigation into textiles and their meanings, fabric is "always in need of care and protection" (Gordon 2011, 34). The same can be said for animal skins, which can dry out if not cared for. All textiles require upkeep and care to extend their longevity. These themes can be traced through tales of shapeshifting women. Often, a swan maiden or selkie will request that their husband keep their garment safe during their captivity. These requests are not always met, in fact, there are several tale versions where the husband responds not with care but with violence. Many a tale tells of the unfortunate swan maiden or other shapeshifting woman whose garment or skin is burned. And other tales tell of the maiden's efforts to restore her skin back to life by chewing it—literally imbuing it with her saliva, with life force (Leavy 1994, 60). Different tale versions can be compared in how the shapeshifting maiden responds to challenges in restoring her desired form. Tales that emphasize the work that these maidens are willing to perform, such as collecting new feathers to construct new wings, the effort of chewing life back into a shriveled skin, or the hero's quest that Blackie's selkie must endure, demonstrates a particular perseverance in the restoration of their agency. The heroine of Blackie's selkie tale discovers that her skin has been so neglected over the years of her captivity that when she is reunited it is only briefly, as the skin turns to powder in her hands. Similar to the bird-maidens who construct new wings from the feathers of their sisters, in "The Selkie's New Skin" the selkie's regeneration is closely tied to the fate of her sisters, though in this version it is the selkie who restores both her own skin as well as the skins of her deceased

51

sisters. In another contemporary literary example, in Ursula Vernon's "The Jackalope Wives," the elder heroine Maggie Harken goes on a quest not unlike the male hero to restore the destroyed skin of a jackalope-maiden whose skin her grandson attempted to burn (Vernon 2014). In the course of the tale it is revealed that Maggie, now in human form for many years, was once a jackalope-maiden herself. Unlike the maidens who cannot resist the pull of their skins, Maggie chooses to relinquish the chance to reunite with her former identity in order to save one of her sisters from the same fate that she once suffered.[17] While many tales feature the brutality of the maiden's capture and the destruction of her skin, the violence is balanced by the care and aide shared between women, who, in their mutual support undermine the bounds of patriarchy that mark them natural enemies.

It is important to keep in mind the living-quality of cloth when analyzing motifs like the selkie's skin or the swan maiden's feather cloak. When we do not regard these qualities, we contribute to the objectification of the shapeshifting woman that the husband enacts upon her. Or, like Joseph Jacobs, we ignore its relevance entirely. The skin and the woman are entwined, both in need of care and both bearing the marks of abuse and neglect. Her fate is tied to her skin, and when she perseveres to restore it, she takes her destiny into her own hands. The garment is as alive as the maiden, and thus bears witness to the impact of violence in its destruction. However, garments can also be salvaged with care, as evidenced by tales where the maiden is able to restore her aged skin with her own saliva. As Gordon iterates, "cloth has power" and acts as a

---

[17] The character of Maggie Harken is a particularly interesting example of a contemporary shapeshifting woman who demonstrates Laura Mattoon D'Amore's concept of "vigilante feminism," wherein girls and women undertake "their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence—such as sexual assault, abduction, abuse, and trauma—because they have been otherwise failed in that manner" (2017, 387). This vigilantism embodies, according to D'Amore, "a cultural reaction to growing up in a world where feminism has tread but where women continue to feel unsafe" (388).

"conduit of transformation" (2011, 150), making it a potent symbol in wonder tales. Marked by resilience, the maidens who persevere to reunite with their true, living forms, demonstrate the intrinsic power women hold over their own fate. Women can restitch themselves back to wholeness, or in the case of Blackie's selkie, can sing themselves back to life.

Self-Empowerment as Happy Ending

In comparing Joseph Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens" and Sharon Blackie's "The Selkie's New Skin," this chapter reveals how innovation is applied to traditional narratives from differing perspectives. While Jacobs' version adheres to a male-centered narrative that obscures the swan maiden's experience and upholds patriarchal beliefs, Blackie's adaptation boldly reclaims the tale from an ecofeminist perspective, placing the selkie woman's quest for her lost skin at the heart of the tale. This shift in focus from male to female agency not only challenges patriarchal norms but also redefines the meaning of "happily ever after" as a journey from trauma to healing and, ultimately, self-empowerment. No longer is the integration of man and woman in matrimony the desired end, but rather the reintegration of the self is what matters most. By emphasizing the selkie's active role in reclaiming the skin she desires, Blackie offers a narrative of resilience and transformation that celebrates the feminine experience.

However, while Blackie's ecofeminist adaptation of the selkie tale provides a powerful narrative of feminine resilience and empowerment, it also raises critical questions about the limitations of Blackie's depictions of womanhood. The next chapter delves deeper into the complexities of women's narrative traditions, from the self-help book genre to the use of personal narrative to inspire intimacy with readers. As the cultural landscape evolves, so too do the fairy tales that mirror society's ongoing debates about gender and identity. It is crucial to

recognize that narratives framed within ecofeminist ideology, such as Blackie's, may reinforce

certain biological essentialisms, minimizing intersectional voices and the broader spectrum of

women's experiences.

Chapter 3: Women's Narrative Traditions

Contemporary Political Perspectives

German folklorist and scholar Lutz Röhrich says that "fairy tales always reflect the society in which they are told" (Röhrich 1989, 5). This perspective is important when examining contemporary authors who work with fairy-tale adaptations, as these narratives are influenced by current sociocultural dynamics. Contemporary debates around gender identity permeate various media and social platforms, challenging or reinforcing traditional heteronormative frameworks and intensifying polarized views. This polarization can be seen in feminist circles as well, as definitions of womanhood create ideological tension. A particular faction grounded in reductionist biology voices concerns that including trans women in female spaces undermines traditional definitions of womanhood. This has stirred movements such as the "tradwife" trend on social media and amplified exclusionary rhetoric from prominent literary figures like J.K. Rowling and Sharon Blackie, as well as other feminist voices that resist intersectional perspectives.

Blackie reinforces a universalized depiction of femininity, and as will be seen in greater detail as this thesis progresses, enshrines normativity into her storytelling. As Siefert attests, over the last few decades, feminist adaptations "have made significant progress toward complicating the image of the fairy tale as a bastion of patriarchal gender roles" (18). However, Blackie's rhetoric in her self-help books complicates this claim. This window into the tensions between patriarchal and feminist influences in fairy-tale adaptations reveals that it is not so easy to untangle them. As is often the case, the arc of progress is not always linear. While the fairy-tale genre may not be "monolithically patriarchal" (Siefert 18) it certainly is not wholistically equitable either.

Blackie's adaptations, while advancing ecofeminist discourse, reveal the complexities and exclusions inherent in attempts to limit definitions of womanhood.

Röhrich claims that the women's movement has "sharpened" contemporary views of the feminine appearing in fairy tales, which results in new perspectives (4). Blackie's ecofeminist perspective is one such example of this reinforcement of femininity as it appears in myth and fairy tale. As prominent contemporary folklorist Jack Zipes explains, these new ways of engaging with fairy tales expose the "speaker/writer's position in the world," revealing their "dreams, needs, wishes, and experience" (Zipes 1988, 17). I have chosen to read Blackie's self-help books in conjunction with her literary fairy tales in order to expand on this topic. Because the literary fairy tale plays an increasingly significant cultural role in Western society today, it is important to consider the fairy tale's social function (Zipes 1988, 13). In particular, Zipes notes that the social function of the fairy tale becomes politicized for adult readers in the 19th and 20th centuries (1988, 23). This politicization is reflected in Blackie's ecofeminist stance as a call to action for women's rights and to further political discussions of the earth's sustainability and the role that humans have in maintaining it. Blackie references an increase in the number of contemporary women's movements that are actively "focusing on a new and strongly felt desire" to "re-root" into the land, build community, and "bring back awareness of and respect for deep feminine values in a world dominated by the masculine" (2016, 27). Polarizing masculine and feminine perspectives, Blackie reinforces hierarchical gender binaries.

Fairy tales, as mirrors of the societies in which they are told, evolve in response to shifting cultural dialogues about gender, feminism, and ecology. As Turner tells us, adaptation of "old stories" allows tellers to "take the same old plot or tale type and make it useful over and over again by working it, making it say something new to us, not only by giving answers but more

often by raising questions" (Turner 2023, 4). Ongoing debates around gender identity and

women's roles, coupled with the rise of intersectional feminism, underscore the tensions between

traditional norms and new perspectives. Blackie's ecofeminist adaptations, while seeking to

uplift depictions of the divine feminine, also expose the complexities and potential limitations of

universalizing women's experiences. To further understand these dynamics, it is essential to

explore how women's folk groups are broadly defined and, more specifically, to delve into the

folk group that comprises Blackie's primary self-help audience.

Women as Folk Group

   This section looks at characteristics of women's storytelling traditions with particular

emphasis on how Blackie contributes to a legacy of women mythmakers and storytellers.

Analyzing how gender impacts storytelling is important, for, as Leavy iterates, "To be aware of

gender as a significant part of folklore narration is to become cognizant of the irony that the

swan maiden is not ordinarily held to be the main character in her own story" (1994, 39). This is

important to note because it highlights silences in scholarship. Folklorists such as Leavy have

asked whether women can be considered their own folk group (1994, 14). The answer, however,

is complicated. In Leavy's words: "Certainly the concept of uniquely female traditions that are

being defined by folklore feminists implies an affirmative answer," and she adds that

"occupation and tradition provide support for the idea of an exclusive as well as inclusive female

folk" (14). While Leavy does concede the point made by Alan Dundes that the conception of a

universal sisterhood would be naive when considering differences in culture, ultimately I work

from the same conclusion which Leavy supports: "folk narratives reveal feminist themes when

their subject *is women's role in culture* and fantasies about escaping that role" (Emphasis

original; 15). The tales by contemporary storyteller Sharon Blackie are easy to categorize as women's tales because Blackie is specifically engaging with the subject of women's role in culture—as well as nature—and she explicitly engages with a predominantly female audience. However, whether or not Blackie succeeds in reaching her audience is another matter. In particular, she is hindered by an overdependence on biological essentialism.

Overprivileging the Feminine

Sharon Blackie's exploration of womanhood, particularly in her self-help books, emphasizes an intrinsic connection between women and nature which is rooted in the physical experiences of the female body, including menstruation, birth, and menopause. "What is it, then, to be a woman?" asks Blackie (2016, 207). Her answer is rooted in the body: "Perhaps more than anything, it is the wisdom of the physical, the sexuality and the life-giving power of the female body which we must begin to reclaim" (207). To begin the work of rebalancing the world, Blackie states that women need to change themselves by changing "the stories we tell about who we are" (22). For Blackie specifically, this means reinvigorating Celtic tales in which women are "portrayed as deeply connected to the natural world" (23-24). Blackie works from the ecofeminist premise that women and nature are equated, both denigrated by patriarchy. Continuing this line of thought, Blackie adds that because women are capable of giving birth and because of the cyclical experience of menstruation, "women have a deep, intuitive understanding that we too are animals" and that, like animals and the realm of nature in general, women are seen as inferior to men, women "know what it is to be afraid, and to be hunted" (181-82). However, as Anne Archambault warns in her critique of ecofeminism, scholars should be cautious of over-privileging women's bodily experiences, in making claims that certain bodies

are inherently superior and more connected to nature. It is important to recognize that "biological conditions are experienced differently by different individuals, and bodily experiences are themselves conditioned by culture" (Archambault 1993, 20). Ecofeminist perspectives should be viewed with a critical lens. There is no universal female experience, and women's perspectives, just like men's perspectives, should be analyzed critically, with understanding as to how culture influences gendered perspectives. As Robyn Eckersley suggests "to the extent that bodily experiences may differ between men and women, there is no reason why either should be socially elevated as superior to the other" (Eckersley 1992). To do so would be to reduce men to being an outsider to nature, as *other*, ironically in similar ways to patriarchal (de)valuations of women, which situate them as outside of culture.

