

# Political Fairy Tales of the 1930s

*The Intertextual Fairy Tale Collections of  
Peter Davies and Naomi Mitchison*

Helene Hauglund Underdal



A Thesis Presented to The Department of Literature, Area  
Studies and European Languages

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the M.A.  
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# Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to situate the stories of the British fairy tale collections of the 1930s – *The Fairies Return* (1934), compiled by Peter Davies, and *The Fourth Pig* (1936), written by Naomi Mitchison – within their literary context as intertextual fairy tales which comments on political, economic and social issues inherent to the late interwar period. As such, the purpose is to demonstrate how they are not only part of the tradition of subversive fairy tales but also how they stand out as historically and politically specific fairy tales. I argue that while these tales use narrative techniques characteristic of the subversive fairy tale genre, their grounding in the concerns of intermodern literature separates them as uniquely historically and politically specific fairy tales. This thesis will discuss how the authors of the modern fairy tales directly or indirectly challenge their readers to question the morality of the dominant political and social structures of their society by intertextually linking their stories to canonical fairy tales intrinsic to the British cultural consciousness.



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# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. The sociohistorical study of folk and fairy tales and the history of the subversive fairy tale .....	8
III. Utopian and dystopian visions and the fantastic in fairy tales .....	10
IV. Political literature and popular culture of the 1930s .....	13
V. Intertextuality and the intermodern fairy tale: discussions of morality.....	15
1 FAIRY TALES AS DYSTOPIAN WARNINGS OF THE THREAT OF UPRISING POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND FOREIGN INVASION .....	19
1.1 Introduction .....	19
1.1.1 Dystopian portrayals of the consequences of the politics of fear.....	20
1.2 “Jack the Giant Killer” and the Battle Between the Forces of Modern Civilization. 21	
1.2.1 The intertextual origins of the original “Jack the Giant-Killer” .....	22
1.2.2 Jack as trope and national symbol from the eighteenth century to the 1930s ....	24
1.2.3 The giants as political allegory: The meaning of Demos, Kudos, and Osmos ..	27
1.2.4 Working for the Boss: The secondary power play in the shift of leadership .....	33
1.3 The Paralyzing Fear of the Wolf in “The Fourth Pig”: A Dystopian Projection of the Consequences of Pacifism.....	35
1.3.1 The politics of fear and American optimism: “The Three Little Pigs” in popular literature and cinema .....	36
1.3.2 Mitchison’s mission of warning and the issues of genre .....	38
1.3.3 Living with the pacifist inheritance of the famous brothers.....	39
1.3.4 “I am Four, without shelter and without hope”: The song as the last defence... 41	
1.4 Conclusion .....	44
2 THE IMMORALITY OF GREED: FAIRY TALES CHALLENGING SOCIOECONOMIC STRUCTURES .....	45
2.1 Introduction .....	45
2.1.1 Socialism as a morally superior alternative.....	46
2.2 “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”: The Corruptive Powers of the Stock Market .....	47
2.2.1 “Open Sesame”: Magic transported from the Arabian wonder tale to the technology of the modern business world.....	48
2.2.2 The consequences of greed .....	50
2.3 The Ruthlessness of Capitalism: “Hansel and Gretel” as an Allegory of Working Class Struggles .....	53

2.3.1	Instability of income and the plight of the poor from German folktale to 1930s Birmingham.....	54
2.3.2	The hard lesson on good and evil magic: resisting the enchantment of money.	56
2.4	Marxist metamorphosis in “Soria Moria Castle”: Magic, science, and socialism ....	59
2.4.1	The Castle of Norwegian Folklore on the Sands of England.....	61
2.4.2	The three tests: journeys in the moral borderlands of materialism and the dissolution of self .....	63
2.5	Conclusion.....	66
3	MATTERS OF THE HEART: QUESTIONING IDEAS OF LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND GENDER EXPECTATIONS .....	68
3.1	Introduction .....	68
3.1.1	Fairy tale negotiations of marriage norms.....	69
3.2	Love and Career as Incompatible for Women in “The Snow Maiden”.....	70
3.2.1	The girl of snow and the girl with the heart of ice: From Russian folktale to fairy tale play and opera.....	72
3.2.2	A tale of social pressure and the ideal of domestication .....	75
3.3	Satirizing Sexual and Marital Morals in “O If I Could But Shiver!” .....	78
3.3.1	Grimm’s anecdote of horror and its fearless youth .....	80
3.3.2	Ludd of the 1930s.....	83
3.4	Transcending the “Cinderella” Myth.....	86
3.4.1	Subverting bourgeois notions of society and gender: intertextual links to Perrault and the Brothers Grimm .....	88
3.4.2	A new Cinderella: breaking with the cultural mythology .....	91
3.5	Conclusion.....	93
4	CONCLUSION .....	95
	WORKS CITED.....	99





# INTRODUCTION

Folk and fairy tales have forever been told and retold; as organic cultural modes, they have been repeatedly reworked, modernised, and adapted to fit the expression the storyteller has wished to make. Throughout the last millennia, the cultural status of the genre has continually shifted as it progressed from being a predominantly oral folk narrative to inspiring the inventions of the literary fairy tale and the incorporation into high art. However, by the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s, it was feared that socio-economic changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the harrowing impact of the First World War had shattered the potential for innovation in the old literary genres. Rather, as Maria Tatar writes, it was believed that the experience of the post-war world could only be justly told through the introspective techniques of modernism – what Walter Benjamin identifies as “the great shift from an era which narrated lived experience to the age of information.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there were some in England who ventured to use the fairy tale form in innovative and subversive ways, who wrote tales for adult audiences that challenged the establishment and their values. Through the work of acclaimed fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes and his *Oddly Modern Fairy Tales* series, two British collections from the 1930s containing fairy tales have been unearthed and republished during the last five years. It will be these which form the basis of this thesis: *The Fairies Return: Or, New Tales for Old* compiled by Peter Davies, first published in 1934, republished in 2012; and Naomi Mitchison’s 1936 *The Fourth Pig*, republished in 2014.

Advertised as “a collection of well-known fairy stories retold for grownups in a modern setting,” Editor Peter Llewelyn Davies’ *The Fairies Return: Or, New Tales for Old* is a compilation of 15 (14 in the recent edition) rewritten fairy tales by as many authors. Adapted from tales geographically hailing from the Middle East, Germany, France, Denmark, and England, the tales were chosen on grounds of their adoption into British fairy tale canon. Specifically British versions of the international tales formed part of the nation’s collective consciousness through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century folk and fairy tale books from collectors and translators such as Joseph Jacobs, James Orchard Halliwell, and Andrew Lang. All of the modern tales are linked intertextually to classical tales through their titles, which explicitly reference their “origin” stories. And so, it is “With reverent apologies to the memory of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Andersen, and the authors of *The Thousand and One*

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<sup>1</sup> Tatar, Maria. “Introduction.” In *The Fairies Return: Or New Tales for Old*. Ed. Peter Davies and Maria Tatar. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 3-4

*Nights &c.*,” as the title page proclaims, that the many artistic minds involved re-imagine characters and plots in a modern setting dealing with modern concerns. As such, they can challenge their readers by changing characters and plots which are not only part of the adult readers’ childhood nostalgia but are deeply ingrained in the narratives which constitutes the social norms they live by.

When the author’s thus write their modern tales about their current social and political issues they take on the role of fairies, the magical rebels of English folklore, the mischief-makers, returned to lure you into their other world where reality is turned on its head. Creating a mirror image of the Western world that allows for the fantastic elements in fairy tales to manipulate, enhance, and invert the familiar, the collection works to disrupt the reader’s expectations and to reveal how the narratives that inform worldviews and social patterns are constructed in the same way as are fictional narratives. In this way it is the storyteller as found in the folk tales which has returned, the oral teller who allowed for the people to transcend their confinement within feudal society and provided an alternative ending which reflected their aspirations.<sup>2</sup> While the power relations of society has changed in the development from feudal to industrial and capitalist society, this strategy still remains a powerful reflection of the people’s wants and needs. Used in a modern setting it involves a recognition that despite the changed nature of social hierarchy the old ways of unfolding patterns of oppression are still valuable instruments for explaining the new.

However, the modern tales of *The Fairies Return* have attained a satirical and cynical sting, giving us either similar endings which happy or unhappy show how the traditional narratives would translate in 1930s society, or new endings which portray alternative wish-fulfilments to those which are found in the original tales. Thus, the vanity of Snow White’s stepmother is cultivated by a gramophone which tells of her unparalleled beauty, until one day it changes its tune, prompting her to concoct a murderous plot to eliminate Blanche, as she is called here, ultimately causing a scandal which not only plummets the stepmother from her social standing but the stepdaughter as well.<sup>3</sup> Moira Cloca-dearg, the contemporary Irish equivalent of Little Red Riding Hood, is tempted by fairy foxes luring her towards their magical realm, but here Cornelius Wolfe is not the sexual predator of the Grimm tale but

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<sup>2</sup> Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2012. Page 8

<sup>3</sup> Dunsany, Lord. “Little Snow-White.” In *The Fairies Return: Or New Tales for Old*. Ed. Peter Davies and Maria Tatar. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 121-136

rather the rescuer whose embrace secures her in the acceptable sexual bond of marriage which ultimately brings her from nature to culture, the meaning of which remains ambiguous.<sup>4</sup>

The sole author of the second collection that this thesis is involved with, *The Fourth Pig*, Naomi Mitchison linked her collection of short stories, poems, and a play, intertextually to international fairy tales and British fairy lore while dealing with highly political and psychological subjects. The collection can be divided into two parts, where the first, which will be the subject of this thesis, is marked by fairy tale rewritings and mythological motifs linked to socio-economic conditions, while the second part largely consists of fairy stories which delves into questions of personal autonomy and identity. A highly experimental author, Mitchison has increasingly been given more attention as the vast array of genres and styles she was involved with has gained academic acclaim, finally becoming acknowledged for her polemic work during the interwar with the scholarly effort to undo the neglect of much of women's writing of the period. Despite her upper class background she was an avid believer in the socialist cause, as well as the feminist, becoming increasingly political during the latter part of the interwar era. An avid participant on the political scene, Mitchison also channelled her activism through her writing of both fiction and essays; as Jenni Calder reveals, she most often wrote to promote a cause, emphatically believing in the necessity "to propel others in the same direction."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the renewed interest in literature of the political vein which Mitchison was part of – with the postmodern recognition of the value of the experience and the convictions propagated in non-modernist texts – *The Fourth Pig* has not been given such treatment, and, as with Davies' collection, the reasons are many and will be dealt with throughout this introduction. One reason could perhaps be attributed to Mitchison herself. The very favourable literary reputation she enjoyed early in her career was due to her mastery of the historical genre, with several successful historical novels, short stories and poems, of which *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* from 1930 remain a classic. Her fiction was firmly anchored in a thorough understanding of the ancient civilizations and mythologies, which she successfully infused with radical ideas and topics to discuss contemporary issues in light of established discourses. In 1935 her first attempt to write a novel of her own time was published, *We Have Been Warned*, prompted by the urgency to properly reflect modern

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<sup>4</sup> Somerville, E.Æ. "Little Red Riding-Hood." In *The Fairies Return: Or New Tales for Old*. Ed. Peter Davies and Maria Tatar. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 249-270

<sup>5</sup> Calder, Jenni. *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*. London: Virago Press. 1997. Page 92

issues. It failed miserably, chiefly because the frank discussions of sexual and political matters which had been accepted in the context of a barbaric ancient world became too shocking in a contemporary setting which dealt with the lives of privileged members of high society, and politicians at that.<sup>6</sup>

But even though *The Fourth Pig* might have taken a blow from this controversy as it was published only a year later, I would contend that the experience sheds light on how the collection came to be made and how it attained its distinct form - that is, why the fairy tale genre fit the impression Mitchison wished to make on readers. A more subtle expression than the radical *We Have Been Warned*, *The Fourth Pig* is aimed at working class, (lower) middle class, and socialist audiences, and deals with subjects such as poor working conditions and the exploitation of the poor, the lack of public freedom for women, and the growing political tensions and the threat of war. Like the stories of Davies' collection, Mitchison's tales are set in the present and/or the recognizable world, and while the short story format was one she was well versed in she was very self-conscious about writing about her own time, noting in 1932: "When I write about modern things people will find out I don't know anything really... the thing I can do is put descriptions of ordinary things into vivid words, so they stand out and make people jump, but that's not good enough."<sup>7</sup> The criticism that is found against the stories in *The Fourth Pig* reflect an aspect of what she seems to fear in this quote, namely that without the historical backdrop the artistic rendering of her social commentary reduces its status as art: professor Samuel Alexander, who figured in a mentor role to her, argued that the stories would be "more elegant as poems," as Mitchison recalls in her autobiography; her biographer, Jenni Calder, deems them too overt in her short description of Mitchison's contemporary short stories, suggesting that "a more subtle, less didactic medium could have made them more powerful."<sup>8</sup>

However, I argue for one that it is exactly this act of unsettling the ordinary, putting it "into vivid words" as Mitchison said, which makes these stories effective because it is the instrument which allows for subversion – a central point to this thesis which will be discussed further throughout the introduction; secondly, their medium, the fairy tale, is chosen

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<sup>6</sup> Maslen, Elizabeth. "Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction". In *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*. Ed. Maroula Joannou. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1999. Pages 143-144. It should be noted that while the novel suffers under some formal weaknesses, *We Have Been Warned* has been reclaimed by postmodern academics as an example of a unique socialist and feminist dystopian reflection of the 1930s (see the works of Montefiore and Lassner referenced in the works cited).

<sup>7</sup> Calder: 120-121

<sup>8</sup> Calder: 133-134



specifically for its overtness. To start to explain why the fairy tale form is used rather than poetry, an issue that concerns both of the collections with which this thesis is occupied, one can begin to look at the different effects which prose and poetry produce. As Umberto Eco stated: "In poetry it is the choice of expression that determines the content, whereas in prose it is the opposite; it is the world the author chooses, the events that happen in it, that dictate its rhythm, style, and even verbal choices."<sup>9</sup> When it comes to the prose genre, I contend that Mitchison's ideas and her urgency to share them greatly benefit from the short story form as opposed to the novel: as Elizabeth Bowen writes, the short story entails "necessariness;" put forth from an impression or conviction which remains at its core throughout, the short story must be executed with poetic tautness adding nothing which does not serve the core idea.<sup>10</sup> As such, by fragmenting her ideas into the segments of her collection they become crystallized, the short form leaving the reader of an immediate impression of the story's issue which "may continue in the mind", defying "the novel's conclusiveness", to use Bowen's phrases.

For Mitchison, form takes centre stage because she clearly identifies the connections between class sensitivities and literary language and genre, and, as Elizabeth Maslen puts it, she "successfully demonstrates an impressive ability to alter her style according to the effect she is aiming for."<sup>11</sup> As this thesis will discuss, Mitchison as storyteller aims to inhabit the particular world of her audience, whether high or low brow, showing great sympathy for their way of seeing the world even as she subverts and challenges the basis of their moral. In a brief review of the collection, Howard Spring touches upon the very core of what these fairy tales represent when he says that "interfused with them is a love of men and women and a hatred of those who exploit and degrade them" – in short, though setting her stories in a modern world Mitchison has been true to the power that lies at the heart of the fairy tale.<sup>12</sup>

In the established narrative of fairy tale retellings for adults, the tradition in English literature begins with postmodernism and the radical tales of the feminist writers from the 1970s onward; at the same time, the Victorian and the Edwardian eras are considered the starting point of subversive fairy tales and fantasy for children with authors such as Oscar Wilde and Andrew MacDonal. However, it is my contention that a focus on the subversive tales for adults of the modernist era can prove a valuable insight into an earlier use of the

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<sup>9</sup> Eco, Umberto. *On Literature*. Secker & Warburg. 2005. Page 313

<sup>10</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. "The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories." In *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 1994. Page 256-261

<sup>11</sup> Maslen: 145-146

<sup>12</sup> Spring, Howard. "The Fourth Pig (stories)." In *The Moral Basis of Politics*. Naomi Mitchison. London: Constable & Co Ltd. 1938. Page ii

mode as a way of conveying meditations on socio-political issues. Additionally, it sheds light on a unique branch of the political literature of the 1930s and the era's singular approach to strategies of subversion with the use of satire, the fantastic, and, in this case, the fairy tale. It is important to note, as Janet Montefiore discusses in her chapter on "Remembering the 1930s", that the memories of 30s was established even before the decade was over – and that the use of the plural "memories" is apt, for there is still "no universally accepted version of English political history during these years."<sup>13</sup> To define an era marked by the growth of various ideological convictions of truth is near impossible, and unfortunately much of the academic reflections on the decade is coloured both by the development into the Second World War, as well as by deeply prejudiced recordings of what was deemed canonical literature in the Post-war era. What will be important here then, is to establish the literary streams which are reflected in the fairy tales of the 1930s to situate them within literary traditions while simultaneously exploring the differences which sets them apart from what have been perceived as canonical literature, and which consequently might explain their alienation.

The tradition of subversive fairy tales speaks to how the genre is an especially well suited mode for expressing writers' political convictions when they can use intertextuality to play off of the didactic moral foundations of the classic tales, but still the modern fairy tales of the 1930s do stand out as overt in comparison to much of the later intertextual fairy tales in the postmodern vein. They *are* time capsules, as the Boston Globe review points out, but where the reviewer finds this a weakness I hold that there is strength in their unique perspective and insight into what I would consider a unique period. Their investment in their own time and its problems is typical of the 1930s and are therefore valuable testaments to how the fairy tale form can be used in periods of great political tumult.<sup>14</sup> The stories of Mitchison's and Davies' collections stand to show how authors can consciously chose their medium and style to reach audiences which are not part of the dominant cultural movements, people who out of lack of representation are all too often swept up into violent authoritarian ideologies. In the case of these modern fairy tales, the use of the folk genres conveys through the familiar narrative instruments of fairy tale structure and magic what the author's thinks is in their audience's

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<sup>13</sup> Montefiore, Janet. *Men and Women Writers of the 1930's: The Dangerous Flood of History*. London and New York: Routledge. 1996. Page 8

<sup>14</sup> Wilensky-Lanford, Brook. "'The Fairies Return: Or New Tales for Old,' compiled by Peter Davies and 'From the Forest' by Sara Maitland." *The Boston Globe*. 10.11.12.  
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2012/11/10/review-sara-fairies-return-maitland-tales-for-old-compiled-peter-davies-and-from-forest-search-for-hidden-roots-our-fairytales/MdDxZHA6Hqf4PzsIS7NO0L/story.html>

interest; to use both comedy and tragedy to enhance and in that way persuade the reader of the injustices they themselves or others suffer. As we know, history has a way of repeating itself; the past often offers valuable parables to the issues of today, and now as during the 1930s we are experiencing substantial changes and ruptures in the political landscapes. Many of the political and social issues the modern fairy tales are involved with are unfortunately to some degree issues today, and though the technologies and industries portrayed might be outdated the continuing relevance of their themes might still offer insight for their intended audiences.

The purpose of the thesis is to situate the tales within their contexts as fairy tales and as political short stories, to demonstrate how they are not only part of the tradition of subversive fairy tales but also how they stand out as historically and politically specific fairy tales. In choosing the subjects for discussion, I wanted to delve into issues linked to major political, economic and social movements in 1930s Britain. The eight stories I have determined to focus on – four from *The Fairies Return* and four from *The Fourth Pig* – represent three areas of political debate, which several of the authors were actively involved with. Chapter 1 will discuss A.E. Coppard’s “Jack the Giant Killer” and Mitchison’s “The Fourth Pig,” and their portrayal of the threat posed by the expanding political ideologies and the passivity of the government in the face of the prospects of a new war. Chapter 2 will be involved with socio-economic issues, as I will discuss the portrayal of the motif of the immorality of an economical structure which fosters greed in A.G. Macdonnell’s “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and Mitchison’s “Hansel and Gretel” and “Soria Moria Castle.” Lastly, chapter 3 will discuss how Mitchison’s “The Snow Maiden,” Christina Stead’s “O If I Could But Shiver!” and Robert Speaight’s “Cinderella” depict aspects of the marriage debate of the 1930s to question marital traditions and their gendered expectations.<sup>15</sup>

As will be discussed further below, all these fairy tales are in one way or another involved with issues of morality when they cast their shadow of ambiguity over socially accepted rules and norms. As intertextual fairy tales built upon the narrative grounds of fairy tales deeply embedded in British cultural consciousness, it is necessary for me to establish their relation to their sources and the moral these stories purport. After all, the original canonical versions of the modern tales are part of a movement to infuse them with Christian and middle class, or bourgeois, morality when they were written or rewritten from folktale material by Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, etc. The discussion of the narrative similarities and dissimilarities will work to expand and, where possible, to add information which can shed

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<sup>15</sup> The references to these stories can be found within the respective chapter in which they will be discussed.

more light on the effect of the modern fairy tales. I will refer to the tales which the modern tales intertextually build upon as the “original” tales, though I of course acknowledge that the popularized versions recorded by the Grimm’s, Perrault etc. are reworks themselves. In order to clarify the discussions of the chapters it is first necessary to introduce the various contexts which the fairy tales and the authors are involved with, both to showcase how they are unique to their literary and socio-political period and within the tradition of subversive intertextual fairy tales. The remainder of this introduction will therefore be invested in displaying how these modes – fairy tales, the fantastic, political literature, and intertextuality – work to subvert dominant ideologies and social mores.