Archambault questions the logic of archetypes of the feminine ideal, asking, "Are these traits the ones that actual women really have or the ones that are traditionally associated with women?" (1993, 20). In other words, are the traits we consider "feminine" actually reflective of real, lived experiences, or are they imparted by traditional (and patriarchal) claims?[18] If we were to carry this logic forward, then does undergoing a mastectomy or a hysterectomy somehow reduce a woman's connection to nature? If a woman does not use her breasts to nurture a child, is she somehow less connected to "Mother Nature"? What is lost if we limit the Earth to simply a feminine ideal of Mother? Certainly, to suggest that the earth is universally a feminine symbol is to project a human-centered vanity onto the natural world, upholding human exceptionalism.

Blackie presents the idea that it is only women who can save the earth because of their unique biology. But this effectively erases the role that women have played in ecological destruction, as

---

[18] It is worth asking this question regarding "masculine" traits. It is equally worth asking whether we can imagine a spectrum beyond the male-female binary. To support one gender over another is to create a hierarchy, which ultimately feeds colonialist and patriarchal systems of logic.

well as excludes men from ecological discourse on possible solutions. While Archambault

believes that "ecofeminism has the capacity to transcend its difficulties," she cautions that we

must contend with its weaknesses:

> The reliance on women's biological functions to establish a connection between women and nature, the uncritical overprivileging of women's experiences, the inappropriateness of designating ideal female characteristics, and the regressive political implications of associating women with nature (Archambault 1993, 21).

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with Blackie's pursuit to reclaim respect for women's bodies

and women's experiences. Her work in turning to the "old stories" (2016, 209) in order to

reclaim empowerment for women and for the land is commendable. In seeking the authenticity

that tradition conveys, Blackie hopes to demonstrate that patriarchy is not a monolith, that myths

and folktales have portrayed the feminine in a positive light, regardless of the claims of

patriarchal theology. She insists to her audience that the "core" task is to "remake the world in

the image of those stories. To respect and revere ourselves, and so to bring about a world in

which women are respected and revered" (209). The consequence of her perspective, though, is

the reinforcement of harmful patriarchal depictions of masculinity as violent, destructive, and

less capable of connection with nature. Despite these essentialisms, she does give voice to the

ways that many contemporary women feel, voicing their fear of subjugation in a society

structured for men, as well as their desire for being recognized and valued. Despite best

intentions to connect with a folk group of likeminded women, as the next section breaks down,

not all members of a target audience will resonate with the author's message. Readers of self-

help books have a unique relationship with the text, choosing what to keep and integrate into

their lives.

The Self-Help Genre

   The self-help genre is part of the legacy of women's storytelling traditions because it is

perceived as feminine. Despite authorship by men as well as women, self-help books "promote a

worldview, a culture, that appeals to women rather than to men" (Dolby 2005, 65). Perhaps in

part because of this perceived feminization, self-help books are not often considered worthy of

academic analysis. Instead they are considered popular nonfiction, despite being written by

authors who hold advanced degrees (2005, 6). However, as Dolby explores in her folkloristic

approach to the genre, self-help books are an emic genre; that is, they are "named and recognized

by the readers and writers themselves" (17). Importantly, the folk define the genre for

themselves, rather than receiving it from academic institutions. While the genre is part of a

literary tradition, when viewed as a process of self-education, self-help books mirror folklore

processes of transmission and performance. Dolby explains that the reader is "both part of a

community" as well as a "solitary learner" and that both of these aspects are part of the process,

engaging with "the communal and traditional, the unique and the individual, the conservative

and the innovative, the popular and the personal" (17). Today, as self-improvement workshops,

podcasts, and other formats gain popularity, authors like Sharon Blackie position themselves as

unique cultural teachers engaging with folklore tradition while also offering "new" perspectives.

Fighting the Patriarchy with Self-Help

   Dolby has made a case for adding the self-help genre to the study of folk narratives,

contending that self-help books can be understood as "cultural artifacts" and "expressive

performances" (Dolby 2005, xi). Similar to fairy tales or legends, there are characteristic

narrative patterns that can be mapped out in self-help books. This structure is broken down into

"lack" and "lack liquidated," wherein a suggestion is posed "that something is wrong with us, with the culture that guides or programs us, or with our information about the world (lack); and the second suggestion of what might be done to correct this problem (lack liquidated) (4-5). This problem-solution equation is reminiscent of the theft and reunion of the shapeshifter's magic garment. In capture tales, the shapeshifting woman experiences a profound lack after the theft of her skin, but this lack is liquidated when she reunites with (or remakes) the garment. Self-help books, too, are transformation narratives. Not meant to merely provide information, self-help books are intended to enact some sort of change upon the reader through their interaction with the text and the application of the personal philosophy it propagates. Dolby explains that the "heart" of self-help books is "a professed disenchantment … with conventional ways of thinking," built on the premise that a "new way of thinking" should replace old ways (2005, 93). Blackie, for instance, encourages readers to abandon patriarchal narratives like the story of Genesis or the myth of Athena and instead seek stories that encourage connection and integration with nature rooted in concepts of the feminine. Blackie critiques patriarchal culture and offers an alternative solution that seeks to honor the feminine.

Authority: The Storyteller as Teacher and Wellness Guide

The self-help genre instigates a deeper relationship between storyteller and audience, so much so that storyteller becomes teacher and reader becomes student. The 2019 Kindle edition of Blackie's self-help book *If Women Rose Rooted: A Life-Changing Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* (first published 2016) is advertised as "The Word-Of-Mouth Bestseller" above the title, directly appealing to the power of orality. Dolby refers to the language used on front and back covers of books as "metacommentary" (2005, 51). The metacommentary influences how a

reader perceives the book before they even read the first sentence. This reference to the oral bolsters Blackie's rhetorical strategy, demonstrating that donning the "storyteller" identity that harkens to the oral transmission of folklore can be a powerful move because it adds a layer of authenticity to what would otherwise be labeled simply fiction written by an author. As was seen in a previous chapter, Joseph Jacobs employs a similar strategy when he adds himself to the tale-telling lineage of women in nurseries telling stories to young children.

Blackie's psychological wellness perspective differs from other authors who work with fairytale adaptations.[19] For example, most authors who publish a story collection or add their adaptation to an anthology do not have the opportunity to explain to their readers what they intend with the story. Blackie, on the other hand, has published multiple books that directly explain her narrative symbols and intentions. In addition, her psychological motivations mean that she literally seeks to change her reader's psychology based on the narratives she presents to her readers. This is incredibly valuable because it means that, as a narrative folklorist, I can go direct to the source; I do not have to guess what Blackie intends through her symbols because she literally tells us what these symbols mean to her and how she hopes her female audience will incorporate the feminine archetype into their daily lives. Blackie has published many books, articles, newsletters, and even in-person and online classes and workshops that detail her unique perspective—and betray her rhetorical strategies. I have focused particularly on Blackie's book *If Women Rose Rooted* for its reimagining of the selkie tale, as discussed in Chapter 2, as well as for the insights it provides into Blackie's personal experiences, which reveal the deeper guiding

---

[19] Blackie is not alone in adapting traditional fairy tales and myths for a wellness-minded audience. American writer and Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés has also reimagined women-centered narratives to empower self-help audiences. See, for instance, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1989). Blackie does reference her work, but claims to differ by not aligning herself with Jungian psychology.

ideologies and "cultural frame of reference" that shape her storytelling (Dolby 2005, 10). I also briefly examine in Chapter 4 her other self-help book, *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* (2022), which contains transphobic rhetoric and provides an opportunity to critique Blackie's reliance on an ecofeminist perspective that depends on biological essentialism. Examining these sources in conjunction with the reimagined tales offers deeper insight into the relationship between storyteller and story, as well as between storyteller and audience.

Blackie is intentionally positioned as more than just an author, and even more than just a storyteller. In metacommentary that introduces Blackie to her readers in *If Women Rose Rooted*, she is described as an "internationally recognized *teacher* whose work sits at the interface of psychology, mythology and ecology" (Emphasis mine; 1). What happens when an author is elevated to teacher? Do the stories Blackie publishes contain an extra veneer of authority because of this positioning of what could be described, in marketing terms, as her brand? In addition, Blackie also identifies herself as a psychologist—the trifecta of storyteller, teacher, and psychologist bolsters this call to authority. As a psychologist, Blackie positions herself outside of the typical Jungian paradigm. She details how initially her work with myth was founded in Jungian archetypes and the work of other popular writers such as Marie-Louise von Franz and Clarissa Pinkola Estés which focused predominantly on revealing "the hidden corners of our own individual psyches" (Blackie 2016, 312). However, Blackie critiques this approach because it tends towards overanalyzing. Blackie explains that she quickly grew tired of this "human-centred psychology" and its tendency to "dumb down" the mythical narratives (2016, 312). Instead, she quests for "the stories which re-animate not just our own souls, but the soul of the outer landscape, and which bring us into relationship with it," stories which are "embedded in place" (312).

Because Blackie is a professional psychologist who works with narrative therapy, she has a deep well of experiential knowledge to draw from. As Grodin explains, a "professional helper" is able to note patterns of behavior and has a diverse pool of people to observe; this ability to see patterns "grants the writer authority and distinguishes him or her from the reader" (Grodin 1991, 412). It is important that Blackie presents herself as a teacher and professional helper with a long history of case studies, because these calls to authority are intrinsic to the self-help genre. A self-help book needs a credible teacher to impart wisdom. However, as the next section demonstrates, it is not authority alone that Blackie uses to reach her audience. Though she is a professional psychologist and an academic, she must also delve into the pool of her own experiences, past trauma, and personal reflections to foster an intimate relationship with her audience.

The Power of Intimacy

Sharon Blackie offers a unique perspective on the uses of fairy tale and myth in modern contexts. Writing in the self-help genre tradition allows her to be more emotionally involved than authors working within academic constraints. Blackie gets to tell stories of her own personal experiences, allowing the reader to "bear witness" to her own transformation (Dolby 2005, 48). Grodin explains that self-help book authors like Blackie "present themselves as having been on their own quests" and often disclose "information about themselves in a manner uncharacteristic of most psychotherapeutic relationships" (1991, 412). Thus, in addition to her persona of authority, Blackie also portrays herself as an everyday woman through the intimate tone that self-help books allow and the inclusion of personal narratives. Including personal insights and experiences is essential to the self-help genre. Personal narratives are shared expressions of the "inner life"—the storyteller's private folklore—and the intimacy created through sharing these

narratives can be so powerful that Dolby hypothesizes it may be even more effective than sex (2005, 47).What and how a storyteller chooses to share their private lore is, thus, a vital element in deciphering the motivation and meaning behind the storytelling. For Dolby, this motivation is clearly "prompted by a desire to create intimacy" (48). Blackie weaves her personal folklore with communal folklore—like traditional myths and fairy-tale narratives—resulting in a blended tapestry of intimacy and authority. Unlike academic scholars who avoid the personal in pursuit of true objectivity and a greater emphasis on authority, Blackie opens a window into herself for the reader to view. In this way, she details how she lives in the world, offers glimpses into her childhood trauma, and tells stories about the women in her life that have impacted her growth. In the process, she seeks to foster intimacy with her audience.