## **II. The sociohistorical study of folk and fairy tales and the history of the subversive fairy tale**

With his 1979 book *Breaking the Magic Spell*, Jack Zipes introduced the methods of analysing folk and fairy tales through a sociohistorical lens to Anglo-American scholarship, contributing to internationalize the primarily Germany based movement which materialized in the 1960’s and 70’s.<sup>16</sup> Subtitled “Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales,” the book presented a cross disciplinary theory which breached the traditional separation of folklorist and literary studies. Zipes argued for a move away from the notion of the “pure” folk tale and thus, as Haase puts it, “provide[d] an interdisciplinary model of sociohistorical and cultural analysis that explains and illuminates the fairy tale in all its manifestations throughout history.” His theories are important for this thesis because the intertextual, subversive fairy tales which will be the focus of my study position themselves in a socio-historical context in order to say something about the social conditions of their own time, and it is therefore necessary to read them in comparison to their originals and the political and social forces which shaped the dominant discourses the tales are in one way or another dealing with.

As the first modernist fairy tale collections in Britain, *The Fairies Return* and *The Fourth Pig* was an effort to bring the fairy tale back from the dead, making an archaic remnant of the past relevant once more by rediscovering the power of the pre-capitalist folk and fairy tales to reflect the life of the masses and their eternal struggle to survive.<sup>17</sup> The subversive tradition

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<sup>16</sup> Haase, Donald. “Preface to the Special Issue on ‘Jack Zipes and the Sociohistorical Study of Fairy Tales.’” *Marvels & Tales*, Volume 16, Number 2. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press. 2002. Pages 127-129

<sup>17</sup> Zipes FTAS: 8-9

the 1930s fairy tales took part in rose as an opposition and challenge against the “recodification of the [folk] material to make it more suitable for discursive requirements of French court society and the bourgeois salons.” As the Grimm Brothers’ reinvented the genre into predominantly nursery literature in Germany, the focus was shifted onto children’s moral education, moulding the tales to propagate bourgeois or elite cultural values and providing them with moralistic endings (often referred to as the *bourgeoisification* of folk and fairy tales).<sup>18</sup> In the Victorian period in England, the formulary structure of the fairy tale and the joyful magic of fairy mythology fed into the need for stability and escape, as Zipes puts it, “to compensate some of the ill effect of industrial regulation and rationalization brought on by the rise of capitalism.” The tales were stripped of their violent and sexual content, functioning to alleviate tension of alienation through magical wish fulfilment and moral indoctrination - anyone can achieve anything if only they behave in the right way and do not stray from their class appropriate path.

When the fairy tale was reinvented in subversive ways to question these dominant values, authors found in the folk tale the narrative tools for destabilizing the logic behind the oppressive structures of society. In 1923, Edwin Hoernle argued for the inevitable return of the fairy tale as a proletarian form of social criticism, saying:

“The thoughts and emotions of the masses are mirrored here most simply and therefore are most clear. Capitalism with its destruction of the family and its mechanization of working human beings annihilated this old “popular art” (Volkskunst) of telling tales. The proletariat will create the new fairy tales in which workers’ struggles, their lives, and their ideas are reflected and correspond to the degree to which they demonstrate how they can become human time and again, and how they can build up new educational societies in place of the decrepit old ones.”<sup>19</sup>

With the rise of Marxism, it became clear to the adherents of the political theory that it was necessary to face the ugly truth of reality and to challenge the social contradictions which dictated working class life if conditions were to be improved. During the German Weimar period, Hoernle’s prediction seemed to materialize as socialists grasped at the form as the

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<sup>18</sup> Zipes, Jack. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky. 2002. Page 17

<sup>19</sup> Zipes FTAS: 139-140 (Zipes’ translation)

perfect tool to spread their message to radically overturn the bourgeoisification of folk and fairy tales.

However, in Germany, where folklore was historically an even more integrated part of modern culture and society than in Britain, “the battle over fairy-tale discourse,” to use Zipes’ term, between Weimar and Nazi culture during the interwar period saw the latter as the victor after Hitler’s succession to power in 1933.<sup>20</sup> As Zipes writes, because the Nazi’s recognised the potential for social criticism which the fairy tales offered for radical writers, they quickly established their own policy towards folk and fairy tales which weaponized the folktales as means of maintaining status quo. The Nazis mutated the unifying nationalistic impulse in folklore tradition that had begun with the idealization of the folk by the bourgeois into xenophobic reinterpretations of existing folk and fairy tales to serve the creational myth of the superiority of the Nordic peoples and the Aryan model citizen.<sup>21</sup> The writing of new British tales during the very first years of the establishing of the Third Reich after the quenching of the subversive tales of the Weimar authors reads like a picking up of the torch for the anti-authoritarian fairy tale. With their gritty and dark realism, their explicit and humorous renderings of the ugliness of industrial society, social conditions, and sexual frankness, they challenge both the status quo and the developments they fear for the future.

### **III. Utopian and dystopian visions and the fantastic in fairy tales**

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson argues that literary fantasy is necessarily produced within the social context of the author because it “attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints; it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.”<sup>22</sup> When juxtaposing the real and the unreal, a narrative can make possible the desires which are inhibited by reality – that is the laws and the dominant value systems which police us – by the telling of the excursion into disorder, thus making visible the structures behind the dominant cultural order which silences the desires of those outside the dominant social sphere. Folk and fairy tales, as Zipes puts it,

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<sup>20</sup> Zipes FTAS: 136-138

<sup>21</sup> As Zipes writes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (page 142), Nazi scholar G. Grenz interpreted “Cinderella” as a tale about the victory of the Aryan race where two “suitable specimens” would find each other and procreated because of the prince’s instinct, “the voice of his blood” leads him to Cinderella, who the prince has identified as a worthy bride.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Art of Subversion*. London and New York: Methuen & Co. 1981. Pages 3-8

“interrogate the lack of correlation between real world practises and ethical idealistic options,” and the magic of the tales lies in the visibility of the difference between the real and the unreal which the fantastic can create.<sup>23</sup> Like Zipes, Jackson is concerned with extending the study of fantasy to include its politics rather than only its poetics, at the same time as she incorporates Freudian psychoanalysis to explain how the fantastic as expressions of desire plays out the “tension between the ‘laws of human society’ and the resistance of the unconscious mind to those laws.” As she explains, there is nothing arbitrary nor transcendental in the fantastic: “It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new,’ absolutely ‘other’ and different.”

What is important in Jackson’s study, as well as to this thesis, is to differentiate between the manifestations fantastic representations of desire can take in the form of utopias. However, utopian ideas are a controversial subject; as M. Keith Bookers explains in his book *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, it has for a long time been debated whether or not utopian thinking is a valuable asset to real world political progress, and especially within the field of Marxism.<sup>24</sup> Karl Mannheim argued that utopian energies functioned in a dichotomous relation to ideological energies, with the former as a catalyst for change while the latter works to maintain status quo. In its quality as a vision of any desirable future, many critics have been weary of utopias’ links to “nostalgia, conservatism, and a desire to escape from the contingency of history” – indeed, any formation of an ideal future, including totalitarian and xenophobic ideologies, are utopian by nature – but recognizing these negative aspects, Frederic Jameson maintains that to envision a utopian end is necessary to inspire political activity in the present. As Jack Zipes shows, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, who wrote about the utopian aspects of the fairy tale during the interwar period, stressed the fact that utopian visions in folk tales “subverts the arbitrary use of reason that destroys and confines the capacity of people to move on their own as autonomous makers of history”; rather than providing plans for an ideal future, the utopian aspect lies in their quality as indicators of action, “anticipatory illusions” as Bloch termed them, which mirrors revolutionary processes through the use of the fantastic.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Zipes FTAS: xiii

<sup>24</sup> Booker, M. Keith. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*. Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press. 1994. Pages 1-13

<sup>25</sup> Zipes BMS: 156-157

Historically, this revolutionary aspect of utopian ideas has been prominent in times coloured by great optimism in scientific progress and its potential to bring about social improvement. However, as Booker points out, such a view clashes with another key feature of utopianism, the desire for stability, and critics have therefore argued that in this capacity utopianism greatly taps into an atavistic impulse which directly oppose science. The turn in modern times towards dystopia (or alternatively anti-utopia) originates in this opposition and the wish to turn away from atavism, as well as in a growing ambivalence towards scientific and technological advances as it became evident that this progress was used to dominate and control not only nature but people. Enlightenment rationality and its notion of reality became questioned, with Nietzsche and Heidegger as pioneering the view that art can be weaponized against the dehumanizing structures of reality, while Freud professed that he doubted that humanity were ever going to be able to move beyond our history, and that the oppressive social patterns of the past is a collective neurosis which we will forever be doomed to reproduce.

Whether or not this proves true, literary utopias and dystopias, like the fantastic, function only in relation to reality and to the past: quoting Gary Saul Morson, Booker writes “whereas utopias describe an escape *from* history, these anti-utopias describe an escape, or attempted escape, *to* history, which is to say, to the world of contingency, conflict and uncertainty.” However, as Booker goes on to argue, utopias and dystopias are not necessarily antithetical, and can in fact function as part of the same project; often there are traces of one in the other, as utopias carry in them misgivings about the present social and political order which they propose to change for the better, and dystopian presentations of “‘bad’ utopias still allow for the possibility of ‘good’ utopias” by inherently suggesting a positive opposite to the negative vision.<sup>26</sup> As overtly political texts, the modern fairy tales of *The Fairies Return* and *The Fourth Pig* exist within this cross-section of utopias and dystopias in their presentations of their distorted mirror images of real society, and as this thesis will discuss, it is in these distortions – in their positive, negative, or ambiguous re-representations of their intertextual sources – that their will for social change, their anti-atavism, is manifested.

According to Booker, the power of dystopian fiction as social criticism lies in its key technique, defamiliarization, which subverts utopian visions and questions their idealism by using spatial and/or temporal distance to juxtapose extreme eventualities of developments

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<sup>26</sup> Booker: 15



taken for granted in the present.<sup>27</sup> As such, dystopian subversion of reason, the driving force to maintain the social order, is involved with similar techniques and purposes as the fantastic and fairy tales. Though only a few of the fairy tales dealt with in this thesis show clear signs of dystopian involvement most contain at their core a dystopian scepticism of the future. It will be essential to explore the modern fairy tales' involvement with utopian and dystopian impulses to understand the mechanisms behind their subversions. I argue that the modern tales rearranges politics to present alternative desirable structures in order to serve the interest of the people, including the proletariat, rather than serve atavistic dominant ideologies. Thus, they align themselves with both the revolutionary aspects of utopian visions which Bloch identified in folk tales while taking part of the literary movement of modern dystopian concerns.

#### **IV. Political literature and popular culture of the 1930s**

The increase in dystopian narratives during the 1930s is no coincidence: when the optimistic 20s ended in economic depression and a substantial growth of fascist support across Europe, people were disillusioned with their democratic governments' ability to realize their vision of the ideal society. The scepticism of the possibility, and even the desirability, of utopias which lies at the heart of dystopian literature answers to this "decline in political faith," to borrow Judith Shklar's term.<sup>28</sup> As Eric Hobsbawm writes, politics had dominated the "high arts" throughout what he calls the age of catastrophe, which he dates between 1914 and 1945, reaching Britain, which was still regarded as a "haven of social and political stability" as opposed to their neighbours on the continent, in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Writers began to forgo "the standard literary-critical assumption that politics and literature shouldn't mix," as Montefiore puts it, challenging its reader with a "direct political interrogation."<sup>30</sup> Critic Kristin Bluemel has offered the term "intermodernism" to fathom this literary political activism, to shed light on the often neglected body of work which has long stood in modernism's shadow.<sup>31</sup> Where modernism focused on stylistic features such as form and language, intermodernism encompasses the broad array of works which focused primarily on

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<sup>27</sup> Booker: 19

<sup>28</sup> Booker: 16

<sup>29</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. London: Abacus. 1995. Page 186

<sup>30</sup> Montefiore: 4

<sup>31</sup> Bluemel, Kristin. "Introduction: What is Intermodernism?" In ed. Kristin Bluemel, *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2009. Pages 1-5

the idea of a literary responsibility towards the people. To define the term, Bluemel offers three criteria for

the manifestations and implications of such intermodern responsibility [...]: cultural features (intermodernists typically represent working-class or working middle-class cultures); political features (intermodernists are often politically radical, ‘radically eccentric’); and literary features (intermodernists are committed to non-canonical, even ‘middlebrow’ or ‘mass’ genres).

The intention behind the project of defining intermodernism as a literary ideology separate from modernism is to retroactively acknowledge and validate the literature which are involved with these three features, and whether or not the term itself will become upheld its criteria stands as a valuable summary to the critical work that has been done over the last decades to map out the full extent of interwar culture. Moreover, I recognize that these features are highly applicable to the modern fairy tales of Davies’ and Mitchison’s collections: while some of the authors, notably including Mitchison, do not have working class backgrounds their literature are substantially class conscious; further, the fairy tale is in itself a lowbrow genre in their function as children’s literature, but, as we will see, the modern fairy tales are further involved with popular culture with their frequent references to the film industry. I will therefore use this term to indicate literature which comes under these criteria during my thesis.

An interesting aspect to explore in intermodern literature, as Elizabeth Maslen has pointed out, is the decisions writers, and especially women writers, made about their fiction; how they utilized a vast array of narrative techniques and voices, genres and form, and how they positioned their work between art and politics in order to successfully reach their target audience and transmit their message.<sup>32</sup> Such a technical feature that was frequently used was Aesopian language, so termed by radical Russian writers to avoid censorship in the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, a style of writing which provided entertainment on one level of the story while leaving hints that it “could be read at another, subversive or polemic level,” as Maslen writes, by the stories’ intended readers. To use the example of Mitchison’s experimentation with genres as mentioned above, where *We Have Been Warned* failed because it was too overtly radical, the fiction which harked back to an ancient world or

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<sup>32</sup> Maslen: 138-140

literary form was more tolerable because it offered a level of conservatism which cloaked a second layer of radicalism, taking care to persuade the reader without alienating her.

An aspect unique to *The Fairies Return* to a greater extent than in *The Fourth Pig* is the merging of the fairy tale with political satire. In her introduction to the 2012 edition, Maria Tatar argues that though satire is invested in politics of a specific time and society in a way that the folk and fairy tales are not, their shared juxtaposition of extreme versions of real oppositions, of their insistence on the clearly good and evil sides of political and social conflict.<sup>33</sup> As Reed Way Dasenbrock shows, “[a]s the Great Depression arrived, as fascism and communism grew in power, and World War II approached, the satiric tradition in English literature took a different turn, towards the visionary of utopian, in which the moral stance of the author and the basis of her condemnation of what she depicted was crystal clear.”<sup>34</sup> The success of satirical fiction based in utopian and dystopian visions both in their own time and later, argues Dasenbrock, is “because they have responded immediately and memorably to major historical anxieties.” During the 1930s, the purpose of Left-wing writers was to tell the truth, and one of their strategies to do so, according to Montefiore, was “by satires which might border on the fantastic in order to sharpen the attack on real targets.”<sup>35</sup> In the modern fairy tales of Davies’ collection, the satire works in a similar manner to the folk tale mode which the tales are intertextually linked to, being reassuring in its ordering of a complex political climate into a clear binary opposite of good and bad – or interestingly, as Tatar points out, to do exactly the opposite, providing an open ended and ambiguous tales where extreme exaggerations reveals the contradictions in or even the irrationality of the ideologies we live.

## **V. Intertextuality and the intermodern fairy tale: discussions of morality**

What made the appropriation of folk tale possible, as Zipes has shown, was that its form and discourses became approved as framework for the literary fairy tale, first as a bourgeois and secondly as an aristocratic art form, as the romanticising and incorporation of folk culture

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<sup>33</sup> Tatar I: 5

<sup>34</sup> Dasenbrock, Reed Way. “An Absurd Century: Varieties of Satire.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel*. Ed. Robert L. Caserio. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009. Pages 246-247

<sup>35</sup> Montefiore: 144

became an accepted narrative tool in new literary conversations.<sup>36</sup> When changing the setting from the feudal heroic world idealized by the bourgeois to the modern world and the interwar context, the author's seeks to accurately mirror specific issues which resonate with modern readers while still reflecting a link between the new power structures and the old by retaining allusions to the familiar folk tale mode. By way of intertextuality, authors can construct reader expectations based on preconceived knowledge of the explicitly or implicitly embedded references to other texts within a narrative, and, as Knoepflmacher observes, in the making of the literary fairy tale dissociation and association coincide, forcing fresh perspectives.<sup>37</sup> The values and morals found in fairy tales which have become ossified social and literary conventions can be subverted and inverted through dissociation when a familiar narrative are given other meanings than those the reader anticipates.

Intertextuality is thus a frame of literary reference, a direct or indirect link to pre-existing text which when used in a self-conscious manner can demonstrate the continuation and/or disruption of a common theme, motif, etc. The intertextual use of canonical fairy tales by the authors of *The Fairies Return* and *The Fourth Pig*, I contend, works much like Aesopian language which, as Maslen showed, provides one level of entertainment while hinting at a secondary polemic level – though some of the stories does not so much as hint as blankly state their secondary purpose. Intertextuality, as with Aesopian language and the spatial/temporal distortions of historical and science fiction, is used as a tool to make radical ideas acceptable to conservative readers by creating enough distance between the reader's reality and the text's while still maintaining enough of a level of familiarity. What will be important to my analysis of the modern fairy tales is to examine their levels of overtness and of ambiguity, to see whether or not there is a difference between the collections and/or between subject matters, and to look into why they may have chosen specific intertextual links to allude to their secondary level.

On the level of political and social commentary then, I argue that the principle aspect of intertextual discussion which the modern fairy tales of the 1930s are involved with is the morality and the dominant values which are found in their sources and explore the borders of morality in the new political, economic and domestic climate. When the authors aim to tell what they perceive to be the truth in the issues which they depict, they also aim to persuade

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<sup>36</sup> Zipes FTAS: 4

<sup>37</sup> Knoepflmacher, U.C. "Parody." In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. Vol. 2. Ed. Donald Haase. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 2008. Page 727-278

the reader of their cause or to affect them to question the moral basis of the political and social structures which they are part of. With the rise of powerful ideologies on both the extreme political Right and Left with their own set of values and perception of reality, the 1930s, as Hobsbawm argues, was the culmination of a decline in the moral progress which had marked the nineteenth century and continued through the twentieth.<sup>38</sup> The First World War, in its then unique totality, had shown an unprecedented brutality and inhumanity which, Hobsbawm contends, unfortunately has come to characterize our modern history from that point on.<sup>39</sup> I claim that the intermodern fairy tales are involved with discussing the need for new values in place of the old, in place of those which allowed immoral atrocities to be committed and continued to purport what the stories portray as immoral political, socioeconomic, and gendered social structures.

Chapter 1 will discuss how A.E. Coppard's "Jack the Giant Killer" and Naomi Mitchison's "The Fourth Pig" portray the prospects of a new war and the threat of foreign invasion, as I argue that they are both involved with a criticism of the passivity of the government in the face of growing authoritarian ideologies. Additionally, both stories illustrate the consequences of allowing the politics of fear to determine the strategy of defence as they depict situations where the inability of the population and their leaders to understand the severity of the threat turns to panic and paralysis when the crisis is upon them. A highly satirical tale, "Jack the Giant Killer" pokes fun at political and economic ideologies alike as three man-eating giants materialize in London, casting an ambiguous light on the good and the bad forces involved while hinting at an alternative solution should the establishment fail to protect its citizens. "The Fourth Pig," on the other hand, is a grim dystopian continuation of "The Three Little Pigs," commenting on the nativity of Walt Disney's animation and the belief that pacifism and isolation can keep the Big Bad Wolf at bay.

In chapter 2, the focus will be on what I argue is different manifestations of greed enabled by the dominant socioeconomic structures of the 1930s, the immorality in preserving a hierarchical class structures and capitalist system which had led to mass poverty and unemployment after the Great Depression. A.G. Macdonnel's "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" settles the plot and narrative of its source neatly into a 1930s context with the ventures of two brothers into the world of the stock market and at the doorstep of the powerful Sesame Financial Syndicate, were, I argue, Macdonnel's subtle changes of the

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<sup>38</sup> Hobsbawm: 13

<sup>39</sup> Hobsbawm: 49

forces which allows the humble brother to prosper speaks to how the classic's moral could translate in the modern times. In "Hansel and Gretel," Naomi Mitchison juxtaposes extreme wealth with the poverty and plight of an unemployed family as the author deftly plays with the reader's and, indeed, the characters' knowledge of the plot of the intertext when she focuses the tale on the necessity for solidarity against the formidable Capitalist power that is the Witch. Next, I hold that "Soria Moria," is a fairy tale illustration of Mitchison's convictions of the immorality inherent to capitalist materialism and fascism as her protagonist undergoes a metamorphic journey to discover first-hand how the produce of industrial production are used propagate injustice and evil.