Scholars working within strict academic constraints make appeals to authority, perhaps highlighting relevant scholarship in the field, theorizing, or emphasizing academic credentials. Blackie, however, seeks to dismantle the hierarchy between herself and the reader by positioning herself as a woman similar to her audience. Through personal narratives that reveal her own life experiences, readers learn that—perhaps like them—Blackie has felt dissatisfaction with marriages and jobs, has grown tired of cities filled with smog and misogyny, and has longed to abandon it all for a cottage in Ireland or a secluded homestead in the woods. She yearned to begin anew, to escape, to take flight like the swan maidens, and to shapeshift into a new life. As she outlines, she is a good patriarchal daughter at the beginning of her personal story; she has acquired all the proper documents of education and finds herself, unhappily, working for a corporate tobacco company, stuck in the bowels of what she terms the "Wasteland," the greedy, dead world ruled by capitalistic excess and the destruction of nature, a "rootless place" (48). Blackie trudges through this world, detailing her unhappiness to the reader. She details how the

"Wasteland" is a "hollow world" where "we spend our lives doing work we hate" for security, for "ever-grander houses and ever-smarter cars and all the latest versions of all the latest gadgets" (52). She also speaks of her longing for something else, something more rooted in the land rather than cement cities. In other words, Blackie articulates a collective longing that connects with her target audience, to whom she is trying to impart an ecofeminist message.

Blackie is not alone in her dissatisfaction with the current systems that allow for the mass destruction of natural resources, nor is she the first to use storytelling to bring awareness to this global issue. In fact, the self-help genre engages with this very topic. Dolby details how self-help writers counter "ambiguous cultural icons of competition, individualism, and violence" with assertions that "the universe and all in it are one" (104). Dolby explores several "folk ideas" (Dundes 1971, 95) that are characteristic of self-help narratives. Another idea is that "humans are part of nature, not separate," and a third idea that humans should be present: "be here now" (Dolby 2005, 107). Blackie engages with all of these folk ideas in her books. While Blackie presents her ideas as new, counter-cultural stances, the genre itself has a long legacy of engaging with these topics. Blackie's message falls into this schema: women and the land are profoundly, spiritually connected; and it is time for women to rise up, root themselves in the ground, and *defend* what has always been sovereign to them; they—specifically "biological" women—are the protectors and the voices of the land. This message is the beating heart of her rhetoric; it motivates her storytelling.

Healing the Woman Wound

Dolby notes that the self-help genre is often predicated on the "prominence of the self" (2005, 21), with many books exploring various conceptions of selfhood. Among the most prevalent is

the idea of the "wounded self," a theme central to popular psychology writers like Blackie. In this framework, self-help books act as prescriptions that guide readers through therapeutic processes, aiming to heal psychological wounds and develop a personal philosophy (2005, 36). *If Women Rose Rooted* centers on the healing of such wounds by reconnecting women to nature and Celtic ancestral stories that reclaim feminine power. However, while her narratives aim to restore wholeness and offer empowerment, they also raise questions about the limits of this approach—especially when the healing journey is framed primarily as a personal rather than a collective, political, or cultural endeavor. Feminist critiques of the psychological self-help genre frequently address how these books depict women's cultural experiences as an "illness" to be remedied by individual experts, rather than addressing the larger sociocultural and political dimensions of these complex issues (See Lerner, 1990; Sidel, 1990). Grodin notes in her study of readers of self-help books: "Even when a woman's problems are acknowledged to have social and cultural roots, the proposed "cure" rarely emphasizes political or social change (Grodin 1991, 406). Thus, while self-help books like Blackie's may offer an abstract sense of empowerment through personal storytelling and mythic reclamation, it simultaneously risks simplifying the complexities of oppression by not adequately addressing the systemic factors that contribute to women's psychological wounds.

Blackie speaks to a Westernized audience of women whom she views as "wounded" by patriarchal theology, critiquing the Western myths and religious teachings that she grew up with, particularly the story of Genesis in the Christian Bible. Blackie explains that the story she was "given to carry as a very young child," which was meant to define and instruct her about her place in the world, afforded little to no significance to women:

> In this story woman was an afterthought, created from a man's body for the sole purpose of pleasing him. In this story, the first woman was the cause of all humanity's sufferings: she brought death to the world, not life (Blackie 2016, 14).

The consequence of this creation myth and its cultural prevalence in the West, Blackie explains, is a patriarchal belief that women are "naturally disobedient temptresses who must be kept firmly in their place" (14). Furthermore, Blackie shares that this cultural story made her "feel small, insignificant, empty" (2016, 15). Renowned folklorist Elaine Lawless (2003) has studied the impact of this biblical story on women's lived experiences through her ethnographic investigation in "Woman as Abject: "Resisting Cultural and Religious Myths That Condone Violence against Women." Like many of the women who Lawless interviews, Blackie is intimately acquainted with male violence, which she details in a personal experience narrative. Even as a young child, she knew that violence was "endemic" in her family. Her personal story is framed by a lineage of male violence enacted against the women in her life:

> My mother, as a tiny child, picked up a poker from the fireplace and held it up to her father to stop him beating my grandmother. A couple of decades later, at just about three years old, I took hold of my own father by the kneecaps and pushed him, step by astonished step, out of the room to stop him hitting my mother (Blackie 15).

Lawless insists on resisting stories like Genesis that condone violence against women. In her article, she argues that the construction of "Eve as Evil=Woman" supports the view of women as abject (Lawless 2003, 299). This means, Lawless explains, that "whatever is deemed polluted, dirty, and sinful-to such an extent that violence rendered against women is often construed, consciously or not, as justifiable given the defiled status of women within culture" (299). Women, through their equation to nature in this schema, are likened more to animals, far below the elevated status of Man who claims the realm of culture in the name of subduing nature—and *ipso facto*, women. This construction that polarizes nature to culture and man to woman

69

ultimately justifies the control of women, seen either as dangerous or vulnerable to corruption, in need of protection.

While Blackie's narrative of healing aims to counter these damaging myths by reconnecting women with an empowered and ecologically rooted sense of self, there is an underlying tension in her approach. Blackie's work continues to equate women with nature, reinforcing a patriarchal framework that has traditionally dehumanized and devalued women by aligning them with the "natural" as opposed to the "cultural." While her intention may be to subvert this dichotomy and reclaim the value of both nature and women, her approach risks romanticizing the past, the wild realm, and traditional views of womanhood that ultimately become harmful rather than liberatory.

Reader responses to Blackie's self-help books often highlight this tension, critiquing her universalization of womanhood and questioning the authenticity of her ecological commitment. For several readers, Blackie's narrative of a universalized feminine experience can feel exclusionary or oversimplified. These readers push back against the idea that there is a single, universal path to healing and transformation that applies to all women. Moreover, they express skepticism about Blackie's ecological stance, questioning whether it aligns with a deeper commitment to environmental activism or if it serves more as an escape fantasy from reality. The next chapter takes a deep dive into reader responses, engaging with the question: Has Blackie effectively fostered intimacy with her audience? And, what does this say about the power that readers have in the author-reader-text relationship?

Chapter 4: Re-Centering the Reader's Interpretive Agency

Self-Help Audiences: A Private and Social Community

Self-Help reading can be a profoundly personal yet simultaneously routine experience. As Grodin attests, it is "woven into the everyday" (Grodin 1991, 414). This can be observed in the habitual practice of reading in conjunction with daily routines or a ritualized reflection process. Perhaps readers engage with the text in pieces, choosing to read a chapter or section before bed or in the morning before starting other chores. It is rare that a reader would read the entirety of a self-help book in one sitting. To highlight the private, routine engagement with self-help narrative, Grodin details how "most readers browsed through texts, often skipping chapters, or finding selected passages that meant something to them," while others "engaged in more interrupted reading, like catching snippets of a book when stopped at traffic lights while driving" (Grodin 1995, 126). In addition, some readers kept notes to themselves on bathroom mirrors or car sun visors as a way to habitually engage with the content that was most meaningful to them.

Despite the private nature of reading self-help, Grodin explains that social community is also fostered. In one sense, self-help books "provide a way to *establish* something that is understood to be culturally shared among a community of "readers"" (1991, 415; emphasis in original). This means that readers are able to tap into a shared well of cultural knowledge, which in turn gives shape to collective norms. In addition, community is fostered through "a sense of the self as socially constructed through contact with others who have similar problems" (1991, 416). One of the draws of the self-help genre is to not feel alone in whatever issue the self-help book takes on; humans like to know that they are not alone in their struggle, and find hope in knowing that others have found ways to deal with the problems they are facing. This desire for connection to a

broader community does not necessarily entail direct interaction with others but rather a shared cultural understanding that provides a foundation for their sense of self.

In regard to Blackie specifically, the creation of various folk groups can be observed in both the virtual and physical sphere. A Newsletter keeps Blackie's readership on the same page and up to date on publications and events. On her webpage, a group-centered call to action is posted: "Join My Pack" (https://sharonblackie.net/). In addition, both virtual classes and discussions as well as in-person workshops, book readings, and public lectures bring private readers into the larger social community wherein readers will inevitably form their own subgroups.

Furthering this thesis research logically would lead to ethnographic study of these subgroups, which would provide deeper insights into how groups negotiate Blackie's teachings and apply her objectives in their daily lives. As this endeavor is beyond the scope of this particular study, instead I turn to the online resources available through book reviews of *If Women Rose Rooted* and *Hagitude*. Book reviews, through sites like Amazon or StoryGraph, are one way that readers engage with a social community. They share what they have taken away from Blackie's work, commiserate with fellow readers, and develop critiques, demonstrating Grodin's claim that agency belongs to the self-help reader. Book reviews are a valuable source of information. Though they do not provide the access that ethnography allows, reviews offer glimpses into the reader's mind. When collected and analyzed, they provide a fuller picture of the negotiated meaning of a story.

Characterizing Blackie's Target Audience

The target audience of Blackie's self-help books, broadly-speaking, is adult Western women. In addition, as Blackie outlines in *If Women Rose Rooted,* she is trying to connect with middle-

aged women. As she details, women in this age bracket experience major changes across many areas of their lives, from professional to personal, leading to questions of "who we are, who we might have been, who we might yet become" (2016, 95). These women, as described by Blackie may be "overtaken by disillusionment and dissatisfaction," find themselves unhappy with marriages or careers, or struggle with "physical illnesses, anxiety or depression" (95). For Blackie, the story of a woman at the crossroads of mid-life is also a story of the animal bride who finds herself with a choice after many years of captivity and domestic servitude: will she don the skin and flee her forced home? Once the maiden is reunited with her skin, she has a choice to remain as mother to her children and wife to her husband, or she may flee and return to her natural realm. This decision does not come until after many years have passed. The swan maiden or selkie wife has had one or multiple children, has seen her husband's interest in their marriage wane, and has experienced the ravages of age that come with residing in the human realm. It is not surprising then that Blackie addresses a predominantly older female audience like herself.

An interview with Erin Geesaman Rabke on the *Embodiment Matters* podcast provides more insight into the type of Western woman Blackie intends to reach with her storytelling. In the podcast, Blackie notes that, while she is a UK writer, her audience is about 80% North American (00:17:25). This tracks with Dolby's book on self-help books being a particularly American feature. But even a female American audience is quite broad. However, during the course of the interview, Blackie gets more specific about who her storytelling is for. She states, specifically that "we need Western women, *white women*, to see that their mythology as well tells us that we have that role as guardians and protectors of the land" (00:48:42- 00:48:59; emphasis added). Blackie wishes to counter the story of "disempowered women" in the West, referring specifically to depictions of Eve in the Bible—the "story of evil women"—and to counter the mythos that

"women have caused the problem" (00:49:48- 00:50:12). Instead, she wants her white, middle-aged female audience to turn to their Celtic roots: "While the stories of Eve, Pandora, and other 'fallen women' may be the stories that have been foisted upon us for the best part of 2,000 years, they aren't the only myths we have inherited, *those of us who have Celtic roots*" (Blackie 2016, 22).[20]

Blackie's call for Western women to reconnect with their Celtic roots could be seen as an effort to reclaim a forgotten mythology. However, this reclamation is laden with the undertones of white privilege, suggesting that her storytelling is not universally inclusive but rather caters to a specific, privileged demographic. Blackie, through her emphasis of whiteness—not only in her word choice in the *Embodiment Matters* podcast, but also in her description of the selkie's white skin—caters to a specific, privileged demographic. This focus on whiteness implies that white women have a unique role in ecological and social guardianship while marginalizing other important perspectives, such as those of Indigenous peoples and non-Western mythologies. Such an approach raises critical questions about who is liberated by Blackie's narratives and who remains silenced. Despite this Eurocentric perspective, audiences prove to be resistant to Blackie's more marginalizing rhetoric. Reviews and responses to Blackie's work reveals that some readers grapple with her romanticized and restrictive vision of womanhood. The next section will delve into how readers respond to Blackie's self-help books, examining both their embrace of and resistance to the ideas she presents.

---

[20] Blackie specifically describes the "Celtic Fringe" which is "made up of specific regions of the countries which stretch along the western oceanic coastline of Europe," which "binds together richly diverse populations with a strong thread of collective cultural identity." For Blackie, the Celtic Fringe is not based on geography so much as a "shared history, mythology and common belief systems" which "arise out of a common landscape and environment which brought about a highly distinctive pan-Celtic culture that is rooted in intense feelings of belonging to place" (Blackie 2016, 23).

Self-Education

In 1954, the influential folklorist William Bascom defined the four functions of folklore as essential tools for maintaining the "stability of culture" (Bascom 1954, 348). Blackie selectively maintains cultural stability by preserving Celtic myths and folktales which feature empowered women characters because she believes that engaging with these tales will inspire modern audiences to see themselves as equally powerful and connected to nature. Blackie identifies a lack of awareness of Celtic lore in Western culture, and seeks to reinstate a worldview that values women and nature. To support this endeavor, she first educates her audience on the Celtic worldview, clarifying what "Celtic" means in terms of geography and cultural groupings, and then presents the stories themselves, framed through her unique perspective. From this groundwork, she encourages readers to contemplate their own heroine's journeys, applying these ancient narrative structures to their personal lives.

Dolby's work on self-help literature underlines that a core goal of these texts is self-education, which aids individuals in building a "personal philosophy" (Dolby 2005, 79). However, the question arises: Who is responsible for shaping this "personal philosophy"? Is it Blackie, acting as a teacher who directly imparts wisdom to her readers? I argue that this is not the case. The term "self" in self-education emphasizes the role of the reader in this process. While readers may turn to experts like Blackie for knowledge and guidance, the agency remains with them. They selectively interpret and negotiate the information presented, deciding what resonates and what will be incorporated into their personal worldview. As Grodin points out in her study, readers rarely accept or reject the messages of self-help books entirely. Instead, they "use them selectively and strategically to think about and negotiate self" (Grodin 1995, 133).

This capacity to resist or adapt the messages of self-help literature demonstrates the readers'

active engagement in the process of personal transformation.

Interpretations of Resistance

This section emphasizes that self-help readers are not passive consumers but active

participants who navigate, negotiate, and often resist the narratives offered to them. Grodin

identifies patterns of "resistance to the text's authority" (Grodin 1995, 126). The self-help reader

(and the scholar-reader) possess agency over the text.[21] As one interviewee states in Grodin's

study: "I don't take what they say as gospel" and "I can adopt a suggestion, or not, as I see fit"

(1991, 411). While Dolby suggests that self-help authors may be portrayed as "newly

enlightened prophet[s]," ultimately, the reader is not required to strictly adhere to doctrine. As

Grodin explains, most of the women whom she interviewed experience "a sense of choice and

control" such that engagement with the author is merely optional (2005, 411). This is an

intriguing deviation from Dolby's thoughts on the storyteller as "enlightened prophet" and

"professional helper" (Dolby 2005, 49). Rather than a strict adherence to the teacher-student

dynamic, the reader embodies both the student as well as the teacher. The reader is more self-

guided than we may first think. In fact, in Grodin's later study, she found that the women she

interviewed took "pride in their active construction of textual meaning, and their resistance to

much of what they read" (Grodin 1995, 126). In these cases readers take pride in the agency they

wield in the storytelling relationship, suggesting that readers do not read self-help out of mere

---

[21] Dolby Stahl, in *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative,* asserts: "If we all truly are "the folk," then the folklorist's interpretation is … the most "informed," and it is also the most easily accessible as a demonstration" (Dolby Stahl 1989).

enjoyment or even a desire to learn something from an expert, but rather pursue the learning process itself as a form of self-study.

This active reading of self-help texts often stems from a desire for personal transformation. Grodin identifies a desire for "separation from the past or aspects of the present" as one of the main reasons for engaging with self-help narratives. The women that Grodin interviews express a desire for "separating themselves from traditional views about women" (Grodin 1991, 416). Dolby reinforces this claim with her assertion that self-help books, at their heart, are about resisting "conventional ways of thinking" with the purpose of creating new ways of thinking which replace outdated beliefs (Dolby 2005, 93). This brings us to an interesting tension in Blackie's work. While Blackie seeks to elevate women's role in ecological stewardship, in the process she romanticizes connection to nature and depictions of womanhood. This tension is recognized by several readers. While they engage with her texts to seek empowerment and new ways of being, they are also discerning and critical when their own personal beliefs and experiences clash with Blackie's narratives.

Privilege, Romanticization, and Reader Responses

As Sharon Blackie details her personal journey of returning to her roots, it becomes evident that her ability to do so is a privilege afforded by her financial security. Though she may not be fully aware of the implications, Blackie presents a romanticized fantasy that is accessible only to women of a certain class. After all, not every woman who feels disconnected or unhappy with her life has the means to abandon everything and move to a cottage in Ireland. This raises critical questions: Is the feminine revolution that Blackie advocates only attainable for white women

who can afford to start over and relocate? How does moving to a rural hamlet in the Irish countryside actually contribute to meaningful societal or ecological change?

I am not alone in picking up on Blackie's limiting perspective. One reviewer leaves the comment that Blackie is incapable of seeing that she "continually romanticizes what a connection to the land and farming should look like" (2010). This reviewer picks up on a reoccurring pattern in which Blackie continually purchases land and then abandons it as she "cuts tail & runs to the next fantasy that she begins dreaming up the moment the current fantasy she's just escaped to isn't adding up to what she's imagined it would" (Reviewed in the United States on June 10, 2010). Another reviewer notes that Blackie's "massive focus on what is traditionally seen as womanhood, and a woman's experience" is ultimately alienating (Reviewed in the United Kingdom on October 25, 2023). These comments reflect a broader discomfort with the narrow, idealized vision of femininity and connection to nature that Blackie promotes.

American academic and scholar Jack Halberstam, in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), provides a more nuanced examination of the concept of the wild. In his queer study of the wild and wild desires, Halberstam makes clear the connection between coloniality and conceptions of the wild. He urges that "we must not imagine that the wild is ours to discover or rediscover; we should resist the temptation to believe that it once existed and now has gone," insisting that "we must find a way around the treacherous binary logics that set the wild in opposition to the modern, the civilized, the cultivated, and the real" (Preface). Shapeshifting narratives, such as those involving the swan maiden or selkie, engage deeply with themes of the wild and civilization. In her hybrid form she mediates these boundaries. Halberstam's work helps us recognize that the concept of the wild is fraught with colonial and patriarchal underpinnings. Engaging with this idea is risky, as it may reaffirm colonial narratives, and clearly, Blackie falls

into the trap of over-romanticizing both the wild and the feminine. Unlike Halberstam, Blackie does not engage meaningfully with the intersections of coloniality and the wild in her discussions on nature as the primary source of womanhood. Her lack of critical engagement lures her into the "romance of going back to some mystical unsullied land," ignoring the colonial and hierarchical structures that have shaped these conceptions (Preface x).

The mixed reviews that Blackie's work receives expands on insights into the motivations behind self-help books. Dolby explains that self-help authors "select those elements of the culture that they believe need to be changed, and at the same time they highlight and reinforce those elements that serve in a positive way their own suggested solution" (Dolby 2005, 11). In doing so, authors uphold traditional elements selectively, retaining only what is "deemed good" (11). Blackie calls for a reinstatement of feminine traditions and narratives she believes have been neglected, but in doing so, she idealizes a connection to the land that is unrealistic and inaccessible for many. This selective preservation reinforces cultural assumptions about femininity and ecological sustainability that do not account for diverse experiences or practical realities.

Although self-help authors like Blackie appear to have significant control over how their stories are interpreted and applied, "they in fact do not always succeed in controlling the interpretive context to the extent that they expect" (Dolby 2005, 123). While Blackie constructs a personal philosophy grounded in restrictive definitions of womanhood and connection to the wild, readers have the agency to resist and reinterpret her narratives. This tension between authorial intent and audience reception is crucial, as it opens a space for readers to challenge and subvert the prescribed narratives. The following chapter delves deeper into this tension by exploring the queer realm of enchantment and bodily transformation, examining additional

reader responses to Blackie's work. This includes specific resistance to her anti-trans comments

in *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* (2022).

Chapter 5: Reclaiming the Narrative: Queer Reinterpretations

Breaking Gendered Boundaries

This chapter enters the realm of the fantastic, a realm where established boundaries and black-and-white ways of thinking are challenged by fantastical bodies that undergo transformation. In other words, the realm of the fantastic is profoundly queer. While Blackie's call for women's empowerment speaks to the desires of contemporary women who wish to find positive representations of women in traditional narratives, Blackie's romanticization of an innate and universal womanhood necessitates critique. In order to mediate her more harmful rhetoric, I choose to end this thesis by shifting to a queer point of view. Previous chapters have explored the shapeshifting maiden through a particular ecofeminist viewpoint that insists on the value of women's experiences, but this final chapter seeks to push the boundaries and jump over the barriers Blackie has erected in order to critically engage with queer realities and potentialities. The shapeshifting woman does not solely represent a feminine ideal as Blackie portrays, but rather opens up discussion of the queer potential of the shapeshifter as animal-human hybrid, representative of transbiological defiance. As anthropologist Serinity Young attests in her broad study of sky-going females, "Shape-shifters are unnerving because they cannot be contained within the primary categories of species, suggesting other, uncanny possibilities," that, by "changing out of their human forms, shape-shifting women shatter gendered social conceptions as well as those of species" (Young 2018, 8). In many ways, this chapter is the most important as well as the most challenging, for it contests the chapters which precede it, queerly contradicting, interrogating, and unmaking in order to conduct a queer re-reading that honors the belief that "fairy tales are *already* species-queer, posthuman, and transbiological," and acknowledges that characters like the shapeshifter "destabilize and upend normative species relations (Greenhill and

Allen 2018, 227). Before delving into queer and transbiological invitations, however, we must first turn a critical eye on Blackie's more harmful rhetoric that goes beyond mere biological essentialism and her over privileging of the feminine.