Lastly, in chapter 3, I discuss stories which are involved with the marriage debates of the 1930s, and the increased focus on women's creative, professional, and sexual lives in a time which saw a retreat back to domesticity and traditional marriage norms for women. These modern fairy tales are all involved with negotiating the gendered expectations of both men and women within and outside marriage, appealing for respect and equality between women and men as a morally superior route to ensure the happiness of both sexes. Thus, Mitchison's "The Snow Maiden" subtly subverts the happy ending of the rite of spring found in her Russian intertext, sowing a seed of ambiguity about Mary Snow's fate in order to prompt the reader to question the morality of the perceived necessity for women to relinquish professional ambitions and interests when married. In "O If I Could But Shiver!" Christina Stead explores male sexual maturation, providing a twist to the ending of her fairy tale source which, I argue, speaks for the requirement of the recognition of women as sexual equals for the hero's psychological quest to be fulfilled. The final fairy tale discussed in the chapter and in this thesis, Robert Speaight's "Cinderella," stands out as a radical evasion of the traditional plot and values of his source, as his Cinderella chooses spinsterhood in an act of sacrifice for the sins of her beloved King, becoming an icon of sainthood as she guides the people who seek her out through the brutal aspects of love and morality.

# 1 FAIRY TALES AS DYSTOPIAN WARNINGS OF THE THREAT OF UPRISING POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND FOREIGN INVASION

## 1.1 Introduction

Two decades prior to the publication of the intermodern fairy tales, Britain had endured what Hagen Schulze refers to as the beginning of the “self-destruction of Europe” – the First World War. This new type of war was all encompassing: armies of both sides wreaked havoc on cities and villages alike as whole nations were made into battlefields; targeting an entire population, the opposing forces found ways of implicating all layers of society, across gender and age, in one way or another both beyond and within the nation’s borders.<sup>40</sup> After a decade of rebuilding the nations affected by the war, a large part of the Western world suffered under the Great Depression, the economic crisis which robbed millions of people of their jobs and homes. The crisis spawned support for totalitarian political ideologies which promised order and stability on the opposite points of the political spectrum, as Fascism and Communism gradually became the doctrines of national governments across the continent during the 1930s. On top of all this, as Eric Hobsbawm writes, because of the First World War’s exceptional democratization of war and the almost limitless persistence from both sides to outlast the other, it spurred a growth of brutalization which were to characterize the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> While democracy proved a steadfast ideal in Britain, the international circumstances as well as the influence these had on the growing organized leftist and right-wing extremist ideologies in their homeland, provided a development which struck fear in the hearts of many of the British intelligentsia – including A. E. Coppard and Naomi Mitchison.

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<sup>40</sup> Schulze, Hagen. *States, Nations and Nationalism: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 1996. Page 265-274

<sup>41</sup> Hobsbawm: 49-50

### 1.1.1 Dystopian portrayals of the consequences of the politics of fear

As previously established, the tales of Mitchison's and Davies's collections form unique parts of a political literary movement bent on questioning the political and social developments that grew exponentially during the interwar period; one which used the historical, the fantastic, and the scientific literary modes to suggest alternative realities based on the authors' ideals, or rather more frequently on their fears. As such, an understanding of the interwar writers' experience of their present conditions can be found in their representations of the past and the future. For instance, Mitchison returned to the mode which had given her success during the early interwar period with her 1939 novel *Blood of the Martyrs* which subtly compares the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire to the fascist persecution of ethnic and political groups throughout the 1930s. At the same time, numerous dystopian novels set in the imagined future of current political developments sought to illustrate possible end results of the innovations in technology in the hands of the uprising authoritarian ideologies, as with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and its reflection of a world of scientifically made class differences bereft of individualism and passion.

The stories of Mitchison's and Davies' collections, however, stand out as a rare example of placing magic within or near their own times to envisage satirical and dystopian scenarios which are involved critically with current political and social issues. Coppard's "Jack the Giant Killer" and Mitchison's "The Fourth Pig," which will be the subjects of analysis in this chapter, both open their respective collections with musings on the impact of the turbulent political developments in Europe on Britain through allegories heavily reliant on popular culture. Though the stories share few formal and tonal similarities, I argue that they are both involved in warning against the politics of fear found in Britain's pacifism in the face the oppressive political movements seeking to impose their ideological convictions on Great Britain. Thus, they craft dystopian visions of the consequences should the irrational impulses which fear creates lead to panic and paralysis. As Schulze writes, a major contributor to the rise of totalitarian sentiments in British politics as elsewhere in Europe was the failure of the democratic parties to bring the country back on its feet after the war; with the upsurge of radical groupings with the growing discontent about the establishment, the democratic government were terrorized by the extremes of Right and Left who both sought a strong



authoritarian state.<sup>42</sup> When counteraction was demanded it was met by a lethargic government hesitant to meet a revolutionary uprising with violent reaction in fear of initiating a civil war.

As my analysis will show, both stories set up a premise of foreign invasion posing a threat to the lives of the British population, which in Coppard's tale evolves into a hypothetical solution to the inability of the government to handle the situation – although Dasenbrock argues that a utopian aspect is necessary for satire to succeed because it must in some way show how to remake society, not just make fun of it, Coppard's ambiguous ending, as we shall see, could be a utopian or dystopian ending dependent on the reader's convictions<sup>43</sup>. Mitchison's short piece, however, is a far more intense meditation on the danger of a passive political stance towards the growing European threat turning into a state of paralysis. Perhaps inspired by the inauguration of the new conservative government in 1935 and the progressively worsening of international conflicts, Mitchison's story is closer to the cautionary tale in its unhappy and ambiguous ending, a difference between hers and Davies' collection which become further evident during this thesis. This chapter will discuss the stories' involvement with dystopian thinking and the nature of their warning against the escapist and naive side to utopian visions. It will therefore be important to display how the stories in turn discuss the authors' visions of the consequences of the politics carried out during their present, and how this is done through various intertextual links from the fairy tales which they based the modern stories on, to the sensations of popular culture.

## 1.2 “Jack the Giant Killer” and the Battle Between the Forces of Modern Civilization

A. E. Coppard's (1878-1957) re-imagined “Jack the Giant Killer,” the opening story of Davies' collection *The Fairies Return*, is set in the England of the early twentieth century, with its narrative situated immediately within a popular culture based on the appropriation of folk tradition and legend for entertainment.<sup>44</sup> Modern techniques of manipulating photographs and film for purposes of entertainment by the newspapers and the cinema are to blame, we are told, for the lack of belief in monsters. As the narrator informs, “sceptical parsons living in the country” – and thus not, it is implied, part of the lived experience of such things as were

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<sup>42</sup> Schulze: 274-276, 278-279

<sup>43</sup> Dasenbrock: 249

<sup>44</sup> Coppard, A.E. “Jack the Giant Killer.” In *The Fairies Return: Or New Tales for Old*. Ed. Maria Tatar. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 39-64. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter.

the city dwellers – believed the press images of the giants to be “nothing more than a mirage induced by occult mediums, or else a walking advertisement for somebody’s breakfast cereal” (39-40). The first half of the story is focused on the arrival of three giants – Demos, Kudos, and Osmos – and the Government’s clumsy attempt at figuring out what they are up to and how to handle them. Culminating in the Chancellor’s confrontation, it is finally acknowledged that the giants, whatever they are there for, are not having anyone else’s interest in mind but their own. When it is discovered that the three colossus are behind the vanishings which haunts the country, tense discussions of how one could possibly take on such enormous adversaries eventually develops into a paranoid paralysis as the giants become increasingly visible in their murderous activities.

As such, London becomes the scene as this introductory part establishes the effect of the uprising of overwhelming powers within an urban environment which becomes the set up for the arrival of the hero and his heroic deeds, borrowing well known motifs and symbols from the modern story’s intertext and casting them anew in a contemporary context of battling ideological forces. Hired by the Boss and motivated by the Boss’ daughter, Primrose, Jack is Britain’s last hope as he sets off across the country in chase of the fleeing enemy. Coppard constructs a story ripe with symbolic meaning and satirical subversions, but for the purposes of this chapter the focus of my analysis will be to establish how the author constructs an allegory of the politics of organized ideologies through his monstrous invaders, and how the manner in which the giants are discussed and interacted with questions the morality in the actions of those in charge of protecting the British population. When looking at the original fairy tale upon which this 1930s version is built, what is essential is of course the Britishness of the tale but also its original purpose, both aspects which are important to understand Jack as a modern character cast as “the common man,” as well as the modern tale’s rooting in popular culture. I argue that the tale not only show us a satirical reading of the ideologies which were intruding on the political scene, but more importantly offer a vision of how such threats to the establishment could be dealt with – for good or bad.

### **1.2.1 The intertextual origins of the original “Jack the Giant-Killer”**

The original tale, known as “Jack the Giant-Killer” or “The History of Jack and the Giants”, is a constellation of episodes concerning farmers-son Jack and his killing of giants, in which Ruth B. Bottigheimer identifies three categories of connected adventures shared by all

versions of the tale.<sup>45</sup> The first two are both recognized by the use of trickery to fool and kill the giants, albeit in distinctly different ways. The first category accounts for Jack's killing of giants in his native Cornwall using wit and ordinary farm tools; the second contains a cluster of stories concerning Jack's giant slaying in Wales and his new position as servant to the son of king Arthur, involving magical tools recognizable from numerous folk tales in the Germanic tradition – the coat of darkness or invisibility, the shoes of swiftness, the sword of sharpness, and the cap of knowledge.<sup>46</sup> As reward Jack has been taken on as Knight of the Round Table at King Arthur's court in the third category, marked by the increased use of brute violence, and initiating the ritualistic sending of the heads of the slain giants to king Arthur. This third cycle of episodes ends with Jack's victory over the mighty Golligantua and his conjurer accomplice, after which the hero becomes part of the landed rich through marriage.

As Elizabeth Wanning Harris has shown, the work of Peter and Iona Opie of tracing stories commonly thought of as English remain central to show how “Jack the Giant Killer” amongst others “entered the popular imagination from printed sources,” as all evidence points to it being a literary fairy tale which seeped into oral tradition.<sup>47</sup> The composer of the fairy tale is unknown, but the Opies, as they are commonly known, determines the earliest reference of an existing fairy tale named “Jack and the Gyants” in a 1708 chapbook. No mentioning of any Jack tale have been found in sixteenth or seventeenth century literature, though frequent allusion in later texts suggests the tale's renown from the eighteenth century onward.<sup>48</sup> What is certain is that the many episodes of the tale are derived from already existing tales, as prototypes of parts of the compilation have been found in Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore – for instance, the episode where Jack lays a billet in the bed in his place to hinder a giant's attack is strikingly similar to a story of Loki disguised as the giant Skrymir uses the trick on Thor.

According to Thomas Green's discussion of the original fairy tale's Arthurian context as found in the earliest printings of the story, the name of Arthur and his court has become synonymous with “a magical and legendary land of the unspecified past” in international

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<sup>45</sup> Bottigheimer, Ruth B. “Jack Tales.” In *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*. Ed. Jack Zipes. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. Pages 314-316

<sup>46</sup> Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie. *The Classic Fairy Tales*. London: Oxford University Press. 1974. Page 47

<sup>47</sup> Harris, Elizabeth Wanning. *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 2001. Pages 77-78

<sup>48</sup> Opie: 50

literary tradition. However, in the Welsh versions of Arthur tales, Green argues, the identification has gone further to the point where “the Arthurian court” is a synecdoche for the “Island of Britain” of the legendary past.<sup>49</sup> Still, the eighteenth-century tale “Jack the Giant-Killer” has not been considered part of this tradition, despite the tale being explicitly set in the Arthurian kingdom, as well as the fact that many of the incidents found in variants of the story are known to be very similar to folk tales of the young Arthur who in Welsh folklore is known as a giant-killer himself.<sup>50</sup> Green further argues that the Jack tale’s nature as a compilation of ancient folk tales deliberately placed in an Arthurian setting points towards the fact that the Arthurian elements most likely were not imposed upon an existing story but were always part of it. Indeed, the theory has been posed that the Jack tale is not only an Arthurian story but a re-composition of the deeds of the Arthur of folklore with Jack as replacement.<sup>51</sup>

### **1.2.2 Jack as trope and national symbol from the eighteenth century to the 1930s**

The name “Jack” is common to the resourceful and sometimes deceitful hero of a tale cycle found in the folklore of Britain, Canada, the US, and Australia, and has come to signify a “typical (young) man”<sup>52</sup> in these countries. Given Green’s argument that “Jack the Giant Killer” is a recast and re-imagined composition of Arthurian tales, I find that one is bound to question the replacement of the legendary king in favour of the farmer’s son and common man Jack. First emerging in the beginning of universal literacy during the early capitalist period and the rise of the bourgeois class, the story of Jack and the giants was a popular segment in the cheap chapbooks being circulated amongst the lower classes, a medium which allowed for both the folk tales of various regions and the literary fairy tales of the elite to spread amongst all layers of society.<sup>53</sup> The transference of the heroic part from king to common man as the legends morphed into folk and fairy tales mirrors the incorporation of folk culture as national culture during the Nationalist Romantic movements, which happened

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<sup>49</sup> Green, Thomas. “Tom Thumb and Jack the Giant-Killer: Two Arthurian Fairytales?” In *Folklore*. Vol. 118, No. 2. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2007. Pages 123-124

<sup>50</sup> Green: 132-133; 136. As Green goes on to say, this version of Arthur, with a reputation of killing “through a mixture of trickery and violence”, seems to have existed quite independently from the “do-nothing” Arthur of the international legend.

<sup>51</sup> Green: 136-137

<sup>52</sup> McCarthy, William Bernard. “Jack Tales.” In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. Vol. 2. Ed. Donald Haase. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 2008. Page 509

<sup>53</sup> Greenhill, Pauline. “Chapbook.” In *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*. Ed. Jack Zipes. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. Page 108

in the interest of solidifying the people's identification with the state through identification with a folk hero who, as the son of a (in some versions wealthy) farmer, is distinctly bourgeois.

Unlike "Jack and the Beanstalk", "Jack the Giant Killer" involves no relation between the hero and the giants, nor an enemy which has robbed him personally of a parent and of wealth; "our" Jack is performing tasks needed for the safekeeping of the community which he willingly takes on, working for the greater good. There is no development in his personality as he already possesses the qualities needed to tackle his obstacles, regardless of whether he is aided by farm tools or magical objects. The change is only in society's perception of him as he repeats his heroic deeds, and in how they consequently allow him to transcend class barriers, though there are no hints that this is Jack's intent all along. Underneath the story's function as entertainment it purports the value of performing one's work and participating in the greater good for society despite horrible working conditions and low wages, that performing one's duty is in one's own interest. The utopian aspect of the story is thus the possibility of being rewarded by the recognition of the elite, reifying the structures which oppresses the lower classes.

Though following this pattern closely, Coppard casts his Jack as a Cornish fisherman, and thus as distinctly working class, making his climb across the social ladder steeper. The Jack of the 1930's is still the sober and dutiful character of the fairy tale, but these qualities become exaggerated and thus paradoxical through Coppard's satirical lens. When he is eventually introduced eleven pages into the story, it is as a guest at his aunt's in Camberwell. During their quick and slightly absurd conversation around tea about the generous reward offered by the Boss – the character Coppard casts as the leader in charge for the second part of the story, which will be discussed further later – for the killing of the giants, Jack's reaction to the idea of a reward goes from "I shouldn't want all that for it" through "I wouldn't mind it" to "I wouldn't refuse it, in a manner of speaking," before patriotically asserting, as he does repeatedly through the tale, that he would "do it just the same for love" (50). In this parodic scene, Coppard makes light of the apparent ease with which the two-dimensional heroes such as Jack take on the superhuman tasks, as his aunt after Jack's humble professing exclaims that he should "for goodness sake get a move on," as his willingness should qualify as ability to handle a catastrophe the government cannot.

The Jack of tradition is often the protagonist of drolls, short humorous tales focusing on one episode of trickery and wit, often at the expense of the ruling or middle class, which were

distributed through chapbooks and broadsides.<sup>54</sup> As such the tales were never part of the bourgeois civilizing project in England during the eighteenth century and so were thought to be highly inappropriate for children, serving as they did purely as entertainment. Still, as previously mentioned, when Jacobs published such tales in his collection of stories aimed at children he defended his decision as a patriotic effort to re-introduce the spirit of the “folk” to the idea of the nation: “They serve to justify the title of Merrie England, which used to be given to this country of ours, and indicate unsuspected capacity of fun and humour among the unlettered classes.”<sup>55</sup> Jacob’s sentiments in the introduction to his collection echoes the wish of the Grimm brothers for the rising middle class to accept the rich culture of the unlettered classes, the “folk,” as the tradition of Germany, with their intention to procure a stronger national self-image for bourgeois.<sup>56</sup>

Given the tradition of humorous tales as well as the history of subversion in folk and fairy tales, the use of satire in fairy tales does not, as Maria Tatar shows, prove to violate the genre as it might seem at first glance. The political nature of folk tales allowed for meditations on matters of social orders, an aspect which Coppard has mixed into the original English fairy tale and its nationalistic moral which propagates the value of the duty performed in all labour. The text itself asks questions of the meaning of its elements through its use of a third person narrator with an oral, conversational style who constantly invites us to interpret the story’s context by himself asking questions he expects from a curious reader – “Where did they live now? What did they eat? Wait awhile, I am coming to that” (41) – alerting of the story’s many double meanings. Additionally, the comments of the characters are often laden with both subtle and overt meaning; Jack’s metafictional remark “there is a moral in this,” which will be discussed further later, seems especially aimed towards the appropriation of the genre and the insistence on moral by the bourgeois.

The first part of the story aptly satirizes the discussions surrounding real life major events in 1930s media and government, as “*The Daily Express* advocated their immediate banishment and entire removal” (47) (“How? Well, you had the whole resources of modern civilisation at your disposal, hadn’t you?”) while the government answers that “you could not with all the means at your disposal even arrest the monsters, neither could you with the whole canon of English law to select from frame an indictment.” In Coppard’s allegory, the British

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<sup>54</sup> Greenhill: 108

<sup>55</sup> Jacobs, Joseph. *English Fairy Tales*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1967. Page vii.

<sup>56</sup> Zipes FTAS: 59

institution is wholly unprepared for the forces which the giants represent. As the realization that the giants are responsible for the murder of the disappeared citizens finally sinks in, “the metropolis was in a state of panic and public duty was ignored” (49), at which point the power balance of the nation shifts as the story progresses into the second part. This aspect will be discussed further at the close of the analysis of Coppard’s story, but first it is necessary to examine the story’s construction of the giants and their allegorical meaning.

### **1.2.3 The giants as political allegory: The meaning of Demos, Kudos, and Osmos**

Monsters and giants are abundant in British mythology and legend, inscribed in literary tradition from the Old English *Beowulf* through medieval epics such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the vast variety found in modern fantasy and fairy tales.<sup>57</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136) was vital in establishing giants as native to Britain, as he tells of the history of British kings who continuously fight their monstrous adversaries to conquer land or simply for sport. From the Middle Ages, the supernatural has been an integral part of the natural past in the lore of the land, with ample giant tales explaining topography and etymology of places both in England and elsewhere in Northern Europe. Giant lore is commonly interpreted as representing man’s fight against the powers of nature through tales of a hero or heroine’s use of cunning to overcome the supernatural terrors as stand-in for the harsh conditions of the British Isles.

As previously mentioned, Coppard starts his tale by linking the three giants of his tale to a mixture of gigantic monsters of folklore, mythology, and popular cinema, as the narrator lists a number of recognizable giants and monsters which no one longer believed in and “could give no credence to” (39). The giants Blunderbore and his unnamed brother are identifiable as parts of the original “Jack and the Giants,” Gog and Magog figure in the legend of Brutus as native to Cornwall as well as in the Bible as both invaders of Israel and amongst the host of the Antichrist,<sup>58</sup> with The Long Man of Wilmington, the 235 feet tall chalk hill figure in East Sussex, as the third with a connection to the British Isles. The remaining two would be familiar to broader audience: Cyclops, a species of one-eyed giants often cast as the

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<sup>57</sup> Avery, Gillian. “British and Irish Fairy Tales.” In *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*. Ed. Jack Zipes. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015. Pages 76-86

<sup>58</sup> Simpson, Jacqueline and Steve Roud. *A Dictionary of English Folklore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2000. Page 147

adversary in Greek legend and literature;<sup>59</sup> and King Kong, the gigantic ape of the 1933 American film, who became an instant part of popular culture with the film's release just one year prior to the publication of Coppard's tale.<sup>60</sup> By setting the story in a realistic world of modern society and industry but allowing for the possibility of the reality of these monsters, Coppard fleshes out a metaphorical substitution of natural forces with the social threats much closer to the worries of the modern world. All the while, the references to genres of classical academic study in the same breath as references to folklore and modern popular cinema acknowledges the role of art and literature, both high and low, in the making and distribution of social and political mores.

As Maria Tatar's introduction to *The Fairies Return* suggests, an attempt to understand the meaning of the figures of the three giants can make one "feel lost in the woods."<sup>61</sup> However, because Coppard's narrator dissociates the giants from the traditional specificity to time, space, and purpose – "the deuce knows *where* they came from or *how* they came" (39) – while constructing their appearance and dialogue as laden with symbolic meaning, I contend that they function as allegorical figures. I will therefore structure my analysis of them around three central aspects of their involvement in the story: the meaning of their names, their meeting with the Chancellor, and their deaths at the hands of Jack. As a story about a Britain under attack published in a time of growing tensions between political factions of various persuasions across Europe, and just a year after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, reading the (super)natural forces as connected to the social forces threatening to plunge the world into a new catastrophe seems apt. After years of pacifism and inability to rebuild the nation, the Labour Government must face the political giants who has "come to save the country" (40).

A first nod towards a political reading of the intention of Coppard's vision is the description of the giants as "leviathans," a word which gained an additional meaning along with the original connotation of various monsters (amongst them giants) when Thomas Hobbes used it to name his philosophical work on the political organization of society – a book which Naomi Mitchison later referred to as an ancestor to the totalitarian vision that "only recently [...] was made explicit" (41).<sup>62</sup> Secondly there is the use of names with Greek etymology, referring to the roots of the institutions of modern civilization founded during the classical antiquity. To start with the perhaps most obvious one, *demos* is a sociological term

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<sup>59</sup> Britannica Academic, s.v. "Cyclops." <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Cyclops/28382>

<sup>60</sup> Britannica Academic, s.v. "King Kong." <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/King-Kong/487720>

<sup>61</sup> Tatar I: 8

<sup>62</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. *The Moral Basis of Politics*. London: Constable & Co. 1938. Page 49



which in ancient Greece denoted both rural areas (as opposed to urban) and of the common people as a political unit, equal to the Latin *pleb*.<sup>63</sup> Later it came to encompass all civic citizens of a nation state, as it forms the root of the term democracy. To argue that Coppard is alluding to the latter of the ancient Greek definitions fits with his description of Demos, as well as Osmos, as “dressed like ordinary men” wearing “lounge suits” (42), and the red patch on the seat of Demos’ trousers could refer to the socialist and/or communist movements the colour is associated with.

*Kudos*, meaning praise of honour and glory, is a less easy word to place within a political context, but Kudos’s more sophisticated attire of frock coat, top hat, and umbrella might imply that he represents the elite upper class or elitism in general in form of the tradition of class based hierarchy. As an expression, *kudos* was first and foremost used in academic circles before it came to general use in journalism during the 1920s, a fact that might also point towards this interpretation. Lastly then, *osmos* is translated from the Greek origin as push and thrust; *osmose*, or the Latinized *osmosis* we use today, while designating the chemical process, is commonly used informally to imply the gradual and unconscious absorption of knowledge or ideas. If we take into account Osmos’ black patch in the same manner as with Demos’, Osmos could be understood as an allegorical representation of Fascism, seeing as black as a political colour was connected to fascism by way of the black uniforms worn by the members of the National Fascist Party in Italy (the term Blackshirts came to refer to Fascists in general).

When the Chancellor, as the governmental representative, moves to confront the giants for disrupting everyday life, he finds them “down by the Monument,” that being the colloquial term for the Monument of the Great Fire in Central London equipped with a viewing platform, from which spectators “were poking their hands through the railings and marking crosses” (42) on the red and black patches of Demos and Osmos’ trousers with white chalk provided by Kudos. I would suggest that such a marking of the patches reads as the marking of their signature, where the crosses refers to the tradition of marking one’s X by the unlettered classes. If so, the scene mirrors the spectacle of the common people signing up for political doctrines that vow to reform the nation and the subtle ways in which especially the lower classes were persuaded to act against their own interests. By allowing this scene to unfold the Government remain passive while the Giants become a visible and accepted part of the London landscape – they even, it seems, turn a blind eye to the murder of a policeman

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<sup>63</sup> Britannica Academic, s.v. “Deme.” <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/deme/29875>

whom Kudos blows out of his hand “into the air in a vast arc over London Bridge [...] until he shot with a quiet squirt into the Thames” (45).

A further attest to the giants’ roles as embodiments of ideological doctrines follows in the Chancellor’s attempt at nesting out their intentions:

‘I’ll make a test of you,’ he said, thinking of a little bit of a puzzle he had heard in his childhood. ‘What is truth?’ he shouted up.

And Kudos said: ‘Nothing but what becomes you.’

Demos said: ‘Nothing but what the world wishes you.’

But Osmos’ answer was: ‘Nothing that I can’t improve upon’ (43).

Kudos’s answer supports the reading of him as a representation of hierarchy, as “Nothing but what becomes you” could refer to heredity, in the sense that truth is a fixed state of reality where the circumstances into which you are born determines the social position you will hold in life – what you are given is what you get. Demos’ “Nothing but what the world wishes you” is of a similar vein, that is to say that truth is a state of constructed reality but one that it is in the power of the people to change, reminiscent of the Marxist belief in social determinism. Thirdly, then, Osmos’ ominous “Nothing that I can’t improve upon” is tightly connected to the answer he gives when the Chancellor continues to ask how this could be done. While Demos first cuts in answering “Never!”, refusing the possibility of such a thing as improving on truth, Osmos retorts “By ignoring it,” to which he gets an approving look from Kudos. This exchange suggests that by Osmos’ reckoning, truth, though a fixed entity, is both malleable and interchangeable – if translated as a political doctrine, it seems apt to interpret this transaction, and Kudos’ readiness to Osmos’ beliefs, as a nod towards the hierarchical foundation of fascism and their manipulation of events and facts to legitimate their ideal social order. Further, the tale offers a hierarchical order amongst the three colossus themselves and thus the oppressive forces they represent: while the order of mention of Kudos and Demos vary, Osmos is always third, which of course is in reference to the rule of three, following which the last is “weighted.”<sup>64</sup> Amongst the intruding ideologies, the tale suggests, fascism poses the greater threat.

Lastly, then, the manners in which the giants are individually slain by Jack gives the final clues to their allegorical meanings. Once the numerous disappearances of people, and the

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<sup>64</sup> Simpson: 356

appearance of said people's clothing, is finally connected to the mystery of the giants' diet, the invaders flee from the urban London and spread across the country, where Jack heroically provides the utopian ending when all seems bleakest. Kudos is first: as Jack arrives "on his bicycle [at] the borders of Epping Forest," "[a] voice was wailing in the sylvan groves: Fee Fye Fo Fum" (55), a call uttered by the giant Thunderdell in the original version of the tale in the famous verse followed by the line "I smell the blood of an Englishman," befitting a representation of an old oppressive system which still haunted England.<sup>65</sup> It seems only appropriate that he should be felled by one of the great symbols of modern innovation and prosperity when he trips over electric pylons and is electrocuted while chasing Jack, who is running at such a velocity he appears to have gained shoes of swiftness. When finally daring to go back to have a look at him, Jack finds Kudos to have shrunk to the "image of a child's doll" within his clothes, to which Jack retorts "There's a bit of a moral in this [...] if I could only think of it" (56). To insert such a metafictional remark by the protagonist is a humorous reminder of the story's satire, and of the insistence on moral made by the bourgeois and the elite in their appropriation of folklore which too often stripped the tales of their original meaning. Kudos, the representative of tradition in the "Jack the Giant Killer" of the 1930s, turns out to be small and insignificant within its outward appearance of grandeur – when Jack sends the doll to Primrose, the Boss's daughter, she is in disbelief, as "[it] did not seem credible to her that what had seemed so much could be so little after all" (57).

Demos' murder is never told by the narrator; rather, we learn from Jack's second telephone conversation with Primrose that he has done him in. After an unfortunate "nocturnal foray into the more illustrious parts of Wolverhampton" (58), Demos and Osmos separate, the former being quickly caught up with by his hunter near a coal mine, where Jack through some "cute bit of work" (59) tricks the giant so he falls to his death after Jack "pickaxed him for twenty minutes" as he hangs by his hands at the edge. Digging pits is a traditional, and according to Spooner, an especially Cornish, method of doing away with giants; in the original versions of "Jack the Giant Killer" Jack uses the tools of the workers to dig a hole to trap the giant Cormoran who haunts his native Cornwall, who he then slays by hitting in the head with a pickaxe.<sup>66</sup> The hole Demos is tricked into, however, swallows him whole, and there is no question as to his demise. The author's choice to place the scene of

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<sup>65</sup> Jacobs: 109

<sup>66</sup> Spooner, B.C. "The Giants of Cornwall." In *Folklore*, Vol.76, No. 1. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 1965. Page 26  
Jacobs: 100-101

Demos' death at the coal mines attests to the coal industry's history as a particularly oppressive enterprise which ruthlessly exploited its working class employees; to make Demos vanish into thin air in such a place, I contend, could imply that the workers themselves would or had to do away with the oppressive forces which claimed to represent them.

As the third and the most formidable of the story's foes, Osmos' slaying at the coast of East Anglia for one harks back to Jack's occupation as fisherman, but more importantly, as Tatar observes, hints at the enduring British strength at sea with the decline of the empire.<sup>67</sup> Rather than repeating the swift partings of the first two of the trio, Coppard constructs a beautifully tragic scene as Jack witnesses what appears to be the performance of a ritual of mourning, as Osmos stands naked in the sea:

There he raised his hands aloft as though invoking the aid of some agency in some realm unknown and very far away, and across the motionless air the words of a beseeching appeal droned from his lips:

‘Maresull eetotes anasull eetotes akiddle eetivy.’ Beyond all doubt the monster's grief was keen. [...] The huge head swayed from side to side as though its eyes were searching heaven from the north to the south. For long they sought, but in vain. Tears as big as oranges plopped into the water between the giant's knees (60-61).

However, and perhaps not surprisingly, Osmos' haunting incantation is a jest: the sentence is akin to the nursery rhyme “In fir tar is,” which is built upon an old joke of simple and banal phrases which said aloud and rather quickly sound Latin.<sup>68</sup> Using the last two lines of the rhyme – “Goat eat ivy; / Mare eat oats” – as reference, we can translate Osmos chant to “Mares'll eat oats, an ass'll eat oats, a kid'll eat ivy.” How widely known the rhyme this sentence was built upon was, and as such if an understanding of the meaning of Coppard's joke was readily understood by contemporary readers, is unfortunately difficult to state, but in either case, what is important is what the reader makes of it. Likewise, there is the reference to the “puzzle” from the Chancellor's childhood quoted above (i.e. “What is truth?”), as an example of the opposite: what it is supposed to refer to not clear, but I would not be surprised if this “test” remembered by one of the country's “wise, wise men” was not a puzzle from folk tradition as the narrator suggests but indeed the great philosophical question of the nature of truth which has been debated through the ages. In a satire which plays with the

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<sup>67</sup> Spooner: 21-22

<sup>68</sup> Opie: 222-223

construction of political ideology and their attachment of meaning upon seemingly arbitrary concepts, Coppard is wont to challenge the reader's own predisposition to place symbolic meaning on words and phrases, the prejudices which decides what is profound and what is nonsense. Laying the words in the mouth of Osmos seems to point towards the hyper-nationalistic vein in fascism and their emphasis on folklore and tradition as the core of the nation.

No matter what the effect, the scene does not alter Jack's plan: enlisting the help of a nearby ship, Jack attacks Osmos from the sea whilst the latter performs his ritual a second time; cloaked by darkness they wait his arrival "until he was no more than a gunshot off" (62), then they fire a harpoon which lands in its target's midriff. As he lies dead in the ocean, Osmos' body remains as it was, he does not shrink or disappear. Jack's initial reaction, the wish to cut the giant's head off and give it to his employer, brings to mind the custom of sending heads found in the original fairy tale, but as he does not know how he resolves to cut and take a thumb instead, perhaps a reference to the folk tale hero Tom Thumb, a character of similar stories as the Jack tales.<sup>69</sup>

#### **1.2.4 Working for the Boss: The secondary power play in the shift of leadership**

Though the battle of forces between Jack and the giants takes the foreground in Coppard's story, there is a secondary power play which remains in the background but nonetheless controls the tale's outcome: as may have been observed, the representative of leadership in the story shifts with Jack's introduction from the Chancellor, the head of the government, to the less formal Boss. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, a great many of the activist artists and writers were disillusioned by what they observed of the government's passive tactic to calm the oft violent uprisings from both the political Left and Right. Though the government and the democratic ideal proved resolute, the people's worries were keen, as illustrated in Coppard's tale. In her introduction to Davies's collection, Tatar describes the narrative's presentation of a three step development in the government's reaction and action towards the superhuman threat that has come to their country: "First there is denial (the kindly giants must have been distributing clothes to the poor), then the government orders an 'enquiry,' and finally there is retreat into isolation."<sup>70</sup> The initial

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<sup>69</sup> Opie: 30-32

<sup>70</sup> Tatar I: 9

enthusiasm towards the giants reads like a critique of the failures of the Government, the Press, and the Public to recognize the power which lies in the ideologies the giants embody until it is too late. Throughout the official enquiry it becomes clear that the risks attached to various approaches to the problem of the giants – “you might shell them, but you would certainly destroy half London in the process and kill ten thousand honest citizens” (54) – blinds them from reasonable action. As the narrator explains: “It was the immensity of the giants that paralysed all effort.”

So, what is to be done if the government’s passivity develops into paralysis? The answer the story suggests is that responsibility must be replaced from the leader of the government to a leader of the economic power structures, that the common man must ally themselves with capitalist forces to succeed if the government cannot rise to the challenge. Indeed, it is not until this power shift has been set in motion that our hero is introduced – again, Jack’s repetition of the phrase “I’d do it just the same for love,” with his feigned attempt at refusing to accept any reward, is highly ironic as his involvement in the story is strictly as a participant in a business agreement. The Boss, not the democratic government, replaces King Arthur in the modern retelling: within the matters of employment Coppard has embedded the fairy tale narrative of the common man proving himself worthy of transcending his class by gaining the hand of the Boss’s daughter Primrose. Or, as she is soon interchangeably called, “the princess – for such she undoubtedly was” (52) – who incidentally can be reached by telephone at “Excalibur 2760.” The change within the narrative from government to capitalist authority is subtle, but it speaks volumes. Further, Coppard satirizes the Government’s unwillingness to engage in counteraction against their adversaries when he lets Jack of Cornwall, the folk hero, slay the giants with common sense, with no cost to human life, and, particularly after Kudos, with the utmost authority. Jack represents the people and the nation under rational leadership, a utopian alternative to the current politics of fear – but the tale remains highly ambiguous to whether a future lead by capitalist forces projects a utopian or a dystopian vision.

Contemporary readers would not easily forget the failures of Capitalism during the Great Slump, an economic event unprecedented in world history which greatly shaped the outcome of the social developments of the 1930s, as will be discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis.

As a pawn in the game of big money, Jack rises to the occasion: once the Boss must concede to Jack’s success in killing Kudos, finally suspending disbelief when the giant’s clothes are discovered – “you would have thought he did not *want to*” (57) – and Jack has become a national hero, his deeds warrants acceptance as his fame secures him from being

cast off as a fraud. However, in a twist from this point on, Coppard assigns the executive role to the princess who in sweet but brisk tones maintains contact with Jack, whom she consistently refers to as John, or at one point, Johannes, seemingly to elevate him from his class through the formal versions of his name. In the story's final scene, the shift is definite as the princess cuts off her father's conversation, sending him off with "Now go away, papa, do!" (63), before hastily brushing off Jack's own business agreement, the bargaining with the skipper of the whaler promising away part of the reward. Framing their narrative by alluding to Jack as the "dream of my life" (64), the subversion of the classic narrative of the passive princess suggests that Jack is the husband as stand in which allows her to take over her father's business in the society of the 1930s. Again, Jack is a pawn, but in the game of Primrose. Perhaps, if democracy fails, being puppets in the scheme of capitalism is a lesser evil than being slaves to the terror of the three giants.

### **1.3 The Paralysing Fear of the Wolf in "The Fourth Pig": A Dystopian Projection of the Consequences of Pacifism**

Mitchison's eponymous story "The Fourth Pig," first published in *Time and Tide* with the subtitle *A Fable of Europe 1935* the same year, opens her collection not with a question but with an answer.<sup>71</sup> The three pigs of British and Anglo-American nursery tradition gained sudden cultural and political relevance during the 1930s with the animated short film "The Three Little Pigs" and its sequels, parts of the Silly Symphonies films of the growing pioneer Walt Disney, as their interpretation as an increasingly explicit political allegory became cemented in Western culture. If, as I argue, Mitchison builds her story upon the foundations of the Disney version of the tale and its popular reading in the interwar context, the political nature of her version is set within a highly relevant cultural framework as the tale enters into a conversation about the message of the films even as they continued to be produced. Set after the utopian ending of the "The Three Little Pigs," the world of Mitchison's protagonist Four is a near-apocalyptic dystopia which bleakly contrasts the time before. We are invited to a personal narrative of intense fear and paranoia, and a disillusionment with the naivety of those who came before her. If Disney's little pigs ask "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?", Mitchison's fourth little pig responds: "I am."

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<sup>71</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. "The Fourth Pig." In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 23-26. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter.

Four's tale picks up some time after the ending of "The Three Little Pigs," as she leads the reader through a landscape which has at length reached the end of a false peace, a society in paralysis waiting for the Wolf's next attack – waiting for their inevitable death. No matter how many times they believe they have tricked or even killed the Wolf, he always returns and he always proves too great an adversary for the meek dwellers of the forest. As we are introduced to the tale, the Wolf is ranging once more: he could be around every corner and behind every tree; he could be disguised as your friend, and so you distrust everyone. Four tells of her three brothers, who now live in the brick house built by Three which has been "reinforced with steel and concrete" (25). Constructing a periodic chronology of the times of One, Two, and Three in which she cannot remember the naive and merry times of the two former, only the hope and faith in the clever Three at the beginning of the terror, the one who promised sanctuary. But the security of a sanctuary could only last so long; the song of the pigs rings hollow as fear now clouds every thought: "the noise of ourselves singing it doesn't keep the fear out of the back of my head any longer" (26).

### **1.3.1 The politics of fear and American optimism: "The Three Little Pigs" in popular literature and cinema**

The earliest written version of "The Three Little Pigs" can be found in J.O. Halliwell's c. 1835 collection *Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England*, and was spread further by its re-publication in J. Jacobs *English Fairy Tales* from 1890. The plot of this early version is twofold, both parts centred on three repetitions of similar events. The first is very familiar to Western readers, with the three pigs and the building of their respective houses in straw, furze, and brick, and the wolf's blowing down the first two and eating their inhabitants, only to be stopped at the third, more solid house. The lesser known second part tells of the wolf's attempt at fooling the clever third pig out of the brick house by way of invitations to pick first turnips, then apples, and lastly to meet at the "fair at Shanklin".<sup>72</sup> The third pig of course continuously deceives the wolf by arriving earlier than the agreed time, prompting the wolf to such anger that he in the end climbs down the third pig's chimney, only for him to land in the pot set up by the clever pig, who then "boiled him up, and ate him for supper, and lived happy ever afterwards."