Perpetuating the Gender Binary, Denying Queer Experiences

Blackie speaks often of the concept of "balance" and how excesses of the masculine in culture need to be mediated by the feminine.[22] As a qualifying statement, Blackie adds that for all her "railing against the patriarchy" she does not wish to make men the enemy but rather to enact a journey of allyship between men and women, to focus on stories that "arose from a culture in which both men and women were valued for the different things they brought to the world" (24). However, despite her statement that men are not the enemy, Blackie often vilifies a universalist conception of Man, which ultimately hinders her message of unity, while also reinforcing the binary division between men and women. Blackie states that "Much of the unique wisdom that women hold has been eradicated or driven underground, out of sight, away from the *dangerous, damning eyes of men*" (2016, 41; emphasis added). She focuses on men as individuals rather than looking to the larger systems of control that reinforce patriarchal beliefs. Historically, ideologies that blame one group of individuals for the entire sins of society while propping up another group as the sole heroes tend to be more harmful than helpful. Because of rhetoric like this, Blackie falls into a dualistic trap that situates women/feminine/sacred as innately good while

---

[22] This claim assumes that the patriarchal construction of gender is true when it pertains to the definitions and archetypes ascribed to male bodies, but that the schema fails when applied to women. It does not challenge the entire construction, which would accept that patriarchy is also detrimental to men and fails to effectively characterize men in similar ways to how it limits women. Nor does it accept that the male-female dichotomy is flawed and does not reflect the whole spectrum of genders. It is in this way that Blackie fails to actually counter patriarchal ideology; she gets caught in it.

men/masculine/civilization is regarded as innately bad. The result is an inverse of the patriarchal schema of woman=evil, reversed to man=evil. Because of this faulty logic, Blackie entirely misses the larger picture, which is far more complex than she presents. She does not attend to the nuance of patriarchal and colonizing systems of oppression that continue to be institutionalized in contemporary society. By placing ownership in the hands of men rather than the systems that perpetuate an unfair system, Blackie upholds the very systems themselves. She vilifies men because they reap more benefits in patriarchal systems. In the process, she creates silence around the harm that patriarchy and ideals of masculinity impose on men in society. By upholding rigid gender binaries and pitting one against the other, she fails to actually provide any real solutions, creating further distance rather than unity.

Furthermore, despite claims to the contrary, Blackie spouts harmful anti-trans opinions. In her book *Hagitude* (2022)*, she cloaks these opinions under a veneer of radical truth-speaking, claiming that women who uphold the tenets of biological sex are the courageous ones for speaking "straightforward scientific fact[s]" (Blackie 2022, 108). There is a particular cognitive dissonance when Blackie acknowledges in one sentence that transgender men and women are marginalized and targets of discrimination, when she acknowledges the "astonishing 92 percent of trans young people" who contemplate suicide, while just a few sentences later she claims that people cannot "literally" change their sex (2022, 199). In particular, Blackie targets transgender women who were identified as male at birth. This is a common tactic of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) ideology that sees trans women in particular as a threat to cis-women's spaces and identities. To clarify, these remarks assert unequivocally that a strict adherence to biological determinism dictates that individuals assigned male at birth, irrespective of their gender identity, are perceived inherently and irreversibly as posing a threat to women

solely by virtue of their existence. In a footnote, Blackie tries to clarify that she is not concerned with genitals, as she claims that biological sex is determined by specific chromosome combinations—yet, conveniently, she ignores the reality of intersex individuals, further maintaining the male-female dichotomy while upholding the erasure of (approximately) 1.7% of the population, according to statistics provided by OHCHR and the United Nations.[23] Blackie upholds that women—particularly older women who are outspoken on the subject or who have great cultural influence, such as Margaret Atwood and other literary women whom she views as championing cis-women's rights—are the ones who are "threatened and denounced for simply insisting on the reality of their own embodied experience," even equating the backlash these women receive with witch hunts (207). Clearly, for Blackie and her fellow "truth-tellers" their perceived safety is more important than the trans community they claim to support: "women have once again grown afraid of expressing their beliefs for fear of being "canceled," or publicly excoriated" (207). In this insistence on the victimhood of cis-women, Blackie outright ignores and erases the very real threats that trans individuals face, who fear bodily harm, alienation, and even the loss of their lives in addition to loss of civil rights. When one considers, if even for a moment, the embodied experiences of trans people, it becomes clear that fear of being cancelled pales in comparison to the fears that trans individuals face on a daily basis.

Similar to her villainization of men, Blackie rails against trans individuals—rather than the systems that perpetuate inequality, or even the corporations who market the gender-inclusive rhetoric she so fears—further perpetuating rigid binary logics rooted in hierarchical and

---

[23] Statistics by OHCHR may be incomplete due to harmful medical decisions made on behalf of intersex individuals. For a historical overview of medical violence against intersex individuals, see *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* by Hil Malatino (2019).

discriminatory Us-versus-Other beliefs. Furthermore, Blackie insinuates that trans individuals are a contemporary phenomenon, effectively erasing the existence of trans communities from history, despite the fact that intersex individuals, alongside other fluid identities like the Two-Spirit community of indigenous cultures, have always existed. Blackie states that older women who rock the boat and engage with "forbidden" subjects, such as the gender discussion, are more necessary than ever, "especially in a world still dominated by patriarchal values and structures," declaring that "we need women who will challenge the worst excesses of patriarchy" now more than ever (208). Taken in context with the rest of her anti-trans rhetoric, the implication is that trans women represent this patriarchal "excess." In the process, Blackie actually engages with the same type of logic that patriarchy employs, creating special in-groups who must fight against out-groups.

Rather than seeing transsexualism as a bridge between masculine and feminine dichotomies, Blackie chooses to villainize experiences that she refuses to relate to. The discordance of Blackie's message is amplified by her harmful rhetoric, which is framed as a desire to better understand the trans and non-binary community. She explains how, in 2021, she set up an online group called the Mythic Imagination Network[24] where she claims to "set up spaces for men, for transgender men and women who'd like to explore and reimagine their own unique stories and mythic and archetypal patterns" (197). Based on her anti-trans commentary, it is perhaps not surprising that, in her words, "so far, there have been no takers" (197). It is particularly revealing that Blackie has not actually taken initiative to meet trans and non-binary individuals in the spaces they have already established and where individuals may feel more secure in sharing their

---

[24] A paid, subscriber based service, like many of her other services (See Blackie's website for rates: https://sharonblackie.net/).

unique perspectives. Instead, Blackie builds a space that she wants others to come to, despite a lack of evidence that they would actually be welcome. She maintains authority, and even charges people to participate, thus obviously wielding an imbalance of power. It is perhaps worth mentioning that as a psychologist, Blackie is part of a legacy in the psychotherapy community that has routinely devalued and villainized trans individuals, wherein the trans experience is classified as an illness, as dysphoria.

Reader's Resistance to Anti-Trans Implications

Blackie's anti-trans rhetoric is upsetting for many readers, so much so that her book *Hagitude* has received a content warning for transphobia on StoryGraph, a social cataloguing web platform similar to Goodreads. One reviewer states that they cannot recommend "a story that invites us to consider that the coastline was in conversation with the author and boulders moved when she left and her dreams spoke to her but is so myopic when it comes to including trans women" (lmaxwellscott, "Reviews with Content Warning for Transphobia," accessed April 18, 2024). In other words, Blackie is quick to invoke magic and transformation, but only as it applies to her in-group. Another reviewer states that "Blackie acknowledges that trans people deserve safe places but then makes it clear that this book is not that place and should be apart from cis women." Yet another reviewer boldly states, "No TERF is my feminist elder. They are stuck in the same patriarchal framework they believe they've vanquished," adding that "Blackie likens the dismissal and "cancellation" of TERFs as a modern day witch hunt not understanding that they are the hunters" (ursacorn, "Reviews with Content Warning for Transphobia," accessed April 18,

2024). Clearly, despite her best efforts to seem equitable, Blackie fails in succeeding in her

performance for a significant portion of her audience.[25]

Reclaiming the Shapeshifter's Queerness

    One might wonder why I have chosen to highlight Sharon Blackie if I disagree with her

transphobic stance, why I have chosen her stories in order to expand on the queer potential of the

shapeshifting woman. These critiques are fair, but I have chosen, like Pauline Greenhill and Kay

Turner in *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* to "read anew and askew" (2012, 13) in

order to tease out the queer and transbiological invitations of the fairy-tale genre, even when the

author did not necessarily intend these perspectives. I am insisting on the value of the

individual's reception of the text, and in the process I present my own interpretation. Folklorist

Donald Haase defends "the fairy tale's tendency to invite multiple levels of interpretation" due to

the use of ambiguity, maintaining, as Greenhill and Turner point out, that the "significance of the

fairy tale lies in its reception" (1993, 234-35). I argue that the shapeshifting woman is a

transbiological figure who, because she messes with "hard-and-fast distinctions between species"

and troubles gender binaries in the process, is distinctly queer; I cannot see her in any other way

(2012, 16).[26] In addition, as Greenhill and Turner claim, it is the underlying deep structure of

fairy tales, due to the realm of enchantment, which inherently challenges normativity, even when

---

[25] In addition to reviews that demonstrate reader dissatisfaction with Blackie's anti-trans stance, trans individual Heather Gorse has published an open letter to the author, explaining the harm caused by Blackie's rhetoric in episode 13 of her *This Mythic Life* podcast. Gorse makes a powerful comment in this letter, stating "Words and how we use them can do staggering damage as well as incredible good." These words are worth remembering.

[26] In *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, Turner and Greenhill note that "transbiology is a more recently developed and broadly interpretable concept" whose terrain is being mapped out by scholars such as Sarah Franklin (2006), Judith Halberstam (2008), Myra Hird (2004, 2006), and Noreen Giffney (2008).

the "surface story may be moralistic, socially restrictive, and gender/sexuality normative" at first glance (16). In this way, I can explore the queer, the non-normative, the eroticized, and the "awkward knottiness/naughtiness of the boundary between human and non-human" (23). As Haase states, "Fairy tales are emancipatory not in their content but in their reception (Haase 1993, 244). It is important to note that I am not forcing a queer perspective, but that queerness is already coded into the shapeshifter. As the captured maiden flees her home and her husband, she also flees limiting definitions of woman as "wife" under patriarchy, expanding definitions by breaking out of barriers. I also believe that applying a queer lens to wonder tales helps to reclaim those voices and experiences which have been silenced and vilified by authors such as Sharon Blackie, thus a necessary rebalancing of power is performed. One might argue that this is not the job of the narrative folklorist, that objective truth must be applied to interpretation or that an authors' intent is more valuable than how the audience receives and engages with the narrative, but I contend that the audience—which includes the scholar—holds a complex relationship to narrative that extends beyond the intent of the author. We shapeshift the tale as we receive it, and in the process make it our own.

Transbiological Pleasure

Eroticism, sexual and nonsexual, is coded into the liberation motif. The shapeshifter experiences pleasure with the embrace of her animal skin. As Bacchilega attests, "[f]olktales and fairy tales are stories about and of desire," and, strikingly similar to self-help books, act from a perceived "lack" (Bacchilega 2008, 13). Desire is a pivotal theme in shapeshifting tales—the desire for the wild, to be clothed in it, to inhabit its powerful, liminal space. The climax of the tale, which I pinpoint as the reunion with the supernatural skin (the Liberation Motif), is

indicative of wish fulfillment; the climax is the fulfillment of a long-awaited pleasure. Wish-fulfillment, pleasure, and the realm of the erotic are actively engaged in tales that feature shapeshifting figures. Just as self-help books seek to grant happiness to readers, fairy tales are devoted to the "pleasure principle" (Bacchilega 2008, 14). A lack is posed and then liquidated, satiated. Intriguingly, Blackie herself plays with pleasure in interesting ways in her short story "Wolfskin." While Blackie utilizes an ecofeminist approach, we can diverge from the path Blackie has set to queerly "imagine what might be" and "explore alternate possibilities and futures," because we are in the realm of the wonder tale (Bacchilega 2017, 8). In this way, I enact a queer re-reading of the tale that is built on a transbiological interpretation. First, I explore the text itself, thinking about the parallels and divergences between "Wolfskin" and "The Selkie's New Skin" as well as Jacobs' "The Swan Maidens." As will be seen, all three tales feature a shapeshifting woman. Though she appears in different forms—as a swan, a seal, and a wolf—their journeys take them on familiar routes. Captured by a male hunter figure, forced to marry and raise children, these shapeshifting women must make pivotal decisions about what they should do once reunited with their skins. For all three maidens, this choice takes them in different narrative directions. For the swan maiden of Jacobs' tale, the maiden ultimately returns to the patriarchal home with her husband, clipped of her wings. For Blackie's selkie, her choices lead her on an epic quest which reminds her of her own agency, heals traumatic wounds, and enacts healing for herself and her sisters so that they may all return to their wild, unrestrained existence. For the wolf-woman of Blackie's literary adaptation, agency is closely tied to her voice and her storytelling as reclamation, and her metamorphosis is characterized by erotic pleasure.