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<sup>72</sup> Halliwell, James Orchard. *Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England*. London and New York: F. Warne and Co. 1853. Pages 16-17



Though widely known in early modern Anglo-American culture, the popularity of the fairy tale grew exponentially with Walt Disney's adaptation in his *Silly Symphonies* series. Premiering in 1933, the popularity of the Disney version accelerated through the following years while its theme song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" became an international hit. As Janet Wasko shows, the early 1930s revealed a shift in Disney's storytelling from open-ended disjointed comedy towards tightly structured narratives with happy endings, introducing a moral plot line made to propagate Disney's conception of specifically American virtues.<sup>73</sup> Good against evil became the prevalent theme as stories "relying heavily on anthropomorphized (human-like), neotenized (child-like) animal characters" presented utopian triumphs over powerful villains through the light-hearted use of exaggerated and brutal violent acts. The success, then, was largely due to its manifestation as a product of Disney's nostalgic longing for "old values" and a simpler egalitarian life, as Steven Watts argues, manifested as an instinctive populism which existed outside the political system and tapped into a cultural agenda which "defended the dignity of the average citizen and elevated the wisdom of the American folk in a period when both had suffered massive trauma."<sup>74</sup>

Disney's "The Three Little Pigs" bypasses the second part of its origin story, focusing rather on the building of the houses and substituting the lacking part with the wolf's attempt at tricking the pigs into letting him in with not so clever disguises.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, there seems to be no consequence other than the loss of homes for the first two pigs as they are allowed to escape to the brick house. Likewise, as Geoffrey Cocks argues, the wolf is allowed to run away – as the symbolic meaning of the wolf as a proxy for the threat of starvation and/or murder remains true to its historical origin, the Disney version lacks the original's inversion of this threat by making a meal out of him.<sup>76</sup> From the film's initial release in 1933, the theme song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" became a national anthem in response to the economic depression which raged the US, as it coincided with the inauguration of the Roosevelt administration which propagated a political optimism through its "spirit of recovery" which "The Three Little Pigs" mirrored.<sup>77</sup> As Watts shows, it gained an

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<sup>73</sup> Wasko, Janet. *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2001. Pages 111-112

<sup>74</sup> Watts, Steven. *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1997. Page 70

<sup>75</sup> Disney, Walt. "The Three Little Pigs." 1933. Video. *The Silly Symphonies* series. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKxWJP\\_LH7A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKxWJP_LH7A)

<sup>76</sup> Cocks, Geoffrey. *The Wolf at the Door: Stanley Kubrick, History, and the Holocaust*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. 2004. Page 34

<sup>77</sup> Watts: 77; 79; 81

unprecedented universality as it became an allegory used by politicians, newspapers, and the common people alike in debates and satire. While critics at the time were disheartened by the intelligentsia's embrace of the short film and their serious analysis of its symbolic meanings, it nonetheless retained its enormous popularity in both high and low brow culture.<sup>78</sup> Later, as the economic conditions stabilized the symbolic relevance of the little pigs shifted to the growing danger overseas: as Cocks goes on to point out, the rise of Nazism and militarism in Europe recast the wolf of the film as a deadly predator, its second symbolic role.

### 1.3.2 Mitchison's mission of warning and the issues of genre

In the midst of Disney's successful streak of "Pig" films, Mitchison published her counter-argument. "The Fourth Pig" explodes the original frame and disallows the utopian ending. Thus, I argue, Mitchison's tale challenges the Western popular culture's easy brush off of extremist power and naive belief in a happy ending to the struggle against the expanding authoritarian usurping of power in the countries of Europe. Four's tale is a witness' tale, personal and harrowing. As such, they are much like Mitchison's own interwar and wartime diaries, which read equally as intimate memoirs as they do social documentation, in which she like many others took on the task of portraying the experiences of living through such trying and controversial times. Her undertaking of the role of a political activist was profound, her fiction becoming a mediating format which in the 30s became heavily occupied with the perceived threat of fascism and a new war in addition to her socialist and feminist agendas.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the hard blow on Mitchison's literary reputation caused by her first contemporary fiction, *We Have Been Warned* (1935), – a dystopian novel envisioning a fascist takeover of Britain – led to the novel's warnings being drowned in its controversy. *The Fourth Pig*, I hold, is symptomatic of the lesson of that failure: it consists of several short stories and poems concerned with issues of political conflict and the threat of war, the collection format allowing her to execute her visions and ideas with greater preciseness and clarity when fragmented. Here, their natures as compressions of the single idea means that her mission of warning on this particular subject can stand central. The poem "Omen of the Enemy" sees the Evil One in the form of a cormorant, croaking ill fortune at London; another poem, "Pause in the Corrida," envisages a

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<sup>78</sup> Cocks: 34

narrator between the bullfights of black and red bulls, metaphors for the clash of fascists and communists in Spain.<sup>79</sup> Most similar to Four's tale is "The Grand-daughter," a short story placed even further into the future from the perspective of a woman whose grand-parents were young during the 1930's.<sup>80</sup> The story poses the questions of how they could let things happen as they did, how they could fail to know what was going on. Though Mitchison of course imagines a horrible conclusion to the politics she saw in her day and its consequences, the story, like "The Fourth Pig," is an eerie read in a post-Second World War context. With the calm hindsight of history, the grand-daughter can reflect on the factors which explains the rise of ideological extremisms, the "comic, but extremely unpleasant and dangerous, group madnnesses" like those that "affected the Fascists in Italy or the Nazis in Germany" which grew in resistance of the rationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>81</sup>

### 1.3.3 Living with the pacifist inheritance of the famous brothers

The protagonist of "The Fourth Pig" does not have the luxury of a peaceful reflective retrospect – she lives the immediate aftermath of 1930s political and social developments. "Sometimes the Wolf is quiet," she says, "[b]ut now the Wolf is loose and ranging and we are aware of him" (23). The picture she paints of her world is one of paranoia and, as in Coppard's story, a retreat into isolation. Anyone can be the enemy – unlike the colossal adversaries of "Jack the Giant Killer," who are envisaged as collected recognizable bodies, danger in "The Fourth Pig" is an elusive entity which can lurk behind every corner, seemingly impossible to protect oneself against. Rather than the jolliness and humour of Disney's short film, Mitchison invokes physically violent imagery of the tearing and dissolving of flesh, creating a jarring effect while describing the capture of beloved figures of nursery tales: "and thus it comes, many times that his slavering jaws crush down through broken arteries of shrieking innocents [...] death to Mother Henny-penny with her downy chicks just hatched, death to Father Cocky-locky with his noble songs to the dawn, death sooner or later to Fox the inventor and storyteller, the intelligent one who yet cannot escape always" (23).

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<sup>79</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. "Omen of the Enemy." In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 27-28

Mitchison, Naomi. "Pause in the Corrida." In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 209-212

<sup>80</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. "The Grand-daughter." In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 54-60

<sup>81</sup> Mitchison TGD: 58

Though some of the early animated shorts portrayed the effects of the Great Depression on the common people, Disney showed no clear signs of alignment with any political ideology or parties, and it is unclear whether the likeness to the economic crises was intended.<sup>82</sup> Instead, as Watts explains, his utopianism relied on a sentimental and nostalgic idea of American cultural identity which fed on the common people's emotional responses to how politics, industry and technology affected them. This utopianism was also an escapist vision where political, social and economic issues were ignored, in an "attempt to create a cultural space where people could experience, however briefly, freedom from fear," as Watts writes. I argue that Mitchison positions her story as a dystopian projection of Disney's utopian populism because it mirrored the increasingly passive politics of conciliation across British political parties during the early 1930s. She observed how the Great War had spawned a pacifism that, as Lassner informs, manifested as a great fear against the risk of decisive action: "On the left and the right it was more comforting to ignore the ignominies of Stalin and Hitler than to involve oneself in the fates of the victims."<sup>83</sup> While they themselves stay safe, the Wolf is allowed to ravage elsewhere, "the torn flesh hot in his belly provoking miasmatic evil" (23).

As a dystopian projection of the future of this passive attitude, Mitchison's tale is a radical subversion of the atavism and pacifism of "The Three Little Pigs" and its theme song. Fearing the Wolf and what it represents is highly justified at the present of the story, as fear has only intensified with the time spent avoiding it. If the audience of Disney's playful cartoon identifies with the three little pigs, Mitchison makes sure to take formal measures to make an impact on that same audience. Allowing Four to be the teller of her own story through a stream of consciousness narrative, Mitchison constructs a tale based on sensory impressions of intense fear to convey the felt consequences of the behaviour and mind-set idealized in populist culture. In Four's retelling of the times of her brothers she strips the storyline of its satirical jest at the idle One and Two and replaces it with bitter-sweet recreation of a world of innocent naivety "before knowledge of the Wolf" (25). Though the Wolf was becoming known to them during the time of Two and their homes needed reinforcing, they still danced and sung thinking he had been warded off. Four can only remember Three's promises to withstand the danger when it's serious nature became

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<sup>82</sup> Watts: 70-71

<sup>83</sup> Lassner, Phyllis. *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own*. Basingstoke, GB: Palgrave Macmillan. 1998. Pages 83-85

increasingly apparent, building around himself and his siblings the concrete walls which for a while kept them safe. But, as she predicts, not even Third's brick house "reinforced with steel and concrete" can hold long: "might not Wolf have practised his huffing and puffing that even this may not be strong enough to stand against him?" (25) Quoting Andrew Ross, Booker writes that "utopianism is based on a critique of the 'deficiencies of the present,' while dystopian thinking relies on a critique of perceived 'deficiencies in the future.'"<sup>84</sup> As an allegory's of a real life threat of invasion by an outside enemy whose force grows rapidly with lack of opposition, "The Fourth Pig" reads as a dystopian alternative of the future should their only defence against the Wolf be the maintenance of their own walls.

### **1.3.4 "I am Four, without shelter and without hope": The song as the last defence**

Having already lived through one world war, Mitchison came to clearly understand the drives which the Great War had set in motion in the defeated Germany, and that the ideological conviction which now fed their will for dominance made them more dangerous than ever. In her polemic work *The Moral Basis of Politics*, published two years later than her fairy tale collection in 1938, she fully develops the political convictions and debates which are recognizable in "Grand-daughter" and "The Fourth Pig." In this book, Mitchison, to use Lassner's synopsis, "analysed the historical and economic positioning of power," as her very direct and experimental involvement in socialism and feminism had convinced her that at the basis of all oppression – amongst social classes, and against men as well as women – was economic inequality.<sup>85</sup> Economic inequality, Mitchison argued, bred a social instability and alienation which manifested as fear and anxiety across the class and gender spectre; what she warns against is the irrationality this fear inspires when translated into actions.<sup>86</sup> What is most relevant for this chapter is her analysis of the role fear plays in various political and cultural movements, from the fear of change which propelled the expansion of Fascism to the fear of war amongst pacifists which she found was beginning to stir panic. As she says, "It is impossible to know how much fear there is in our acceptance of any political vision. We are always hovering between fear and morality."

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<sup>84</sup> Booker: 19

<sup>85</sup> Lassner: 71

<sup>86</sup> Mitchison MPB: 56

Read together, “The Three Little Pigs” and “The Fourth Pig” become a cautionary tale where what Mitchison deems the false utopian ending of the original leads to dire consequences. Rather than the transgression of social mores of the traditional nursery tales of the sub-genre, Mitchison transfer the wrongdoing of the pigs to the tendency to allow fear to lead to irrational transgression of what is “morally good.” As in folk and fairy tales, and, as we have seen, in Disney’s rendition of them, Mitchison’s theories are based on a good/evil dichotomy, but it does not necessarily correlate with rational/irrational behaviour.<sup>87</sup> Though a pacifist herself, she argues that the non-resistance and non-violence of the German Socialists in the face of the Nazi usurping of political and cultural power during the early 1930s showed that pacifism did not necessarily equate a morally good choice of action because good deeds does not negate the evil it reacts against. As Four explains, “The Wolf is too much for us; he refuses to be hoodwinked by the gentle and subtle. And, in the end, it is he who has the teeth and claws, the strength and the will to evil” (23). Against such an adversary, pacifism is no longer an option.

Yet, she worried that to use the fear of war to provoke political action, as in the propaganda of the British pacifists, would allow for irrational action and an abandonment of moral. As Lassner points out, with the British Union of Fascists becoming more apparent in the streets, mustering up rallies both in 1934 and 1936, Fascism seemed a tangible threat also within British borders as well as without.<sup>88</sup> This fear was something she understood all too well – in *The Moral Basis of Politics*, she writes: “I dislike having this fear, and it is certainly not likely to lead to intelligent action; when I allow it to get at me too much I become irrational, nightmare haunted, unable to think clearly, or, for that matter, to think at all; I find myself cowering like a rabbit.”<sup>89</sup> This quote reads much like a synopsis of “The Fourth Pig” as it mirrors the overwhelming anxiety which comes with finally acknowledging the threat which the Wolf poses – “The thought of the Wolf is more than a pig’s brain can hold” (24). At this final stage of passivity one stands alone because one can no longer trust one’s friends are not the Wolf in disguise, the fear having grown in such intensity that it can only manifest as irrational paranoia: “One movement that reminds me of what I believe the Wolf is like, and I have struck out, I have knocked down, I have injured or killed my friend. And ah then, can I

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<sup>87</sup> Mitchison MBP: 202-203

<sup>88</sup> Lassner: 59

<sup>89</sup> Mitchison MBP: 265

be sure that the Wolf is not in me, that I am not myself the Wolf's finally clever and successful disguise?" (24) Irrationality, the story suggests, can only serve the interest of evil.

The final two sections contain what I deem direct intertextual references to "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?", the theme song of Disney's short film, through what Four calls "the song of the pigs" (25). While concluding the account of her three brothers, she recounts that now even Three "is afraid and there is no more playing and dancing for the others" (25). At such a time, the only possibility for action against the Wolf is the last stand: "I can sing the song still, the brave song of the pigs, crying out we are not afraid, we have this and that and the other, and we will die waving the Pig banner" (25). In *The Moral Basis of Politics*, Mitchison discusses how the use of non-violence in Germany at the brink of Nazi takeover created a vastly different effect in the overall mustering of antipathy towards fascism than the violent defence the Austrians put, despite the fact that it was clear from the beginning that neither stood a chance.<sup>90</sup> "The Germans probably had the least chance of winning by force," she writes, "[b]ut they did not try. And the world, though sorry and indignant for them, and admiring some of them, was not moved by any tragic moral drama." "The Austrians," however, "gave the world and their cause a heroic and tragic drama and the means of conversion." There seems to be an echo of this argument of the value in the last stand in the tiny shimmer of hope of a happy ending which Four envisions could spring from her last stand: "perhaps after we are dead there will be something, [...] the silver shadow of the way back to the old sty" (25-26).

But a happy ending for the fourth little pig is impossible in this apocalyptic future, as fear has become all consuming. "I am afraid, and afraid almost all the time, even when I am singing the song; the noise of ourselves singing it doesn't keep the fear out of the back of my head any longer" (26). "Three was afraid," she says, "but yet he thought he had the cure for fear; he thought the time would come when no pig need fear the Wolf" (26). But curing fear is only curing the symptom; the Wolf is the disease, the "miasmatic evil" (23) which unchecked will only inspire new fear. Rather than rewrite the story of the three pigs, Mitchison disrupts the rule of three to portray the consequences of their utopian ending, claiming it a false ideal. As such, "The Fourth Pig" works to shatter the illusion created by the allegorical meaning which the Disney short film's gained in popular culture, providing a counterargument in the same vein as the idea which Mitchison opposed was portrayed.

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<sup>90</sup> Mitchison MBP: 202-203

## 1.4 Conclusion

As my analysis has shown, “The Fourth Pig” and the first part of “Jack the Giant Killer” both portray a population and its leaders’ inability to recognise a palpable threat against their society and the panic and paralysis which ensues when that threat is upon them. Pacifism in the 1930s, these stories suggest, is futile and, more profoundly, immoral because an invasion of evil forces is inevitable. In order to warn against the tendency towards atavism which they recognized in their society, Mitchison and Coppard craft dystopian projections of their fear, albeit in fantastic allegorical forms, using the language and the motifs of popular culture to inspire action. The use of English fairy tales as intertextual links to their own, along with the heavy reliance on popular culture and popular forms of entertainment, speaks of a will to meet the people on the people’s terms in order to awaken their audience to the danger facing their nation. With the cultural memory of the First World War still fresh, it is not surprising that Coppard and Mitchison should use as their antagonists monsters of gigantic proportions which moves at enormous speed and can be seemingly everywhere at once.

The rule of three stands central to the allegories of both tales, as in Coppard’s subtle ranking of the three giants, which, I have argued, suggests that the giant which metaphorically stands for Fascism could be construed as the greater threat. Mitchison, however, centres on rule more profoundly when she disrupts it, forcing a continuation which challenges the reader’s expectation of an enclosed narrative, opening up for the possibility that the strategy idealized in the Disney version of the tale could lead to a dystopian nightmarish future. “Jack the Giant Killer,” as we have seen, has a dual nature as a depiction of a dystopian near-future based on the catastrophic consequences of his current government’s attitude towards extremist fractions of the political Left and Right which he provides with a resolution, though a reading of the shift of power from government to capitalist forces as a utopian happily-ever-after depends on the reader’s principles. There is no lack of satire about the second and last part of the Jack tale, as it pokes fun at the devious and greedy nature of the capitalist leaders which Coppard suggests has been elevated to the position of the feudal fairy tale kings and princesses in the modern world. If aimed at an audience with socialist predilections, such an ending can itself be seen as a form of dystopia. This leads us to the next chapter, which like the latter half of Coppard’s tale purports to awaken the reader to the problematic nature of economic structures based on individualistic greed.



# 2 THE IMMORALITY OF GREED: FAIRY TALES CHALLENGING SOCIOECONOMIC STRUCTURES

## 2.1 Introduction

The years between the First World War and the publication of Davies' and Mitchison's intertextual fairy tales were coloured by a steady and confident rebuilding of industries which had been exhausted in a war fought on all expenses during the 1920s, followed by an economic depression which lasted through the early 1930s. A nation with a capitalist economy, Britain was dependent on international finances and trades to maintain its position as the world's most formidable empire, and the stock market crash and its consequences disrupted any chance of stability. As Branson and Heinemann writes in their book *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, the depression in Britain attained some unique features compared to the other nations affected: while foodstuff from the colonies remained cheap, meaning that they could feed their working class, the long-going outsourcing of industries to the colonies led to a failure to invest in "modernizing production at home, [contributing] to the technical backwardness of the older basic industries in Britain."<sup>91</sup>

Unemployment was astonishingly high even in the boom years of the 20s throughout Western Europe, according to Eric Hobsbawm, averaging on 10 to 12 per cent of Britain's labour force; but during the worst period of the Slump, 1932-33, it rose to a staggering 22-23 per cent, and it was never able to sink below 16-17 per cent before the second world war.<sup>92</sup> Not only did traditional labour industries suffer, but professions associated with the middle class was no longer safe, and re-securing a job could take not months but years. In a simultaneous development, the fully employed retained stable wages which, because of the lowered prices on food, resulted in more purchasing power and the rapid growth of "consumption industries such as private housebuilding, furniture, motor cars and entertainment." In folk memory, i.e. the memory of common people based on their everyday lives, the interwar period was one of great social suffering, despite the fact that the standards

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<sup>91</sup> Branson, Noreen and Margot Heinemann. *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1971. Pages 1-5

<sup>92</sup> Hobsbawm: 90-95; 96. As Hobsbawm adds: "The trauma of the Great Slump was underlined by the fact that the one country that had clamorously broken with capitalism appeared to be immune to it: the Soviet Union."

of living were better and poverty had decreased overall from what had been the case 30 years prior. The contrasts of means created tensions across the class barriers: as Hobsbawm writes, workers without access to means of production – and therefore any means of self-preservation – and largely without social security became a liability to Western governments, who were forced to focus their priority on social conditions rather than economic ones, especially in order to prevent mass radicalization.<sup>93</sup>

### **2.1.1 Socialism as a morally superior alternative**

The somewhat exaggerated manner in which the social conditions were conceived by the people and by writers was partly explained by what George Watson refers to as “the myth of catastrophe” among intellectuals – which, in its economic variety, he describes as the apocalyptic belief in the inevitable fall of capitalism – as well as extensive effort put into create surveys to map the conditions of the poor and to establish an economic barrier to determine what constitutes poverty based on the prices of rent and the bare necessities for life.<sup>94</sup> Mitchison was one of several socialist novelists who took part in documentation in order to raise awareness of the poor conditions of workers and the unemployed in an effort to convince the middle and upper class public of the immorality behind the structures which allowed such inequality. In *The Moral Basis of Politics*, Mitchison asks how the citizens of a nation can be said to be a unified group, how they can feel connected as a people, “when the people who compose it live so differently from another with such utterly different sets of interest.”<sup>95</sup> Though the basic inventions of running water, gas, and the radio, was equally distributed due to its simplicity, technical and cultural aspects taken for granted in upper and middle class life, such as the telephone and books, were hardly ever found in the poorest homes.

As Hobsbawm writes, the Great Slump allowed socialism to become the moral alternative over a failed and corrupt capitalism, a position in which he claims it would surely not have been without the socioeconomic disaster.<sup>96</sup> Mitchison identified the financial breakdown and fragility of the German economy after the war as a cause for the German people’s susceptibility towards hateful and authoritarian fascist rhetoric, and she claimed that the class

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<sup>93</sup> Hobsbawm: 90- 96

<sup>94</sup> Watson, George. *Politics and Literature in Modern Britain*. London: The Macmillan Press LTD. 1977. Pages 103-105

<sup>95</sup> Mitchison MBP: 7

<sup>96</sup> Hobsbawm: 8

antagonisms in Britain created by the economic insecurities and unemployment, which she feared would lead the country into a similar direction, was orchestrated by individuals “creating monopoly situations” making money by “artificially increasing national fears and jealousies.”<sup>97</sup>

The stories discussed in this chapter all revolve around the immorality of upholding a society of hierarchical structures based on individualistic greed, but they are each positioned from their own vantage point. Thus, the social layers involved with in the stories and which could be construed as their main targeted audiences vary greatly: A.G. Macdonnel’s “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” delves into the world of upper and middle class businessmen and bankers, and the dangers of their immoral digressions; Mitchison’s “Hansel and Gretel” is told in great sympathy and solidarity with the working poor; lastly, “Soria Moria Castle” is directed towards the intellectual elite, making fiction of the theoretical and ideological debates Mitchison herself was involved with. Unfortunately, though Mitchison left ample evidence of her political views which are a valuable theoretical framework in this thesis, the same cannot, from what I have construed, be said of Macdonnel. But as with the other stories of the two collections his fairy tale stands firmly on its own accord as a testament to his time and its political and cultural moment. I contend that the common theme in all three stories of this chapter is the moral basis of economic structures, and the greed, immorality and corruption which individualistic ideologies of economics such as capitalism inspire. Therefore, my analysis will diverge into how these fairy tales function as what I argue are separate parts of a larger discussion concerning the dominant socioeconomic structures and their relationship to a moral/immoral dichotomy.