Exploring the Text: "Wolfskin"

   "Wolfskin" begins, like many traditional fairy tales, with a protagonist alone in the woods: "Say you go alone into the woods" (Blackie 2019, 9). The perspective is made clear in the second line: "It's winter, and you're hungry." Here the reader is given two important things: 1). The repetitive use of "you," the iteration of second-person perspective, introduces a pattern. This pattern reinforces the reader's orientation *within* the narrative; and 2.) in the process, the reader/audience becomes complicit with the actions of the "you" subject. The rest of the sentence sets the scene and motivation. These descriptions are *embodied,* and through their embodiment connect to the reader's sensate memories of winter and hunger: this serves to further orient the reader *into the body* of the character of the hunter. This makes the hunter *relatable*. We have all felt the cold chill of winter that sets teeth grinding; we have all felt the gnawing bite of hunger, and to these are linked associative memories as well, of warmth, of fullness. Invoking these primordial emotions that drives humanity across time is a rhetorical strategy that establishes conflict—introducing tension that sets the narrative in motion. The hunter is hungry, and like all who are hungry, deserves to acquire sustenance. Hunger itself can be viewed in terms of pleasure and wish-fulfillment. This makes the third sentence a continuation of logic, despite the jarring hint at violence in the line: "So you take up your rifle, put on your deerskin jacket and your boots lined with rabbit fur" (9). It is this sentence that firmly establishes the identity of the hunter, verified through his appropriation of animals for his needs. He is clothed in skins, in furs, in justifications.[27]

---

[27] It is not clarified that the hunter is a man until the second page: "Wolf-woman has to marry man, because man has her skin" (9). Therefore, the reader can only assume that the hunter is male. However, because the capture motif adheres to a strict pattern, it does not take a massive leap to assume the hunter is male from the opening of the story. Blackie works on the assumption

And then a narrative trick is pulled, and ever so subtly, the true authority—the narrative voice—slips into view, destabilizing prior expectations and offering a subversive take on the typical framing of capture tales from the male perspective. The hunter may be the protagonist, but it is the narrator[28] who controls his movements: "Off you trot." The narrator sends the body of the hunter into the "thin" dawn light; the skills of the hunter—to track and listen for the calls of wild animals, to read the sky—are embodied motions for the hunter, not even aware himself of them, for he does not "think much of all that." "You're there to kill your dinner," the narrator slyly tells the reader/hunter, reminding again of the hunger, of the necessity of violence to come, as well as the resultant pleasure. Not only are you hungry and cold, but you are also tired, and after a whole day, all you've caught is a rabbit "still warm" when you stumble across a mill house, where you make yourself at home. The repeated refrain of "Say you…" establishes a pattern that reveals the voice of the narrator. The phrase is a nod to the orality of fairy tales, and calls attention to itself as a story. This is further established when the creaking of the door—an embodied clue—points to a shift in the story with the *sound* of a creaking door as a signal to the reader to pay attention. "All the best stories" have a creaking door is a narrative wink between the author and the reader. The call for attention is followed by the arrival of the wolf, who enters the mill house and, rising "up on her hind legs," the wolf shouts, "*Skin down! Skin down!*" and "out slips a woman" (9). "The mill house is her home," the narrator establishes. Because there is ambiguity around the narrator, the reader is left conflicted over whether the hunter makes this connection. Whether the hunter is aware or not, the narrative makes clear that it *is* the wolf-

---

that the reader will associate the hunter with a male identity because that is how these stories have traditionally been told.

[28] Who does the narrative voice belong to? To Blackie, as the author, or perhaps to the wolf-woman? The text plays with ambiguity on this matter, though a satisfying answer is offered by the conclusion of the tale.

woman's home as she hangs her skin on a "peg behind the door" (9). The home is customized to her, which makes the hunter an intruder.

As is the case in many capture tale variations where the garment is stolen—as we saw in Jospeh Jacobs' tale "The Swan Maidens"—specific word choice is invoked: "Say you *creep* down the ladder and *snatch* away the wolf-woman's skin" (2019, 9; emphasis added). These are marks of his skill as a hunter, but also of the violence he is capable of. Following this language, the story begins to shift as the hunter is revealed to be less likable than the reader may have first perceived. For he nails her skin to the mill wheel and nudges the wolf woman with his foot. It is here that his true cruelty is revealed. And yet the reader is still structurally linked with the hunter; the reader is complicit in the violence. When the wolf-woman screams, "*Skin on me! Skin on me!*" all she can do is cry when it does not move from the mill wheel. Then the narrative establishes the beginning of a new pattern with the phrase "Say you laugh" followed, on another line of its own, by "Ha ha ha." This pattern physically breaks up the text, adding blank spaces—a liminal space where the reader can pause, reflect. The story references its intertextual narrativity again with the line, "You know the rest" (9). Invoking, like a palimpsest, the readers' memory, forcing a recall of all the intertextual references the reader has available to them, conjuring a multitude of possibilities. The implication is that there is a logical order to things. It references the traditionality of the tale itself. It acknowledges well-worn patterns that echo across variants: "Wolf-woman has to marry man, because man has her skin. Man moves into enchanted mill; wolf-woman cleans and cooks. Same old story" (9). The drudgery of her labor is referenced, as it is in many tale versions, making clear her new role now that she is separated from her wild nature, now that her home has been co-opted through patriarchal force.

The self-referentiality of the narrative comes into the fore, coalescing into a larger theme for those who make the connection. It is revealed that the hunter likes stories; he "makes her tell you stories each night before bed. Wolf-stories; they make you laugh" (9), and he promises to give the wolf-woman her skin back "if she tells you a story you really like" (9). It is worth stopping to reflect on this element in more depth, for not only does it intertextually reference with other tales where a woman must tell stories to prolong her life, such as can be seen in the collection of Middle Eastern folktales *The One Thousand and One Nights*, but it provides a vital key to understanding what Sharon Blackie is trying to *do* with the story; this is a story about a woman held captive by a man, but it is even more so a story about the power of story when wielded by women who are otherwise denied agency. This narrative decision to reveal its narrativity intentionally invokes a long lineage of contained women fighting for their life through storytelling.

The hunter laughing at the wolf-woman's suffering recurs when the hunter sells the skin for profit. The pattern moves the reader through the story, offering continuity but also jolts of pleasure because now the reader has been conditioned to anticipate the next movement, the shift that follows the chorus. The following lines start to build narrative tension and rising ambiguity: "Say the wolf-woman begins pregnant with hope, but ends up pregnant with a man-child. Say the man-child kills his brother Hope in the womb" (9). The violence in these lines is meant to jolt the reader. There is an edge to the tone of the story now that was not there before. To build off the unease that has been established, the narrator asks: "Don't you like this story?" then demands "Say you do." The voice of the narrator wields more agency than the reader (and by relation, the hunter) first realized. Patterns guide the reader/audience through the narrative with repetition and expectation. The rule of three is often a rhetorical strategy in European tales, and it is this that

provides a sense of things coming together, things progressing as they should. The hunter's laughter is repeated a third time after he hears about his son, the man-child, who wonders about his mother's wolf origins. Interestingly, it is not the wolf-woman who confirms that she once had a different skin, it is the father/hunter, who tells him the skin has been sold (10). Blackie's version of ATU 400 demonstrates patterns that appear in other contemporary versions in the focus that is afforded to the child. In this version, the man-child wonders "whether he is a wolf too," and he cries when his mother tells him that she can only "show him how to discover his skin" when she is in wolf form. It is the boy's tears that triggers the next laughter sequence of the hunter.[29]

The Capture motif inevitably leads to resolution through the Liberation motif, which balances the scale. In this version—similar to Blackie's selkie tale as well as Joseph Jacobs "The Swan Maidens," it is the child who discovers the mother's skin, in this instance at the preacher's house.[30] The man-child relies on his sensory knowledge. Guided by smell, he follows his "wolf-nose" (10). It is in this moment where the identity of the man-child shifts toward wolf-boy. This trust in his own senses is a powerful message that underlies the entire narrative and anticipates the rising action that leads inexorably to liberation. Though the wolf-boy does not have a wolf-skin, he still has wolf senses; he contains an intrinsic energy in the sensate knowledge that comes in his recognition of his true, embodied self. In this case, sensory experience leads to full

[29] Blackie provides a critique of patriarchy in this instance that actually diverges from her feminine focus and gives some space to the harm that patriarchy commits against masculine stereotypes. She engages with the patriarchal belief that men and boys do not, and should not, cry, for it is a sign of weakness, as the hunter here clearly insinuates with his laughter.

[30] I have noted in previous sections that Blackie often fails to interrogate institutionalized patriarchy. However, her critiques of patriarchal religion are worth noting, for they are the only instances in which larger systems of control are implicated in the harm that patriarchy causes. Themes of religious resistance appear in several short stories in her collection.

embodiment. The wolf-boy tells his mother where her skin is, and then the story reaches its

crescendo, the following lines swelling with power and agency, imbued with meaning:

> Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's bones. Say the wolf-woman
> has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's heart. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but
> still has a wolf's eyes (10).

In the Kindle version, these lines appear underlined, denoting that these are popular lines that

have been noted by multiple readers, a feature called Popular Highlights unique to Kindle

editions. This offers a window into how an audience has responded to the tale, demonstrating a

consensus of thought through the emphasis that this is an important juncture in the narrative, and

confirming that the author has succeeded in part of their performance. As the climax unfolds, the

language begins to mirror the opening. We can see, through intentional word choice, the

relationship between the Capture and Liberation motifs, which inversely parallel each other. The

wolf-woman "*creeps* out in the dark" and "*steals* through the window of the preacher's house"

(Emphasis added, 10). Similar word choice (*creeps*, *snatches*) is used to describe the hunter's

theft of the wolf-skin; but now it denotes the skill of the wolf in stealing it back.

    The erotic comes into full force in the reunion with her skin at the denouement of the tale. As

the wolf-woman says the magic phrase, "*Skin on me!*" the "Skin *reaches* for her … *Caresses* her

like a lover, and she *shudders* … Skin *wraps* itself *softly* around her *throat*, loosens her *hurt*

heart" (emphasis added, 11). The word choice and descriptions here are incredibly intentional

and emphasize erotic liberation, the pleasure of the body on full display. The skin becomes an

entity in itself, imbued with life force, so that it may perform actions which explicitly make the

connection to sexual release. There is a strong undercurrent of ecstasy, of fulfillment. It speaks of

what Bacchilega calls an erotic "capacity for joy," as well as the embodied pleasure that comes

when a fractured identity is made whole (2008, 19). The hunter returns from his hunt to find a

wolf and a cub in the kitchen; the wolf "growls and bares its teeth" and the hunter "never saw it coming" (11). In the final lines, the repetition of the laughter sequence is twisted in favor of the wolf, who "gets the last laugh" (11). This fourth rendition in the pattern subverts the three that preceded, and contains the resolution of the story. It is implied in this ending that the wolf-woman kills and perhaps even devours her captor. This reversal directly parallels the capture motif, wherein the hunter "consumes" the maiden under the threat of violence. Blackie, in her interview on the *Embodiment Matters* podcast coyly alludes to this ending, saying "I think this story actually in contemporary times would go a little bit differently" (00:52:20- 00:52:32). In the final lines of the tale, the wolf-woman reclaims her skin and her home, and is even able to restore her child to a wolf as well. When she consumes the hunter, she fulfills yet another transgressive desire. In the twenty-first century, vigilante justice that restores feminine agency and silences forever the patriarchal force which keeps women captive is the ultimate happy ending.

The Power of Voice

The importance and power of voice is particularly present in the allomotifs that appear in Blackie's reimagined tales. In "The Selkie's New Skin," (2016) the selkie uses singing to revive the skins, and in "Wolfskin" it is the wolf-woman's voice that commands the skin back to her. Like the wolf-woman who speaks her wolf stories—stories about who she truly is and where she truly belongs—Blackie calls women to tell their authentic stories and to connect with stories that empower their belonging to the world. In the *Emodiment Matters* podcast, Blackie discusses her short story collection *Foxfire, Wolfskin and Other Tales of Shapeshifting Women*. She uplifts the supernatural figure who "shifted, who changed, who grew, who had voices," with the goal to

"empower women" to "think about how we can reimagine our voices again" (00:50:16-00:50:39). Using self-help books and reimagined fairy tales to engage with themes of femininity and encourage women audiences to integrate traditional tales into their daily lives, Blackie manifests the shapeshifting woman in the twenty-first century, demonstrating the negotiation of ongoing dialogues about gender, feminism, and ecology. Thus, Blackie continues a legacy of women writers engaging with fantasy as a remedy for what they identify as culture's ills. Marina Warner highlights this "strongly marked shift towards fantasy as a model of understanding, as an ingredient in survival" as feelings of "ecological catastrophe gathers momentum, and the need to belong grows ever more rampant … more frustrated" (Warner 1994, 415). Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, mentions this overwhelming feeling of dissociation in the face of global environmental devastation as far back as 1994. Blackie's storytelling is a direct response to this global anxiety, which has only increased since the 90s. Clearly, trends in fairy tale scholarship and publication will continue to touch on these dialogues, these fears, and the fantasies constructed to combat them in the hope for a better future. Storytelling becomes survival when stories allow us to see the world other than it is. Through the alternative possibilities conjured in storytelling, a "mythical hope" is conjured like a magic spell, and in the process "actually builds a mythology in which utopian desires find their place" (1994, 415). In these alternate possibilities, a wolf-woman meets her fairy-tale happy ending with the joy that comes from erotic liberation, and a selkie heals herself, her sisters, and her daughter from generational trauma. The fairy-tale ending is not, in this case, about the union of men and women in marriage, but rather the liberatory power of reconnecting with the self. The wolf-woman restores narrative agency to herself by telling her wolf-stories. The final story she tells the hunter is a wolf-story about her reclaiming her identity and her home from him, a story where she gets the last laugh.

Clearly, voice is an overarching theme in Blackie's self-help books and her reimagined tales. This is not surprising given the goal of Blackie's storytelling: to help women find their lost or stolen voices. It is ultimately through storytelling that healing is enacted, and this, I believe, is one of the powerful takeaways from Blackie's work. Voice—who gets to wield it, and to whom it is denied—invites deep reflection on the nature of storytelling and the transmission of folklore. While Blackie empowers certain marginalized voices, she unfortunately silences others. Traditional tales and the structures that shape them often maintain conventional ways of thinking, while also featuring queer possibilities that inspire new ways of perceiving notions of the body and of belonging. For instance, in the erotic transition from woman into animal, fissures of queer joy can be mined. While Blackie does not necessarily intend the audience to see queerness in the wolf-woman's embrace of her wolfskin, queer possibilities exist nonetheless. In particular, my interpretation sees this act as severing the male/female binary. She splits it apart and clothes herself in a skin that transcends heteronormative conceptions of gender. She exists in the wild, liminal space where the force of possibility dismantles rigid binaries.

Unrestrained Embodiment

Pauline Greenhill and Leah Claire Allen, in *Animal Studies* (2018), seek to "destabilize conventional notions of the human and its discursive centrality" and reference a category of "animal trans fairy tales" which "reveal and then resist the normative social construction of species" (229). Swan-maidens, selkies, and other shapeshifting women fit nicely into this category of "animal trans" tales. When viewed from this angle, we can abandon Blackie's centrality of female biology, can "de-link hierarchical biological categories" that restrict the animal maiden (229). While Blackie would likely agree with Greenhill and Allen's foundational

conception of the human as animal, she is unable to avoid reducing human beings to their biology. While the wonder tale invites scholars to "wander off socially sanctioned paths," Blackie remains on the well-marked paths of the normative, missing a world of wild invitation (Bacchilega 2017, 8). As Jack Halberstam explores in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, the desire for the wild is a "desire for knowledge beyond the human" which is "simultaneously sexual and ecological, tethered to a project of wanting to know how animals want to be in the world and thrumming erotically to the experiences, sexual and nonsexual, of other creatures in the wild" (Halberstam 2020, 79). Halberstam's perspective extends our conversation of desire beyond merely the feminine that Blackie centers her interpretation on, engaging with theories of posthumanism and sexecology. Halberstam understands the wild as a disordering, a "mode of unknowing, a resistant ontology, and a fantasy of life beyond the human" (2020, 8). Indeed, the shapeshifting figure, who desires her non-human form, must go through a process of unbecoming-human in order to become-animal. This unbecoming is central to the "anarchitectures of wildness" (29). While architecture is usually conceived as a building and making, an ordering, Halberstam's "anarchitecture" is an unmaking, unbuilding; it represents resistance and the collapse of order, normative boundaries, and binary oppositions.

A Queer Poetics of Becoming

The shapeshifting woman embodies a resistant ontology as she blurs the boundaries between human/order and animal/wild. In the metamorphic ambiguity of her transformation, she represents what Halberstam defines as an epistemology of the Ferox, a "becoming feral" (2020, 78). The desires implicated in the ferox represent non-normative desires: "These desires are not nice or right, good or true; they are feral and unbound; they long to fly" (78). It is likewise the

acknowledgement that "there are entire systems of knowing, signifying, and desiring that simply exceed the human" (82). Halberstam explains that the wild is so "intensely alluring … that some humans have longed to enter it not as visitors, but as part of it" (77). In an example of queer ecology and the ferox epistemology, Halberstam references *The Peregrine* by J.A. Baker (1967), who writes a love song to the birds he tracks. Baker's story becomes a queer swan maiden tale as he becomes wife to the bird he "pledges to follow" (Halberstam 2020, 82). Queerly unbecoming human, desiring to become bird, Baker "longed to be part of the outward life, to be out there at the edge of things, to let the human taint wash away in emptiness and silence as the fox sloughs his smell into the cold unworldliness of water" (2020, 82-83). His poetics of desire aligns with Bachhilega's claim that wonder "springs from awe and inspires curiosity" as it seeks an embodied transformation (Bachhilega 2017, 8).

There are interesting parallels between this poetics of embodiment and the desire Blackie's protagonist experiences in her short story "Foxfire." In similar fashion to Baker, the protagonist claims the fox she sees in the woods and follows it deeper into the wild. She loses her human self when they lock eyes and "the warmth of her amber melting my cold blue ice" (Blackie 2019, 36). Both quotes reveal the slippery permeability between the human observer and the animal they desire to embody. The protagonist in "Foxfire" explains that this is not merely a love for the fox but that she "wanted to be her" with a longing she had never before experienced, a longing to "be sleek and fast; to be beautiful and fierce, feral and unconstrained. To run wherever I wanted to run, to make my dark home in the belly of the fecund earth, to hunt at dawn in the wildness of a moonlit wood" (2019, 36). These unconstrained desires that resist fixed ontologies awakens the sensory body. The shapeshifting woman's journey into the wild realm, as depicted in Blackie's "Foxfire," echoes the desire to unmake and remake the self, to transcend human constraints. Her

100

longing to shed her human form and embrace her fox identity speaks to the broader narrative of transformation that challenges rigid binaries and conventional ontologies. Just as Baker's yearning to become a bird transcends mere observation and enters a realm of embodied wildness, Blackie's protagonist in "Foxfire" desires to dissolve the boundaries between self and nature. This unbounded embodiment, which rejects human-centered narratives, becomes an act of radical liberation—one that aligns with the queer poetics of becoming.

Speaking the Body Whole

The sensory awakening of the body is also evident in Blackie's "Wolfskin." Even when stripped of her physical wolf form and contained within a woman's skin, the wolf-woman retains her primal senses: "Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's bones. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's heart. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's eyes" (2019, 10). This repetition leads into the climax of the story as the wolf-woman speaks her skin back to her body. The skin "flows all over her, down her back, around her thighs. Skin wraps itself softly around her throat, loosens her hurt heart" (10-11). This moment of re-embodiment speaks to a profound healing from trauma, mirroring the journey of Blackie's selkie protagonist. In my interpretation, the fluidity of this skin represents a process of queer becoming. If queer experience is often framed by the trauma of alienation and the discomfort of inhabiting the wrong body, then this erotic moment (lack liquidated)—of the body flowing into its rightful form and transcending human-made restrictions—resonates with a deep sense of queer liberation.

Blackie's "Wolfskin" reveals the shapeshifter's potential to disrupt and dissolve not only gender binaries but the very idea of a stable, singular identity. Here, the wolf skin is not just a

garment of transformation; it is a reclamation of selfhood that transcends societal expectations. As Greenhill and Allen suggest, these "animal trans" tales offer impactful critique of normative social constructions, inviting us to consider identity as fluid, untamed, and continuously evolving. By embracing the queer potential of these shapeshifting figures, we move beyond Blackie's romanticized and restrictive vision of womanhood and open ourselves to a wilder, more inclusive imagination—one where liberation lies not in returning to roots but in continually reimagining what it means to belong, to desire, and to exist in a world where binaries no longer bind us. While Blackie marginalizes and silences queer perspectives, the tale itself reveals the power of claiming our true skins, of literally speaking the self into existence. Agency through voice—calling the skin back to the body, singing ourselves into wholeness, and telling our stories in ways only we can—is a radical form of resistance against the confines of normative expectations. By asserting this interpretation, I enact my own agency as a reader, transforming the text into a space where queer liberation and self-determination can flourish.

Conclusion

As this thesis draws to a close, it reaffirms the timeless adage that every ending is a new beginning. My journey into the heart of the shapeshifting woman has traversed familiar trails, yet it has also ventured into uncharted territories of wonder and revelation. I end where I began. Off the beaten path, lost somewhere in the fairy tale forest. Being lost, after all, can be a fruitful experience when approached with wonder and curiosity. At the onset, I followed the well-worn paths marked by the scholars who first sought to quantify the mysterious shapeshifting woman of folklore. I approached the topic like Barbara Fass Leavy with an expansive perspective, winding through the immense history of the shapeshifter's manifestations through myth, legend, and fairy

102

tale. I began in the tangled weeds of marital discontent, hacking away at the patriarchal forces that seek to keep the maiden from view, that seek to contain her in domesticity. But along the way, I discovered that she is so much more than just an unhappy wife. I learned that the realm of wonder where she is at home beckons with a greater allure, and calls scholars to "wander off socially sanctioned paths," (Bacchilega 2017, 8). Through her poetics of queer becoming, I have released tidy notions of the body as ordered so as to transcend binary logics and explore her fluidity across boundaries of gender and species. In all cases, the shapeshifting woman is rebellious.

In my journey, I have wondered if I have become the hunter-husband. In my obsession with her true essence, have I caught and contained her? Have I stripped her of her magic robe and forced her to reveal her nakedness to me? I hope that I have not, in this process of dissection, limited her to something all too human and legible. After all, the shapeshifter defies singularity; she cannot be pinned down to one story or one interpretation. Existing in multiplicity, she dwells in the spaces in-between. Her voices are countless, resounding with the rhythms of an ever-changing existence. I have endeavored to amplify the silenced voices and hidden narratives embedded within the infinite possibilities she contains. Along the way, I have seen that she is hidden beneath a palimpsest of interpretations that do not always honor her inherent queerness. To this end, I have followed in Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill and Cristina Bacchilega's call to see wonder tales as queer invitations. I have read "anew and askew" and "against the grain" to reclaim her story, and in the process I have articulated her in my own way, leaving my own "human marks invested with desire" (Zipes 1988, 7).