## **2.2 “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”: The Corruptive Powers of the Stock Market**

In the rewriting of classic folk and fairy tales as seen in Davies’ and Mitchison’s collections, the directness with which the modern tale is intertextually linked to its original can vary greatly, and to various effects. In “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” A.G. Macdonnel elegantly transports the plot and characters of the original tale from *The Thousand and One Nights* into a modern British setting, very much proving the sense of timelessness which fairy

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<sup>97</sup> Mitchison MBP: 215

tales have culturally attained – perhaps especially when it comes to the theme of economics.<sup>98</sup> The modern tale’s Casey and Alastair, nicknamed Cassim and Ally, are sons of Fergus O’Donnell Barber, who from his sons’ births has attributed them with the qualities of the Irish and of the Scottish respectfully, both nations which he invariably claims to be the heir of. At reaching adulthood, the sons settle in London; Cassim thriving as a successful stockbroker while Ally lives the life of the struggling writer. That is, until the day Ally discovers that his telephone, rather than connecting him with the operator when dialling O, allows him to eavesdrop to the conversations of the office of a financial house. As is soon clear, the office deals in unfavourable shares in Middle Eastern companies which values increase exponentially shortly after purchase due to unforeseen circumstances, and by discreetly investing according to the office’s coded messages Ally sets himself up as handsomely wealthy man – a scheme which works perfectly until the day he includes his brother into the game.

By resituating the classical tale within an interwar context, Macdonnel neatly lays bare the continuity of socioeconomic structures and class consciousness which has led to the modern predicament, while illuminating how the power hierarchy within these same structures have drastically changed with 20th century capitalism. As Tatar writes, the tale “reads like an allegory of the modern times and reminds us that fairy tales, with their focus on primal fears and desires, are easy to tailor to modern socioeconomic conditions.”<sup>99</sup> It is the details which Macdonnel changes from the original tale to accustom it to contemporary society which tell of his subversion, because they expose how the moral at the heart of the fairy tale, despite being set in a different moral landscape, remains the same: the poor who humbly wishes to have the means to live comfortably is awarded, while greed and arrogance will inevitably lead to downfall.

### **2.2.1 “Open Sesame”: Magic transported from the Arabian wonder tale to the technology of the modern business world**

“Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” remains one of the three stories which has been most deeply ingrained in Western culture from the collection of Arabic fairy tales, *The Thousand and One Night*, or alternatively *Arabian Nights*, in addition to “Sindbad” and

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<sup>98</sup> Macdonnel, A.G. “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.” In *The Fairies Return: Or New Tales for Old*. Ed. Maria Tatar. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 186-207. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter.

<sup>99</sup> Tatar I:16

“Aladdin” – both found in re-imagined versions in *The Fairies Return* – and was first published in *Le Mille et une nuits*, Antoine Galland’s 1717 collection. It was widely featured in chapbooks in from the second half the 18th century, and as such would be very familiar to a lower and middle class British audience. The original tale establishes the brothers Kasim and Ali Baba with contrasting economic motives and class awareness; an opposition Macdonnel stays true to while he embroiders his own Cassim and Ally’s contrasts with the link to the nationalities attributed to them by their father. Alastair, “a dreamy, unpractical Scotsman” (189) who resolves to be a novelist in lack of other talents, lives in near poverty in a studio apartment with Carmelian, a “member of the Gaiety chorus” to whom he is not married. Cassim, “[i]nheriting all the tough business-instincts, the capacity for hard work, and the relentless realism of the Irish” marries into wealth, his wife exceeding his “Irish puritanism” in her gloating of her brother-in-laws misfortunes and in her disapproval of his romantic life. The addition of sexual morals to the tale further highlights the way Cassim’s wife sees herself and her husband as the moral superior of her brother-in-law and his partner and how this is tied for her with economic prosperity. In the eyes of Mrs. Cassim Barber, by way of her Christian virtue, Ally’s “unrelieved and unrelievable poverty” (190) is surely the work of “the Almighty”; an unsympathetic determinism which tragically impacts the story as it progresses as it is her jealousy and anger with Ally and Carmelian’s sudden affluence and their following social climb and unceremonial marriage which prompts Cassim to take part in the scheme that leads to his demise. The satirical juxtaposition of Mrs. Cassim’s assertion of her Christian virtues and her class-consciousness and jealousy towards Carmelian provokes the question of which of the two is the morally better person.

The initiation of the two tales starts in a similar vein, with the younger brother’s accidental discovery of a source of unlawful treasure while doing his bit of menial work. Ali Baba happens upon the cave of the forty thieves while gathering dry branches to sell, and overhears the magical words – the infamous “Open Sesame” and “Shut Sesame” – which controls the doors. Remembering these words, Ali Baba can swiftly move in and out of the cave with enough gold to support himself and his wife, cleverly covering his steps. Macdonnel replaces the magical doors with an unruly telephone line, which, through “some tiny technical fault, a short circuit perhaps, or a linking-up of one wire with another wire to which it ought not have been linked up” (191), lets Ally Barber listen in on the illegal transactions of the Sesame Financial Syndicate, a financial company whose recent success has shaken the stock market.

Like all the fairy tales discussed in this thesis, the 1930s “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” plays with the juxtaposition of the recognisably real, or the plausible, told in the language of the unreal. The malfunction of the Sloane Exchange – the telephone company which, as the narrator reminds its interwar audience, only recently replaced the automatic operator system with dial up – that has caused Ally’s recurrent transference to the Syndicate’s private lines is described as “one of those electrical mysteries which are beyond ordinary comprehension” (190-191). Innovations of technology, the narrator implies, is as incomprehensible and fickle as enchantments for the uninitiated. The financial world could as well have been an entirely different world to Ally, who is “transported [...] by magic carpet into a life that he knew nothing about” (191). When using the words and plot devices of the Arabic fairy tales in this section more than any other, Macdonnel’s narrator creates a playful mood mimicking fairy tale narrative, or even metafictionally disrupting it by inverting a common trope: “Now, although the words Open Sesame meant nothing to Ally, being obviously some sort of code, any child knew of the recent sensational fluctuations of the Ispahan and North Persian Gold-mine Company” (192).

### **2.2.2 The consequences of greed**

Unfortunately, as with the original fairy tale, Ally’s success inadvertently spawns tragic circumstances which contrasts this playful tone. The Arabic tale’s central moral is a lesson of cunning and common sense centred around the less fortunate, and it is Kasim which must pay the heavy price of our learning. When Ali Baba discovers the hidden cave of the forty robbers, he is able to enter and exit because he remembers the magical words, and he takes only a fraction of the wealth inside and covers his steps so they won’t know it is missing.<sup>100</sup> Kasim, when he coaxes the secret off of his brother, recklessly brings ten mules to carry the treasure; but once inside, he forgets the magical words, and is slain at the doorstep when the robber’s arrive. Ali Baba, who finds his brother’s body in pieces at the entrance of the cave, must hide his brother’s murder with the help of Kasim’s slave girl, Morgiana, who from this point on becomes the assertive character who sees through and avoids the robber’s attacks on her new master. With Ali Baba’s economic rise, the role of the clever and the subtle is transferred to her.

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<sup>100</sup> Lang, Andrew. *The Blue Fairy Book*. Philadelphia: David McKay Company. 1921. Pages 188-195

When Macdonnel reworks the Arabic tale into his post-Depression stock market story, the moral regarding the deadly pitfalls of greed become even more poignant. It is implied that Ali Baba's choice to help himself to the robbers' treasure is a matter of common sense, as are Ally Barber's investments. Like his inspiration, Ally buys and sells just enough shares to go unnoticed by the Syndicate while setting himself up as a comfortable man, and, as the narrator explains, "Alastair, being a man of letters, was also a man of sense. He knew, as so few other business-men know, when to stop" (194). As Tatar writes, because Ally is able to avoid being "implicated by the tale's nexus of greed and guilt" he is the rewarded hero: he is "Jack, Lucky Hans, Fair Ivan, Tom Thumb, and all other dreamers and numbskulls who are by nature deserving of good fortune and thereby escape the fate of their rapacious, evil fairy-tale brethren."<sup>101</sup> Though Ally clearly takes the money for himself, there is an indication that he takes only enough for him and Carmelian to live more comfortably and respectably, a life which all the humble folk surely aspire to. Because he does not think like a businessman and a capitalist, and therefore, the story suggests, does not feel the need to flaunt his new wealth, he does not leave traces as his brother does. However, despite the justifications offered for Ally's actions, the tale remains ambiguous about whether or not they are morally good. Likewise, the tale is vague on Ally's relationship with capitalism in spite of being a man of letters – a quality of his which the story juxtaposes with his brother's sense of business – as his humble stint as a stock market investor might make him a morally better capitalist, but a capitalist nonetheless.

Cassim, led on by his greedy and arrogant wife, asks his brother for leave to use the telephone in the studio apartment to the same ends, despite knowing the Sesame Syndicate by reputations as "little better than robbers" (196). Ally's retort "don't blame me if you are stung" foreshadows Cassim's ruin, as he invests as heavily into the scheme as to raise suspicion in the Syndicate many times over, and doing so in the name of the company he works for, Messrs. Jogson and Batt. When the Syndicate orchestrates a false scheme in order to eliminate the intrusive competition, the humble bankers are left in absolute bankruptcy. Cassim is soon reported missing, only to be found in the studio apartment, not killed, but having taken his own life. This change from the original is an eerie mirroring of the one of the most prominent images of the stock market crash of 1929 of bankers suffering similar fates.

In the scene preceding the discovery of Cassim's body, Macdonnel recasts the slave girl Morgiana twice, as the washerwoman in the building of Ally's studio apartment and, most

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<sup>101</sup> Tatar I: 16

prominently, as Mr. H. Al Rashid, the (male) representative of Messrs. J.P. Morgan, one of a group of powerful banking-houses “gunning for the Sesame Syndicate” (199-200). J.P. Morgan offers Ally a hundred thousand pounds to help bring down the Syndicate, by continuing to follow their schemes in the extravagant manner of Cassim. Following orders out of Morgiana House, London, Ally soon picks up on the Syndicate’s false scheme when he recognizes their false pretences with the new embellishments of their usually curt messages – “The biggest thing we’ve ever done, Sam; Colossal” (204). In a dangerous gamble but with the powerful Morgiana backing him, Ally wins an intense and high-suspense buying war with the “the terrible forty” (206). The hero is awarded with his kingdom, and in a satirical manner at that: now a wealthy man with an honourable reputation, Ally is made an Honorary LL.D. by the University of Accrington, as they are “fully alive to the fact that the novels of so rich a man must be of exceptional merit” (207). The intellectual world is apparently equally as corrupt as the financial.

When venturing willingly into the world of the high playing schemes of the capitalist stock market one must tread carefully to avoid the pitfalls of corruption. As with Coppard’s “Jack the Giant Killer,” “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” remains ambiguous about its portrayal of the stock market in and of itself, reflecting only the uncertainty of the market post-World War I. Though the narrative development of Ally Barber follows that of Ali Baba closely in the beginning of the tale – in that he is an active and assertive character as long as he is poor but becomes passive when rich. However, the recasting of the slave girl who takes over for Ali Baba as the confident character, and who eventually saves him, as a powerful banking-house seems to rob the tale of its moral message that reward will be duly paid for alertness and wisdom by humble master who has climbed the social ladder himself – as well as an active female character. Additionally, the banking house, as an institution of power, takes on the role of the master for which Ally Barber is employed throughout their scheme to take down the Syndicate. Unlike the original fairy tale, our hero is not the one in control, and not the one with the power to reward diligent servitude – as with Jack in Coppard’s “Jack the Giant Killer” Ally ends up as a pawn in a much bigger game than is staged in the original. Macdonnel creates a satirical ambiguity which generates an uneasiness in regards to the shift of power which the stock market fairy tale of the 1930s necessitates. Like the fairy tales discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, it stands rather as a cautionary tale against immoral ambitions within its landscape. In interwar London as in the enchanted Arabian deserts of the



fairy tale world, fortune favours those who seeks to make a living without greed and corruption.

## 2.3 The Ruthlessness of Capitalism: “Hansel and Gretel” as an Allegory of Working Class Struggles

The most playful of Mitchison’s intertextual fairy tales, “Hansel and Gretel” is set in Birmingham, staging an exaggerated juxtaposition of extremes of wealth and poverty.<sup>102</sup> Billy and Minnie Jones – the latter dubbed Minnie Mouse because she was so “little and pretty and merry”<sup>103</sup> – are shoved out of their home after enraging their mother and, as they wander off to “Corporation Street,” are lured to the home of a fur-clad witch in a Rolls Royce with presents and chocolate. But rather than being taken to a gingerbread house, this witch’s house is made of solid gold and silver and furnished with riches, a magic world in which an eerie enchantment casts a green light on all of her servants which enfolds the wonders with a toxic and uncanny atmosphere. With the help of Sasha Sable, the little animal making the fur collar of the witch’s coat magically brought to life, Minnie is able to avoid the witch’s enchantment and save her big brother before the witch can enslave them. The children return to their remorseful mother, bringing back banknotes from the witch’s house which formerly made up a lampshade, vastly improving their income, and, more importantly, leading to their father finding employment.

In a period of comparable prosperity among the population, the dehumanizing conditions of the working poor and the unemployed was for many definite proof of the iniquity of the current socio-economic structures and a confirmation of the moral obligation to usher in socialism as an alternative. By focusing on the lived experience of the poor, Mitchison shows detailed understanding about the psychological hardships of family life brought on by unemployment, and how social mores and values work to further create antagonisms within the working class. I argue that shifting from the traditional theme of abandonment of children to one of solidarity within the family, the modern “Hansel and

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<sup>102</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. “Hansel and Gretel.” In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 74-89. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter.

<sup>103</sup> A reference to the Disney character which appeared in the Mickey Mouse shorts, which often dealt with Mickey as a poor worker or unemployed where they get to stick it to the man (Watts: 63-63); here, however, Minnie gets to be the active character who teams up with Sasha Sable and rescues her passive brother. Also, the witch of the Lang version is introduced when she asks the children “Nibble, nibble, little mouse / Who’s nibbling my house?” (Lang BFB: 199)

Gretel” is a psychological tale in which the children learn to understand their socio-economic reality and the immorality of their conditions, an understanding which will allow them to develop into adults who are capable of slaying the witch. As such, the story can be read as an allegory of how the working-class must come to a deeper understanding about their position in order to rise up in class struggle and revolution in solidarity to take down the dehumanizing forces of capitalism.

### **2.3.1 Instability of income and the plight of the poor from German folktale to 1930s Birmingham**

“Hansel and Gretel” was first heard and recorded by the Grimm brothers in Germany between 1808 and 1810, and subsequently reworked, republished, and translated by them and others into countless versions. It was part of Andrew Lang’s first collection of fairy tales, the *Blue Fairy Book*, in 1889, a likely source for Mitchison.<sup>104</sup> Despite its enormous popularity, “Hansel and Gretel” has, as Zipes writes, a moral code which is deeply prejudiced regarding “the consequences of hunger in poor families, the trauma of abandonment, the depictions of women as nasty stepmothers and witches, survival, and the sanctification of paternal rule.”<sup>105</sup> The actions of the parents are rationalized by blaming the mother/stepmother as the initiator of the plan and faulting the father for meekly allowing her to decide; in the end he is forgiven by the children because he, as it says in the Lang edition, “had not passed a happy hour since he left them in the wood,” while the abrupt addition to this sentence about the stepmother’s fate – “but the woman had died” – implies that her lack of remorse justifies her death.<sup>106</sup> The father is thus rewarded with the jewels won by the children and patriarchy is justified.

In his essay about the adaptations of the fairy tale, Zipes demonstrates how many writers post 1945 have written their own versions in order to discuss this problematic narrative; but already here in her 1936 rewriting, Mitchison subverts these troubling morals to explain the difficult conditions of living which the poor families of the unemployed suffered. Though the two causes are largely separated in *The Fourth Pig*, she merges her feminist views with socialism in this story as it revolves around an issue where she felt they were inseparable: the specific plight working class and poor women, who she claimed was grossly overlooked by feminists who focused only on middle and upper class women, and socialists who focused

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<sup>104</sup> Lang BFB: 196-201

<sup>105</sup> Zipes, Jack. *Why Fairy Tales Stick*. New York: Routledge. 2006. Pages 195-196

<sup>106</sup> Lang BFB: 201

only on men.<sup>107</sup> Thus, rather than castigating the mother figure, the 1930s “Hansel and Gretel” portrays a great sympathy towards her, her situation, and her frustration. Restoring the character as a biological mother, as found in the earliest editions of the Grimm’s written version, Mitchison’s Mrs. Jones is tired of a life of only affording the very basic necessities without hope for improvement. “[S]he was mostly cross to Billy and Minnie and they were frightened of her,” the narrator explains, but she goes on to largely justify the mother’s frustrations (74).<sup>108</sup>

Mr. Jones, a mechanic, has been unemployed for near two years, spending the little money he produces from gambling on beer and sweets for the children. In the Grimms’ consistent reworking of the tale, as Zipes goes on to write, they made great effort to erase the father as victimizer and making him a symbol of the stable home; in the modern tale, the blame for providing an unstable household is placed on the paternal figure, both on him personally and on the society’s expectations and failure to provide him with the opportunity to fulfil them. There was an assumption that women should stay in the home rather than work after marriage, and even if they defied social stigma – let alone if their husbands were willing to defy the embarrassment of not being the breadwinner – employers would most often not give them work based on their status.<sup>109</sup>

Further, the consequences of low income and this disharmonious home life puts strains on their social and professional lives; as this story portrays, the social embarrassment of unemployment and poverty leads to the father’s withdrawal from professional and social arenas, dropping “out of his Union and out of the brass band he used to play in.”(74) The narrator puts focus on how their meagre means does not allow them to invest in new clothing: Mr. Jones finding it “uncomfortable meeting the other chaps now he’d only got the one suit for Sundays and weekdays” (74); Mrs. Jones making due with a coat from the Church Jumble “which had belonged to the vicar’s mother” (75) that she had not found the time to alter; Minnie’s second-hand shoes, as ill-fitting as her mother’s coat, and her patched clothing (86). The fateful day when the story takes place, Mrs. Jones lashes out in anger after the children when she comes home to see that they have made a mess of the house rather than helping her clean, causing her to break the milk jug in her hand. It is the last drop which unleashes her frustration: as the narrator explains, “the milk was what she’d been saving for the kids’ supper

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<sup>107</sup> Lassner: 66-67

<sup>108</sup> Zipes WFTS: 197

<sup>109</sup> Branson: 22

– she’d done without it in her tea for weeks now except on Sundays when she had a drop of condensed – and the jug was one she’d had for a wedding present and it belonged, as you might say, to the times when she’d thought life was worth living” (76). The laughing children – “for breaking things mostly is a joke, to kids” (76) – are thrown out after harsh scolding, and “she sat down by the table and let herself go slummocking all across it, and she cried and cried” (77).

The build up to this situation, the children leaving their chores half-finished to play, shows the immaturity in their detachment to their socio-economic reality. Of course, that does not necessarily mean that they are fully in the wrong, as children they are bound to live in a detached world of their own, and their sense of responsibility has not yet been developed. Their idolization of their father stems from his irresponsible spending on sweets and the affection he shows them when he sits them on his knees to tell fairy stories on the occasions when he has won at betting, money which they in reality cannot afford to not spend on proper food and clothing, creating a greater antagonism between the parents and a naive favouritism by the children (74-75). Billy’s reasons for quitting his chores are purely selfish – “I don’t like scrubbing, Min” (75) – but Minnie retains a sense of duty towards her mother, though it is linked to the outward threat of the P.A.C. man who she believes will catch them if they do not help their mother. The P.A.C., or the Public Assistance Committees, were responsible for the payment of unemployment benefits, but their strict means tests to decide how much each individual and family could receive and their low scales quickly made them the Big Bad Wolf of the unemployment crisis – perhaps a Big Bad Wolf with which unruly children could be threatened.<sup>110</sup>

### **2.3.2 The hard lesson on good and evil magic: resisting the enchantment of money**

As Opie and Opie point out, the “Hansel and Gretel” of tradition is part of a series of tales in which small children are subject of an involuntary struggle against an ogre or witch who they must outwit, unlike tale types with the hero as the initiator of the struggle such as the Jack tales.<sup>111</sup> However, in Mitchison’s modern take she avoids the plot objects of the pebbles and the breadcrumbs as Mrs. Jones only throws the children out into the street; it is their own choice to wander off and they voluntarily go into the woods of urban Birmingham, i.e.

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<sup>110</sup> Branson: 20-29

<sup>111</sup> Opie: 236

Corporation Street where “the gentlemen in white collars” (77) and “the ladies with real silk stockings” go “into the beautiful great shops and movie palaces,” and the children outside “stuck their nose and dabbed their grubby fingers on the glass.” But Billy and Minnie, with their childish wish to entertain themselves, do not understand the dangers; as the narrator warns, “they weren’t safe really, those shops. They weren’t what they looked like. Things aren’t, mostly” (77). After standing outside for a while they are approached by an old woman in silk, fur coat, jewels, and a hat with a bright blue feather, who tells them to come with her into the shop so she can buy them presents. Billy, “a bit dazed and stupid” (78) as the narrator says, picks train and rails, but Minnie wishes for a work-basket for her mother because she feels bad about the milk jug, “and she thought this would make up for it, and besides it would pawn for five shillings easy.” Despite the temptations of the shops, Minnie retains the good sense to want the tools the family desperately need to mend their clothes; unlike Billy, who is enamoured by the riches and the toys the witch offers.

Once seated in the backseat of the witch’s Rolls-Royce, Minnie grows weary of the old woman, who when smiling shows the tip of her tongue “which were rather too pink and moist-looking for anyone her age” (79) and of the “kind of nasty green light that there was all round the chauffeur’s cap and shoulders.” At this point Mitchison’s plot deviates from that of the traditional “Hansel and Gretel” with her introduction of the magical helper Sasha Sable, the fur collar of the witch’s coat who comes alive to warn Minnie of the witch. The allusion to Russia in the name – Sasha being a well-known pet name for Russians, and Sable being a species of martens mainly inhabiting the forests of Russia – seems like a nod towards the country’s position as the high seat of Marxist and socialist ideas at the time. This introduction, I contend, is the crux of Mitchison’s subversion, because the sable is there to guide the children out of a situation they are not able to get out of on their own.

The old woman, Sasha explains, is a witch who captures and eats children or use them as her slaves, and he has been allowed to come to life in order to warn Minnie to, as he says, “get away before she gets you too” (81). The extent of the witch’s horrors is beyond anything the folktales told of:

“Do you know about the silk she’s wearing, Minnie Mouse? There were little children out in China, and she trapped them like she trapped the rest of us, and every day they had to dip their hands into boiling water to fetch out the cocoons of the dead silk-worms to be spun into her dresses.”

“What ever happened to the children in the end?” said Minnie, going all shivery.

“They died, mostly. That’s what witches do to children. They kill them and eat them and turn them into spiders or bake them into gingerbread. She’s got slaves all over the world. She’s got brown slaves who dive into the sea to pull Jane Oyster out of her bed and cut her open to steal her pearls, and sometimes they get caught by the great clams and octopuses and drowned; she’s got black slaves who work in the hot diamond pits for her. And here too, she has her slaves at work the whole time, making things for her and carrying them to her house” (81).

The witch is the epitome of imperialistic and capitalistic greed who without moral scruples exploit those who desperately need to make a living. The change of the building material of the witch’s house is found in older sources as well as here: Opie and Opie refers to the French story “Finette Cendron” where three princesses follow much the same trajectory as “Hansel and Gretel” – including the push into the oven – where they encounter a giant’s house made of gold and jewels, which they suggest are “more attractive to princesses.”<sup>112</sup> Once inside the witch’s house – “papered with pound notes and ten shilling notes” (82) and “crossed cheques for a thousand pounds a piece” – she attempts to lure them with the strategy of the traditional tale, providing them with delicious food and soft beds, only the £ sign sewn on the pocket of their pyjamas “seemed to burn rather and give them a pain over the heart” (84) and around every corner green-hued servants stood guard to ensure their prisoners would not escape. In the modern world, Mitchison’s story suggests, money provides the enchantments that makes people turn a blind eye to immorality, even to the kidnapping of little children.

Another deviation by Mitchison is the metafictional insertion of references to the original tale. Minnie is well aware of the trajectory of “Hansel and Gretel” and plans to assume Gretel’s part in the narrative in order to slay the witch: “She remembered knives and cauldrons and fires waiting, and how the children in the stories were fattened up to be eaten” (82), and she wondered “hard how to do in the witch, remembering the way the children in the fairy tales used to manage it, tipping her up into her own oven and turning her into gingerbread – only there didn’t seem to be any oven here and she didn’t know what else to do” (85). Killing the witch at this stage is a task well beyond 9-year-old Minnie Mouse, as Sasha Sable rightly tells her when arrives to help them steal out of the house: “Next time, perhaps. If you’re a good girl and remember all about it and never let the witch get at you

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<sup>112</sup> Opie: 236

again” (87). Sasha’s repetitions of his plea for them to remember their experiences with the witch is a plea that it has been the seed from where they can grow into witch slayers.

But for now, their story ends with their safe return to their parents with the gifts of work basket and the lampshade banknotes, which Mr. Jones changed – as he did not want “it to get round to the P.A.C. man” (89), who would likely have stopped paying them their benefit. The money allows them regain a somewhat respectable position in society without embarrassment: “Mrs. Jones paid up all her bills, and they both began to hold up their heads again with their neighbours” (89). Though no believed their stories, “no more than you do, I’ll be bound” (89), as the narrator says, the last paragraph of the tale gives a hint of a utopian future:

But how Billy and Minnie grew up, and how later on they went back to the witch’s house, and how they and their friends killed the old witch – for she was still going strong – and made things so that she could never come back again to Birmingham or anywhere else, that’s another story and I haven’t time to tell you today (89).

Because of Billy and Minnie’s dramatic introduction to the dangers of financial exploitation they were able to grasp their socio-economic reality, reaching an important understanding which prepares them to learn how to stand against the immorality of the power structures in capitalism and imperialism.

## **2.4 Marxist metamorphosis in “Soria Moria Castle”: Magic, science, and socialism**

Out of the tales of the two modern fairy tale collections which this thesis is concerned with, Mitchison’s “Soria Moria Castle,” I would venture, deviates most from its source material.<sup>113</sup> Told in a stream of consciousness style by a first person narrator, the story begins as the protagonist walks through the portcullis of a sand castle at sunset. The circumstances which has led to the position in which she finds herself are highly ambiguous: her memories of the construction of the castle and especially its purpose being only partial, or are perhaps intentionally hidden from us. Having shrunk in size – an “alteration of my scale of material

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<sup>113</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. “Soria Moria Castle.” In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 93-114. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter.

standards” (94) as she puts it – she goes on only to discover a witch. The witch shoves her through “the dark entrance of Soria Moria castle” (94) into a room with an enormous cauldron where it becomes clear that the witch intends to cook and eat her. When the protagonist finds her courage, proclaiming “I am not going into your cauldron!” (95), the witch offers her the choice of taking three objects instead. The objects – a grain of wheat, a grape seed, a small piece of iron ore – take her one by one on journeys of metamorphosis as she, in the form of these objects, experiences their development from first contact with life through their marvellous re-purposing in material and industrial culture. Her quest is to experience the anguish at immortality with which she, as finished products of the witch’s objects, is used in modern society.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Mitchison’s collection can be thought of in two parts, where the first make up the socio-economic fairy tales which are discussed here. The last of these, “Soria Moria Castle” stands out as addressing not the working or the lower middle class as does the rest of her stories, but rather her social and intellectual peers. The tale is dedicated to her close friend Douglas Cole, a noted member of the Fabian Society and avid advocate for socialism in Britain.<sup>114</sup> As Calder writes, Cole was an important influence on Mitchison’s growing “social and economic awareness” and her scepticism of the capitalist morality during the 1920s. Though she was never a member of the socialist party, Mitchison had great sympathy for their theories and implemented them in a huge bulk of her work. Based on the dedication to Cole and the reference to committee meetings within the story, it is likely that her life as a political activist serves as a backdrop to the narrative – perhaps, as in the fairy story “Adventure in the Debatable Land” from the same collection, she herself is the narrator.<sup>115</sup>

But I contend that another real life passion of the author, her investment in science, plays an important part of this tale.<sup>116</sup> As Warner writes, Mitchison “wanted to prove that science – her father and [her brother] Jack’s preserve in her family – could be reconciled with fantasy, which was her own strength. She refused to allow the latter to be dismissed by the former.” I argue that in “Soria Moria Castle” she makes use of them both in an exploration of how biological processes and innovations in science and technology can be utilized towards both

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<sup>114</sup> Calder: 101-102

<sup>115</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. “Adventure in the Debatable Land.” In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 180-195

<sup>116</sup> Warner, Marina. “Introduction.” In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Page 7. That Mitchison should eventually traverse into science fiction, and indeed become pioneering in the genre, seems only a natural progression.



moral and immoral ends by the various ideological forces of the Western world. Magical metamorphoses become the vehicle for the portrayal of the immorality which Mitchison identified within the ideologies of capitalist materialism and fascism. As the last of her socio-economic, intertextual fairy tales within the collection, “Soria Moria Castle” is the conclusion which summarizes her meditations of political and socio-economic problems and their structural and psychological causes.

#### **2.4.1 The Castle of Norwegian Folklore on the Sands of England**

The original “Soria Moria Castle” which Mitchison intertextually links to is a Norwegian folktale gathered by P.C. Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe and published in their collection *Norwegian Folktales* between 1841 and 1844. Several English translations were printed in various folk and fairy tale compilations in Britain, amongst them one in Andrew Lang’s *The Red Fairy Book* (1890), the second book in his series of fairy tale collections.<sup>117</sup> Seeing as Lang had been a friend of the Mitchison’s family, the Haldanes, throughout her childhood, it is likely that it is the version found in his book which she would be familiar with. The folktale follows Halvor, a good-for-nothing only son of poor farmer who would rather spend his time by the fireplace “raking about among the ashes” than doing honest work. After being persuaded to muster upon a ship which is caught adrift after a storm, Halvor becomes involved with three repeated events where he saves three princesses each guarded by a many-headed troll, all exclaiming “Hutetu! [...] It smells just as if there were Christian man’s blood here!”

After having lived with the princesses for a while, and having fallen in love with the youngest, Halvor wishes to visit his parents. The princesses grant the wish, on the condition that he does not tell anyone about them or the events which has brought him wealth as reward. But Halvor transgresses their interdiction and is left at his old home, heartbroken over his mistake with only a ring as a token of his beloved. He resolves to journey to find Soria Moria Castle and his Princess, three times meeting kindly strangers who in various ways help him on his way. The first, an old man, sells him his horse which leads him through strange woods; the second, an “old hag” aids him by asking the West Wind for the way to the castle and exchanging the old horse for “a pair of old boots [...] with which you can go fifteen quarters of a mile at each step.” Halvor follows the West Wind for a while, who guides him to some

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<sup>117</sup> Lang, Andrew. *The Red Fairy Book*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers. 1898. Pages 30-42

young girls washing clothes who gives directions for the last leg of the journey. On his path, he has learned that there is to be a wedding at the castle, and at the final wedding feast he slips the ring the Princess gave him into the glass as it is passed around to drink the bride and bridegroom's health – as the tale concludes: “‘Yes, he is the right one,’ cried the youngest Princess when she caught sight of him; so she flung the other out of the window and held her wedding with Halvor.”

Not many elements of this original folktale is recognizable in Mitchison's modern fairy tale, but one intertextual aspect might be construed from the modern story's short reference to another castle of Norwegian folklore. The protagonist is confronted by the witch at the entrance to the sandcastle when the latter senses the former's regret, saying: “If you hadn't decided to come to Soria Moria castle, you didn't need to have gone and built it!”(94) The dialogue which ensues provides ample clues to a backstory, for one a remark about a committee meeting where “the decision which it seemed certain I had but lately come to”(93) were likely made, alluding to a committee most likely responsible for the building of the castle. But secondly, the narrator's reply to the witch's remark – “there were reasons against the Castle East of the Sun” (94) – references the folktale “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” found in the same Asbjørnsen and Moe collection as “Soria Moria Castle” and featured in Lang's first compilation, *The Blue Fairy Book*.<sup>118</sup> Similarly to Soria Moria castle, the castle East of the Sun and West of the Moon lies in far off mysterious lands to where the heroine must find her way back after being cast off for breaking interdictions. On her way, the protagonist is helped three times by strangers because she in various fashions has proved herself sincere and thus worthy of the prince whose impending marriages she must hinder.<sup>119</sup>

In the origin tale of Mitchison's sandcastle, the traditional Soria Moria Castle is situated in an alternative landscape on the outskirts of the societies with a strong rural and folk identity, where the Christian faith lives next to legends and folk beliefs. As Halvor ventures to find the castle he moves into a realm outside Christian society – “[n]o Christian folk have been here for more than a hundred years,” as one of his helpers exclaim – and thus outside established Christian morality. This is very similar to the idea of the Debatable Land which Mitchison explores in the consecutive fairy stories of her collection, where her heroines moves in to explore their agencies and strengths without the bounds of patriarchal society.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Lang BFB: 16-24

<sup>119</sup> A further similarity is the help of personified manifestations of the wind, but in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” the South, the East and the North Wind appear in addition to the West Wind.

<sup>120</sup> See especially “Adventures in the Debatable Land” in *The Fourth Pig*, referenced above

To recreate the Soria Moria Castle could be read as an attempt to venture into a space outside morality to discuss the current society's inherent immorality. As Mitchison writes in *The Moral Basis of Politics*, she was well aware that British society was built by Christian concepts and ideas, and "as this has been happening for a good many hundred years, it has conditioned us towards a certain view of life" which would make it difficult to gain support for new doctrines of social, economic and political structures such as socialism.<sup>121</sup> Also, the choice of a Norwegian fairy tale as basis could be a nod towards the triumph of social democracy in Scandinavia.<sup>122</sup>

The narrator's nod towards the committee's discussion of the "necessity for realism" (94) further suggests the role of the fantastic and the unreal in the castle's construction. If we remember the definition of the function of the folk and fairy tale as Zipes put it, namely the interrogation of "the lack of correlation between real world practises and ethical idealistic options," the fantastic plays the part of rearranging the familiar so as to explore more morally acceptable alternatives to oppressive social and political structures. To construct a castle of the fairy tale variety could thus be to build an arena for the manifestations of the theoretical discussions, for the ideas of moral and immoral choices to be a lived experience from which a change can be made. The witch's part is more ambiguous, but likely functioning as obstacle to hinder the protagonist in turning back – once you have decided to enter the castle you better finish what you started.

#### **2.4.2 The three tests: journeys in the moral borderlands of materialism and the dissolution of self**

And so it is that Mitchison's heroine moves into the castle and stands face to face with the witch, in an alternative reality in which survival is possible only through metamorphic revelations. As a grain of wheat, the protagonist experiences the growth of the plant from the profound tension of the grain to the upward burst towards air and sun, maturing slowly from a solitary identity to a camaraderie with neighbouring axes, their union as one with ripeness and pollination. Then, as her stems are cut, she is grinded with her neighbours into flour, absolving any sense of identity; "a daze of the mingling and splitting of cells, a uniting and casting off of chromosomes, each one a single plant and yet each inseparably and inextricably part of the others" (99). In the baking, the final mixing with new substances "bringing with

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<sup>121</sup> Mitchison MBP:12

<sup>122</sup> Hobsbawm: 138

them faint, diffuse memories of a hotter sun and a different growth, or of an animal life, incomprehensible and yet acceptable,” she is made into a cake, gathered “into a single consciousness, so that again there was an ‘I,’ individual and yet in a complete sympathy with the other cakes which had been formed out of the same material” (100).

Once in the final form, Mitchison ingrains her metamorphosed creation with a sense of purpose in which human needs and her needs to satisfy them work in symbiosis. Put in the window of a shop, the protagonist is aware of the hungry eyes which desires her, and she longs to give herself to them to still their needs and “become one with life” (101). However, the moment of her sale delays, and she slowly becomes conscious to the social and economic difference of the people outside and inside the shops, and to the ungrateful and unsatisfying intent behind the customers of the shop would buy her to use as decoration for their parties. She laments that those who needs her goes by: the children who wholeheartedly would cherish her as she can help them grow; men on their way from hard labour, “fainting for sugar to burn up and reconstitute them;” women “whose thought [...] were of many hungers, their own and their husbands’ and their children’s” (102). What Mitchison portrays here resonates highly with her intentions for writing *The Moral Basis of Politics*, her wish wo “suggest a non-competitive morality to go with the new economic facts.”<sup>123</sup> The British culture pattern, she claimed, functioned as if there was an economy of scarcity, while in reality there was sufficient production of food and other materials to support all of the nation’s citizens. Instead, the capitalist structures purport a consumerism where natural resources go to waste, as with the tale’s protagonist as cake, who goes stale and is thrown out with the rest of the unsold cakes, before she again is in her human form standing by the witch’s cauldron.

Next, in the form of a grape seed, the protagonist grows to stronger stem as a winding grapevine, concentrating with maturation on her clusters of fruits until harvest when again there is a dissolution of the “I” into a fathomable entity as she is mixed and swirled into wine. Then she retains her single identity encompassing the glass and the cork as she is bottled, and she becomes aware of the goodness and comfort she can bring to the women and men who drink her:

We had divine understanding of tiredness and discouragement, and how it was in us to allay these sadnesses. We knew the pains of those who cannot escape from the toils of their selves and their own miseries and knew too how we could help them to escape,

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<sup>123</sup> Mitchison MBP: 14-15

show them the way out of self-pity and self-regard to comradeship and philosophy and kindness. [...] For us in darkness flashed the leaping leopards of poetry, swept close the moth wings of rest and relaxing, bubbled the pure gaiety of youth and friendship, the springing of ideas, the springing of love and the setting free from bonds. So we waited, sure of our gifts (106-107).

However, the protagonist's experience is to be as ill-fated as the last time. She is opened in a party of men, "rich and secure and well-fed and driven by no necessities" (107), neither creators or bound by friendships, their hearts filled with "suspicion and jealousy and quarrelsomeness; each man a slave of himself and his own possessions." Her hope to break the barriers between them and bring them happiness is in vain because, as she finds, the minds of these men are not to be altered, and all she inspires in them is to loosen their sense of decency, unleashing their hatred "in boasting and anger; loosed to, the impulses towards cruelty" (108). As living matter, the protagonist is absorbed into a "manifest wickedness" (108) reminiscent of the drives of supporters and propagators of oppressive forces for individual gain and of fascist rhetoric, a thorough demonstration of the horrors mankind is capable of.

Lastly then, the protagonist grabs the last of the witch's objects, the piece of iron ore. The only non-living matter, this experience is one apart from the others, dormant yet given a sense of the life of the workers who toiled to work her out of the mines – their great unhappiness and anger, their wish for a different life, and "how they, like iron itself were gripped by an inexorable process which they could not anyhow escape from." (109) Then, she is able to see that within her "packed substance, an interlocking and overlapping multiplicity of images, set upon me by the ingenious imaginations of skilled designers," (110) of plans for what she could become, from the small necessary items for home life, the tools to people's livelihoods and those designed to save lives. Also, there was the grand designs, the ships and buildings, means of transportation and intricate machinery. "I knew myself as potentially part of mankind, [as a] potential giver of the complicated joys and delights which knowledge has given, for all that had been thought into me" (111).

However, there is no turn of events at the third try; her final form itself becomes the subject of grief. The excitement of finding her ingots used and discovering what design of all her potentialities has been chosen is soon turned sour as her form is revealed and her purpose becomes clear: a great gun, the thoughts of men put into her are only of the destruction of life. "My muzzle pointed inexorably towards death; all parts of me were designed and perfected

towards death-giving. And with that, with the heaping of death-thoughts upon me, my awareness began to fade out and grow cold and earth-fixed” (112). With no potential for good in her design, the trajectory of her metamorphic journey is already over; the moral choice is made already in her production, and so she returns to Soria Moria Castle.