As I conclude this journey, I find myself not at a definitive end but at a new beginning—a clearing where paths diverge, each inviting further exploration. The shapeshifting woman,

endlessly morphing, has led me down winding trails of narrative, guiding me to question, to reinterpret, and to imagine anew. What I have discovered through the process of writing this thesis is not some definitive essence of the shapeshifting woman but rather an invitation to live with unbound desire, to challenge the normative, and to find and speak my own story into existence. She reminds us that stories are not static artifacts, but are continually reshaped to meet the needs of those who tell and retell them. In the same spirit, this thesis is a story in itself—in the process of telling the shapeshifter's tale, I rewrite her story, creating yet another turn of the kaleidoscope. May this exploration inspire others to wonder and wander, to embrace complexity and ambiguity, and to find new ways to tell stories that truly set us free.

Bibliography

Archambault, Anne. "A Critique of Ecofeminism." *Canadian Woman Studies* 13, no. 3, 1993.

"Authentic (Adj.)." Etymology. Accessed April 17, 2024.

https://www.etymonline.com/word/authentic.

Bacchilega, Cristina. "Where Can Wonder Take Us?" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 28, no.

1 (98) (2017): 6–20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26390187.

Bacchilega, Cristina. "Preface to the Special Issue on Erotic Tales." *Marvels & Tales* 22, no. 1

(2008): 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1353/mat.2008.a247499.

Baker, J. A. (John Alec). The Peregrine. [1st U.S. ed.]. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Barber, Wayland Elizabeth. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years - Women, Cloth, and Society*

in Early Times. Norton (New York), 1994.

Bascom, William R. "Four Functions of Folklore." The *Journal of American Folklore* 67, no.

266 (1954): 333–49. https://doi.org/10.2307/536411.

Blackie, Sharon. "Home." SHARON BLACKIE, September 9, 2024. https://sharonblackie.net/.

Blackie, Sharon. *If Women Rose Rooted: A Life-Changing Journey to Authenticity and*

Belonging. September Publishing, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Blackie, Sharon. *Foxfire, Wolfskin and Other Stories of Shapeshifting Women*. September

Publishing, 2019. Kindle Edition.

Blackie, Sharon. *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life*. Novato, CA: New World

Library, 2022.

Bray, Abigail, and Claire Colebrook. "The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics

of (Dis)Embodiment." Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24, no. 1 (1998):

35–67. https://doi.org/10.1086/495317.

Bronner, Simon J., ed. "The Symbolic Equivalence of Allomotifs: Towards a Method of

    Analyzing Folktales." In *Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*,

    317–24. University Press of Colorado, 2007. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgrzn.21.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed. Novato, Calif: New World Library,

    2008.

Carroll, Valerie Padilla. "Introduction" in *Ecofeminism in Dialogue*, eds. Vakoch, Douglas A.,

    and Sam Mickey. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018.

Conrad, JoAnn. "Narrative Entanglements and Discursive Entrapments." *Narrative Culture* 8,

    no. 1 (2021): 7–20.

Dolby, Sandra K. *Self-Help Books: Why Americans Keep Reading Them*. 1st ed. Champaign:

    University of Illinois Press, 2005.

Dundes, Alan. "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview." *The Journal of American Folklore* 84, no.

    331 (1971): 93–103. https://doi.org/10.2307/539737.

Dundes, Alan. "Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century." In *Grand Theory in Folkloristics*, 3-.

    Indiana University Press, 2016.

Eckersley, Robyn. *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*.

    Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Flodin, Emma. "The Second Skin: A study on the relationship between clothes and human

    bodies." MA Thesis. Stockholms Universitet, 2019.

Franz, Marie-Luise von. *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*. Rev. ed., 1st Shambhala ed. Boston:

    Shambhala, 1993.

Gates, Barbara T. "A Root of Ecofeminism Ecoféminisme." *Interdisciplinary Studies in

    Literature and Environment* 3, no. 1 (1996): 7–16. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/3.1.7.

Geesaman Rabke, Erin, Interview with Sharon Blackie, *Embodiment Matters* Podcast, January

    28, 2020, https://embodimentmatters.com/embodying-an-enchanted-life-with-dr-sharon-

    blackie/

Gordon, Beverly. *Textiles: The Whole Story: Uses, Meanings, Significance*. London: Thames &

    Hudson, 2011.

Gorgosz, Jon E., "The Practice of Pinning and Its Production of Gendered, Idealized Images for

    Women on College Campus in the 1940s, 50s and 60s" (2014). *Southern Illinois*

    University Carbondale. Paper 2. http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/esh_2014/2.

Gorse, Heather. "An Open Letter to Sharon Blackie." Enchantments, October 26, 2022.

https://heathergorse.com/post/699134762728718336/an-open-letter-to-sharon-blackie.

Greenhill, Pauline, and Leah Claire Allen. "Animal Studies." In *The Routledge Companion to*

    Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures, 1st ed., 225–34. Routledge, 2018.

    https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315670997-25.

Grimm, Jacob, Wilhelm Grimm, and Margaret Hunt. *Household Tales by the Brothers Grimm*. S.

    l: The Floating Press, 2011.

Grimm, Jacob, Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, and Andrea Dezsö. *The Original Folk and Fairy*

    Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition. 1st ed. Princeton: Princeton

    University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400851898.

Grodin, Debra. "The Interpreting Audience: The Therapeutics of Self-Help Book Reading."

    Critical Studies in Mass Communication 8, no. 4 (1991): 404–20.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039109366806.

Grodin, Debra. "Women Reading Self-Help: Themes of Separation and Connection." *Women's Studies in Communication* 18, no. 2 (1995): 123–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.1995.11089793.

Haase, Donald, ed. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004.

Haase, Donald. *The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993.

Hatto, A. T. "The Swan Maiden a Folk-Tale of North Eurasian Origin?" Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 24, no. 2 (1961): 326–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00091461.

Halberstam, Jack. *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*. Duke University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012627.

Harris, Anna. "Embodiment." Oxford Bibliographies. 2016. 9780199766567–0151. doi:10.1093/obo/9780199766567-0151.

Inc., Leenkus Technologies. "Origin and Meaning of the First Name Julianne : Etymology and Character Traits." nomorigine.com, January 24, 2024. https://en.nomorigine.com/origin-of-firstname/julianne/.

"Intersex People | Ohchr." Intersex people OHCHR and the human rights of LGBTI people. Accessed April 18, 2024. https://www.ohchr.org/en/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/intersex-people.

Jacobs, Joseph. "Introduction" and "The Swan Maidens." *Europa's Fairy Book: Restored and Retold by Joseph Jacobs*. G.P. Putnam's Sons (New York), 1916.

Jorgensen, Jeana. *Fairy Tales 101 an Accessible Introduction to Fairy Tales* (United States),

    2022.

Jorgensen, Jeana. "The Most Beautiful of All: A Quantitative Approach to Fairy-Tale

    Femininity." The *Journal of American Folklore* 132, no. 523 (2019): 36–60.

    https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.132.523.0036.

Jorgensen, Jeana. "The Thorns of Trauma: Torture, Aftermath, and Healing in Contemporary

    Fairy-Tale Literature." *Humanities* (Basel) 10, no. 1 (2021): 47-.

    https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010047.

Jorgensen, Jeana. "Quantifying the Grimm Corpus: Transgressive and Transformative Bodies in

    the Grimms' Fairy Tales." *Marvels & Tales* 28, no. 1 (2014): 127–41.

    https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.28.1.0127.

Lau, Kimberly. "Girl: Stories on the Way to Feminism" in *A Narrative Compass: Stories That*

    Guide Women's Lives by Hearne, B. G., & Trites, R. S. (2009).. University of Illinois

    Press.

Lawless, Elaine J. "Women as Abject: Resisting Cultural and Religious Myths That Condone

    Violence Againts Women: Document View." *Western Folklore* 62, no. 4 (2003): 237-.

Leavy, Barbara Fass. *In Search of the Swan Maiden a Narrative on Folklore and Gender*. New

    York, NY: New York University Press, 1994. https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814752685.

Lerner, H. "Problems for Profit?" *The Women's Review of Books*, p. 15.

Lundell, Torborg. "Gender-Related Biases in the Type and Motif Indexes of Aarne and

    Thompson." In *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, edited by Ruth

    B. Bottigheimer, 149–64. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986.

    http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1nhz.12.

Lüthi, Max. *Once upon a Time : On the Nature of Fairy Tales*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

Mattoon D'Amore, Laura. "Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions." *Marvels & Tales* , vol. 31, no. 2 (2017): 386-405. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.31.2.0386.

Merriam Webster, s.v. "Embodiment (noun)," accessed May 8, 2024. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/embodiment.

Mori, Camille. "(Dis)embodiment in Psychology and Psychotherapy: A Critical Historical Analysis and Clinical Implications," *Graduate Student Journal of Psychology* (GSJP), vol. 18, Special Issue 2022.

Moskowitz, Eva S. *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Murdock, Maureen. *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*. Shambhala (Boston and London) 1990, p. 2.

NCADV | National Coalition against Domestic Violence. (n.d.). https://ncadv.org/

Nutt, Alfred, and Joseph Jacobs. "Mr. Stuart-Glennie on the Origins of Matriarchy." *Folklore* 2, no. 3 (1891): 367–72. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1253080.

Puhvel, Martin. "The Seal in the Folklore of Northern Europe." *Folklore* (London) 74, no. 1 (1963): 326–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1963.9716898.

Propp, V, and Laurence Scott. *Morphology of the Folktale (1928)* : Second Edition. Edited by Louis A. Wagner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.7560/783911.

lmaxwellscott "Reviews with Content Warning for Transphobia." Review of *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* by Sharon Blackie, The Storygraph, accessed April 18, 2024. https://app.thestorygraph.com/book_reviews/580c6385-29fc-4846-bc8e-d6fdc457043e/content_warning/53.

ursacorn "Reviews with Content Warning for Transphobia." Review of *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* by Sharon Blackie, The Storygraph, accessed April 18, 2024. https://app.thestorygraph.com/book_reviews/580c6385-29fc-4846-bc8e-d6fdc457043e/content_warning/53.

Radner, Joan Newlon. *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Röhrich, Lutz. "Introduction." *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, edited by Ruth B. Bottigheimer, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/lib/mun/detail.action?docID=3442453.

Sidel, Ruth. *On Her Own: Growing up in the Shadow of the American Dream*. New York: Viking, 1990.

Silver, Carole. "'East of the Sun and West of the Moon': Victorians and Fairy Brides." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 6, no. 2 (1987): 283–98. https://doi.org/10.2307/464273.

Simpson, Jacqueline. *Icelandic Folktales and Legends*. Stroud: Tempus, 2004.

Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Expanded edition with a new preface by the author. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Thompson, Stith, 1885-1976. Motif-Index of Folk-Literature; a Classification of Narrative

        Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux,

        Jest-Books, and Local Legends. Bloomington :Indiana University Press, 195558.

Turner, Kay and Pauline Greenhill. *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, eds. Kay Turner

        and Pauline Greenhill, 1st ed. Vol. 9780814338100. Detroit: Wayne State University

        Press, 2012.

Vernon, Ursula. "Jackalope Wives." *Apex Magazine*. 2014. https://apex-magazine.com/short-

        fiction/jackalope-wives/

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd ed., trans. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis A

        Wagner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021.

Warner, Maria. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. New York:

        Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.

Wratislaw, A.H. "Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources." 1890, 290-91.

        https://sacred-texts.com/neu/sfs/sfs72.htm

Young, Serinity. *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females*.

        1st ed. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018.

        https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195307887.001.0001.

Zipes, Jack. *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. Hoboken:

        Routledge, 2006.

Zipes, Jack. "The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 12, no. 2

        (1988): 7-31. https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.0.0236.