By metamorphosing into inanimate objects she can experience and identify with moral choices not from the viewpoint of the oppressed, as so many of Mitchison’s stories and poems of the collection does, but from the viewpoint of the raw material of the earth which mankind has for centuries ingeniously manipulated and perfected for the sustenance and maintenance of human lives. In the socialist dreamscape of the dissolution and reconfiguring of the self into a simultaneous individual and community, with the ability to satisfy the needs and desires of good men and women in harmonious synthesis for a greater purpose, she must learn the hard way of the psychological structures of primal desires which leads people to propagate oppressive and immoral agencies. What she has learned is the deeply rooted discourses and hierarchical structures which governs her society and herself: as she says, she knows that “the kind of castle that we build is from its foundations conditioned by the kind of person whom we have allowed ourselves to become.” Once her foundations have been laid bare before her the castle crumbles; the tide comes to sweep it away. But its fall is not sign of failure but of new possibilities for improvement, for trying and failing and trying again: “I perceived that the sea was sufficiently near and was, indeed, about to destroy my carefully made castle. Yet this was of no consequence to me, for to-morrow I should build another and better castle which would in its turn come to destruction and a levelling out of walls below the salt quick water” (114).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Through the discussions of this chapter, I have shown that the modern fairy tales analysed represent three different aspects of the socioeconomic issues which coloured the 1930s: the financial world of the stock market; the plight of the unemployed; and the industrial production of material goods. All tales, I have argued, are involved with accounting for the immorality inherent to the context which they are set in, enhancing and emphasising the differences between the good and the bad in classical fairy tale manner. Thus, the adversary of Minnie and Billy, whose parents must support them on welfare alone, lives in a house of money and is surrounded by riches. However, one could question the morality of Minnie’s murderousness, as the killing of the witch in the narrative she compares with her

own situation was in self-defence. The help of Sasha Sable and their easy escape distances Minnie from her role as a proxy of Gretel, as I hold is the purpose of Mitchison's subversion, but if one removed the allegorical meaning their return to the witch's house with their friends in order to kill her seems rather brutal for a morally good ending. Macdonnel's exposition of the financial world in "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" muddles the clear morality of its source, as the lawful and criminal forces which battle there does not do so in a fight between good and evil, but rather for the position of power. Shying away from the justified victory of poor younger brother and his slave girl over the murderous forty thieves of the tale's intertext, Macdonnel presents an ambiguous moral when his protagonist is taken under the wing of a powerful banking house, begging the question if Ally Barber is really just taken advantage of by those in the high seat of capitalist power. Instead of subverting the rules of the financial game, which the artistic sensibilities of Ally might have implied, Macdonnel inverts the plot of the original's ending making Ally a good little capitalist who is slightly more in the right. Being a pawn in the capitalist scheme might be preferable in the world of the 1930s "Ali Baba" when even his artistic career benefits from the riches he is rewarded.

In regards to the treatment of socioeconomic conditions and issues, Mitchison remains more clear in her moral message than her counterpart in Davies' collection. For one, this could be symptomatic of her activism, but it is also, I contend, connected to the politics of fear which were discussed in the first chapter of this thesis and the sense of urgency this lends to her treatments of social concerns. As established, Mitchison was vocal about her belief that the poor socioeconomic circumstances based on hierarchical ideals and greed would drive the people towards ideologies based on irrationality which reflected their disillusionment with their society. As such, it would be important for her to inspire in her reader a disillusionment of the forces she deemed immoral, as she does in "Soria Moria." Though the frame story's intertextuality and fantastic imagery leans slightly towards a surrealism which can be difficult to grasp, there is no question about the moral message purported in her portrayal of the three metamorphic quests. The last chapter of the thesis will expand upon gendered issues of marriage which has been brought to light here in my discussion Mitchison's "Hansel and Gretel." As we shall see, Mitchison elaborates on the breadwinner ideology in her fairy tale of the social norms separating education and marriage for women. In her tale as in the two others which will be analysed, the purpose is to question the ideals of masculine and feminine behaviour and roles which stand in the way of both men and women's happiness.

# 3 MATTERS OF THE HEART: QUESTIONING IDEAS OF LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND GENDER EXPECTATIONS

## 3.1 Introduction

During the 1930s the perceived “crisis in marriage” was one of the most debated topics in the polemic of radio and press, influenced by the political and economic factors of the First World War and the Great Depression which heavily impacted the development of sexual and marital mores.<sup>124</sup> As Diana Wallace writes, while the 1920s had staged the discussion of the meaning of spinsterhood in literature following the enormous loss of men during the previous decade, in the 1930s the discussion again shifted towards married life as the politics of domesticity became increasingly conservative. The crisis was brought on by the emancipation of women and the spread of birth control, factors which had changed family dynamics as, especially with the latter, the combining of marriage and career became increasingly achievable. The fear was that contraception and what Wallace describes as the “new Freudian-inspired emphasis on women’s ‘right’ to sexual fulfilment” would lead to a normalization of promiscuous sexuality out of wedlock which would then dishevel the social structure.

As Wallace’s article shows, the debate was coloured by highly contesting convictions, as both men and women would argue that women were either reluctant to enter traditional marriages, or alternatively that they jumped at the opportunity to marry in order to gain security for themselves and to avoid the boredom of work. However, more and more prose of the marriage counselling genre appealed for the idea of partnership in marriage, that, as some suggested, “each spouse [had] a different but equal and complementary function.”<sup>125</sup> The idea of the separate spheres of the sexes was not new, but there were increased observations that wives could be a friend and a companion to the husband, which some argued could be proved by the success of the involvement of women in arenas attributed to the male sphere, such as

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<sup>124</sup> Wallace, Diana. “Revising the Marriage Plot in Women’s Fiction of the 1930s.” In *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*. Ed. Maroula Joannou. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1999. Pages 63-66

<sup>125</sup> Wallace: 66



politics, sports, and in professions. When the social debate surrounding marriage made its way into contemporary literature, many female writers focused on the marriage plot in new and subversive ways in order to, as Wallace writes, “explore how marriage might be refashioned to accommodate women’s increasing expectations in sexual, political and professional life.”<sup>126</sup> Despite this trend, the regressive forces which worked to re-domesticate women were still seen as a serious threat to the progress of the emancipation of women. As Lassner writes, women’s dystopian fiction of the time – such as Mitchison’s *We Have Been Warned* from 1935 – did not feature scientific control as “the major apparatus of the state” but rather a continuation of the cultural codes based on misogyny and social control.<sup>127</sup>

### 3.1.1 Fairy tale negotiations of marriage norms

Fairy tales have traditionally presented marriage, most often leading to a social rise, as a reward confirming the moral superiority of the values which the hero/heroine represents in their happily-ever-after-endings, albeit after very different deeds and hardships according to the gender of the protagonist.<sup>128</sup> With the strict coda of gender expectations and virtues of the popularized classical tales as reworked by 19<sup>th</sup> century collectors, the fairy tales’ deep roots in the cultural consciousness allows the writers of 1930s tales to question what sort of ending marriage really can represent for the lovers. Put differently, they cast a shadow of ambiguity over the morality of the narratives and their rewards when these tropes and stereotypes are translated into real world relationships. There are several stories in *The Fairies Return* and *The Fourth Pig* which deal with gender roles and expectations, but as the focus of this thesis is on the debate of morals in 1930s polemics I have chosen stories which directly question the good and the bad of social mores in regards to marital life. Moreover, these fairy tales not only follows the marriage plot but also give an inkling of the quality of the married/unmarried lives of the protagonists.<sup>129</sup> The three fairy tales offer very different arguments towards love and marriage, and towards the question of personal autonomy within the context of marriage. However, what all the three fairy tales chosen do have in common are plots centred on a

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<sup>126</sup> Wallace 63

<sup>127</sup> Lassner: 63

<sup>128</sup> Tatar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1987. Pages 85-97

<sup>129</sup> E.Æ. Somerville’s “Little Red Riding-Hood,” found in *The Fairies Return* (pages 249-270) and mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, is an example of the marriage plot at the service of another dichotomous motif, namely nature versus culture, where Moira’s new role as a wife is seconded to her role as part of the dominant social order.

mystery which drives the actions of the protagonists, and it is the purpose of this chapter to expand and shed light upon the function and effect of the choices of the modern authors in regards to these mysteries.

The first two fairy tales, Naomi Mitchison's "The Snow Maiden" and Christina Stead's "O If I Could But Shiver!", revolve around different aspects of the marriage debates of the 1930s: the subduing of female career ambitions and creativity, and the idea of women as sexual equals within marriage respectively. Both tales put emphasis on central metaphors for these phenomena – melting, as part of a juxtaposition of the sensations of being cold and warm, in "The Snow Maiden," and of course shivering in "O If I Could But Shiver!" – which are lifted from the intertextual sources whose trajectory they follow. In doing so they explore the imposed ideals of masculinity and femininity in regards to female objectification and domestication, ideals which can stand in the way of the happiness of both men and women. I argue that these stories do not seek to condemn or uphold marriage as an institution as such but to challenge the socially expected roles of the genders within the marriage. The third and last modern fairy tale, "Cinderella", however, inverts the marriage plot of its intertextual source in a satirical presentation of the ideal of love both within the fairy tale world and the modern, and thus it stands out amongst the fairy tales of similar theme. Writer Robert Speaight subverts the narrative plot itself, stripping it of the moral ending it had attained in its form as a classical fairy tale and offering it anew in an ambiguous tale which does not promise a more self-sufficient and active Cinderella to replace the passive heroine of the canonical tale. The tale proves a cynical disillusionment with the traditional ideas of love and marriage and their meaning in the modern culture of the 1930s.

### **3.2 Love and Career as Incompatible for Women in "The Snow Maiden"**

"The Snow Maiden," found in Naomi Mitchison's *The Fourth Pig*, is a modern interpretation of a Russian literary fairy tale dealing with the dangers posed to a snow girl exposed to the mortal world.<sup>130</sup> Set in Birmingham, Mitchison's Mary Snow, the daughter of the mythical deities January and April, is "boarded out at five shillings a week by the Poor-law-authorities" (62) in a working class or lower middle class home of fear that "the sun-god,

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<sup>130</sup> Mitchison, Naomi. "The Snow Maiden." In *The Fourth Pig*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2014. Pages 62-73. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter.

the man-god, the god of life and potency” (62) who hates her will find and destroy her. Told in an intimate, gossip like tone by a narrator seemingly in the protagonist’s neighbourhood, the story’s initial focus is on how Mary is not quite like other girls: for one, she is a brilliant student excelling in “what’s not common in a girl, and that’s mathematics” (62); secondly, she is not capable of romantic love. As a snow maiden she shares the attributes of her father, who is implied as a representation of winter, as her heart is cold to the feelings of love – feelings which her mother April, the representation of spring, has the power to give her but protects her against. As the narrator explains, Mary is not short of suitors attracted to her “blue eyes and curly hair, yellow and shiny as a Caution Stop” (62), but she “didn’t want to go out with fellows, [...] she just wasn’t made that way” (67). The only boy she likes is Bert Hobbis because he would talk mathematics with her, though the friendship requires a bit of fending off of his expectations of kisses.

All goes well until the day George Higginson, the cotton tradesman engaged to her friend Betty, lays his eyes on Mary. Casting off Betty he pursues Mary aggressively, forcing embraces and kisses on her and shocking her to her core, to the point where she finds even mathematics cannot distract her from the unpleasant memory for long. Soon the social judgement that she is at fault in Betty’s misfortune is replaced by her foster mother’s “nagging and hinting” (66) that she should be more approachable towards George once it becomes known that he has won £100 “in the sweep” – “Mrs. Smith kept on hinting how useful that £100 would come in” and “what a chance it was for Mary” (66). Her mind muddled and confused, unable to focus on her schoolwork, she cannot even talk mathematics with Bert anymore because he is going out with Betty. Slowly, the couples’ romantic talk of their new aspirations for their future married life and the happiness in their infatuation becomes a mystery which takes up all of the miserable Mary’s thoughts. Thus, on the annual visit of her mother, April, she begs to be granted the ability to experience romantic love, to break down the barrier which makes her different from the people around her, a wish her mother woefully fulfils. And so, for the short while her engagement to George Higginson lasts, Mary radiates as she anticipates her new life without the scholarly preoccupations, until married life materializes and “she just seemed to melt away, to fade right out somehow” (73). My analysis will discuss the central role of the fantastic elements of the story through a reading of how Mitchison subverts her source material, in order to attain an understanding of what this ending means for Mary Snow.

Mitchison's story is straightforward and "overt", as Jenni Calder says in her biography on Mitchison, where she links the story to the author's 1934 non-fiction work *The Home and a Changing Civilization*, claiming that the image of the patriarchal Sun-God is an obvious reference to D.H. Lawrence, who Mitchison attacked in that previous work for "promoting the ownership of women by men."<sup>131</sup> Though I do not oppose this argument as I find it quite clear, as I will show in the discussion to follow, that Mitchison's Sun-god is an image of the patriarchal powers which D.H. Lawrence represents to her, I claim that the story offers more when read on its own terms as a fairy tale with all which that implies. In light of its genre I argue that "The Snow Maiden" is an effective dissection of how the powers which assign people to gender roles unnatural to them are ingrained in society. Thus, it casts an uneasy ambiguity over what is considered moral and virtuous behaviour in a social environment where people are not at economic liberty to live outside the social discourse. I will therefore discuss how the story highlights how people are interpellated, to use the Marxist term, to follow the social mores as well as the intentions of those well-meaning people who push Mary to act against her nature. Mitchison, I claim, not only criticises the patriarchal social rules which creates an either/or dichotomy of work and marriage for women, but also tries to make readers who might take such rules for granted question this injustice to women.

### **3.2.1 The girl of snow and the girl with the heart of ice: From Russian folktale to fairy tale play and opera**

Not to be confused with "Snow White" of the Grimm collection,<sup>132</sup> the intertextual source of Mitchison's tale "The Snow Maiden" comes from a Russian folktale tradition with a history of modern rewriting before Mitchison provided it with her British spin. In folk tradition, the motif of a girl made of snow can be found in the Russian folktale cycle from which one version was translated and published in England amongst others in Andrew Lang's *The Pink Fairy Book*, dubbed "Snowflake" in that particular book.<sup>133</sup> In the tale, an elderly poor couple who were never able to have children on their own, beset by a fit of whimsy, decides to play in the first snow of winter and construct a child of snow. Wishing that the child would be real, the snow suddenly shakes off to reveal a beautiful live girl within, who

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<sup>131</sup> Calder: 133-134

<sup>132</sup> Which incidentally is rewritten by Lord Dunsany in Davies' *The Fairies Return* (pages 121-136) as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>133</sup> Lang, Andrew. *The Pink Fairy Book*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1904. Pages 143-147

turns out to be the most charming and helpful daughter to them. However, though thriving during cold and wet weather, she is miserable on bright summer days, preferring to stay inside out of the sun. Then, on the eve of Midsummer Day, a group of children persuade the wife to let Snowflake join in the celebrations, but when they play at jumping over a fire the snow child evaporates in thin air.

The motif of the Snow Maiden as the daughter of Winter and Spring, however, does not appear to stem from a known folktale but rather from the Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky's 1873 fairy tale drama *Snegurochka* ("The Snow Maiden"). Unfortunately, though several of Ostrovsky's plays have been translated and published in English, "The Snow Maiden" seems not to have been one of them. However, the opera by the same name composed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov after Ostrovsky's play, which premiered in 1882, can be found and read in English, and as Ostrovsky is listed as the work's author one can hope that the manuscript of the opera does not stray much from the play.<sup>134</sup> I contend that the similarities in plot and motifs which will be discussed below between the Russian "The Snow Maiden" and Mitchison's tale warrants a reading of the former as the latter's intertextual source. However, because of the issues of translation and an absence of an account on Mitchison's part it is difficult to state whether she was inspired by Ostrovsky's drama or Rimsky-Korsakov's opera. Based on accounts of the plot of Ostrovsky's text compared to my reading of Rimsky-Korsakov's they seem to share the same general plotline, and the lack of attribution should therefore not be of major consequence to the analysis of Mitchison's story.<sup>135</sup> Though I use the text from the opera as source material in this thesis, I will refer to Ostrovsky as the author of Mitchison's intertext as its plot stems from his work.

Using the premise of a Snow Child introduced to the mortal world, Ostrovsky creates a mythological setting for his play which counterpoises the natural and the cultural human world in a romantic epic. When Mitchison reintroduces the mythological world of Ostrovsky's play so many years later, she simultaneously harks back to a famed playwright and a period in Russian drama which shares much of the vision for what their literature should do with the writers of the British modern tales. As Gary Thurston writes, Ostrovsky is remembered as "the creator of the popular theatre" in Russia, writing plays in which he sought to accommodate the tastes and views of the "uncultured masses" and to understand

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<sup>134</sup>Rimsky-Korsakov, Nikolay. *Snegurochka: (The Snow Maiden) A Legend of Springtide*. Trans. Fredrick H. Martens. New York: Fred Rullman Inc. 1921. Pages 5-39

<sup>135</sup> Warrack, John and Ewan West. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 1996. Pages 482-483

them.<sup>136</sup> Coincidentally, as when Ostrovsky wrote about his motivation for turning to the “Un-Westernized Russian audience” and holding “up their surviving folkways for critical examination,” as Thurston puts it, he offers an early example of the intended motive identifiable in the modern fairy tales of the 1930s. As Thurston quotes, Ostrovsky was aware that “[i]n order to have the right to correct the *narod* [i.e. the folk], without offending, it is necessary to show that you know what is better for them. That is just what I am working on now, in uniting the elevated and the comic.” What Ostrovsky intended to make the *narod* question was the tension between traditional practises and modern claims for individuality, opening up for the possibility that the two ideals did not need to be mutually exclusive.

In the Russian version of the tale, Snégurotchka is the daughter of Winter and Spring, held in the land of her father in fear that the Sun will harm her unless she stays “pure and innocent” forever, while Spring urges him to let her experience freedom.<sup>137</sup> They agree to let her be fostered by Bobyl and Bobylicka, a mortal couple, for protection, and Snégurotchka rejoices at the plan and reveals that she has become infatuated with young man named Lel. However, Lel does not return her affections; instead the man set to marry her good friend Koupava, Mizguir, rejects his fiancé and pursues Snégurotchka – much like George Higginson pursues Mary in Mitchison’s tale. The scorned Koupava pleads with the Tzar to condemn Mizguir and Snégurotchka for their actions; but the Tzar, impressed by Snégurotchka’s beauty, is bewildered that she has no love in her heart for any man. The Tzar then determines that her cold heart must surely be an affront to Yarilo the Sun-God who has yet to come forth and end their long winter, and thus he vows to reward the man who can win her love. Yet still, Snégurotchka remains appalled by Mizguir’s attentions, and watching the newly formed relationship of her beloved Lel with Koupava she grieves that she cannot love, and that she does not have a heart like other maidens have. She seeks out her mother Spring who grants her the wish to be able to experience love, and as she and Mizguir professes their love before the Tzar she melts away as the rays of the sun pierces the clouds. And with that, Yarilo the Sun-God is appeased, and the long winter at last gives way to spring. When read in comparison to Mitchison’s variation, the celebration of Snégurotchka’s melting in the ending of Ostrovsky’s utopian tale of the rite of Spring is as striking as Mary Snow’s subtle tragedy. Dying with the knowledge of love and with happiness in her heart she gives her soul to Mizguir, and with her sacrifice the natural order of the seasons is allowed to progress.

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<sup>136</sup> Thurston, Gary. *The Popular Theatre Movement in Russia, 1862-1919*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1998. Pages 64-65

<sup>137</sup> Rimsky-Korsakov: 7

### 3.2.2 A tale of social pressure and the ideal of domestication

When Mitchison stages her own “The Snow Maiden” the rite of maturity follows much the same trajectory, but its conclusion runs counter to its original’s. Her modern fairy tale illustrates her assertion that the battle for women’s equality had shifted from public to private matters, and that change had to happen in the home next. In 1930 she wrote: “Apparently, all the feminist battles are gained, or almost all. Actually, nothing is settled, and the question of baby or not baby is at the bottom of almost everything.”<sup>138</sup> While other areas of society saw innovation and progress during the 1930s, women were increasingly pressured to relinquish careers and go back into the home and to domestic life, a trend Mitchison and her fellow feminist intellectuals tirelessly worked against in public debates. As in her “Hansel and Gretel,”<sup>139</sup> the reference to Russia, which is of course very explicit here, is perhaps also influenced by the “loosening of marriage laws in Socialist Russia.”<sup>140</sup> When Mitchison then revives “the sun-god, the man-god, the god of life and potency,”(62) of Ostrovsky’s national mythos he is the embodiment of the patriarchal traditions and social codas, narratively lurking right on the outskirts of the stage. The appeaser of the sun-god of Ostrovsky’s tale, the Tzar, is replaced in the 1930s tale by the community in which Mary lives: the legislative power of the Tzar in his role as the judge in questions of morality is rewritten as the social pressure of the neighbours which insistently persuades and polices people to conform to social norms. The moral judgement of the people surrounding her inspires in her the sensitivity to her own difference, and thus explains the gradual development of a girl who “knew what was what” (63) into one who begs to radically alter her personality in order to cater to other people’s expectations.

After all, Mary is given every opportunity to have an academic career. As the narrator explains, her teachers fought for her to be granted academic scholarships, which were incidentally held back not because of her gender but because of her poor background (62). What is determined by her gender when it comes to academics, however, is the social norm surrounding her prospects of marrying as it was expected that women gave up careers when married, though the topic could not be further from Mary’s mind when the story begins. The attention she receives from boys is largely unwanted; as the narrator says, [t]here was only one boy she liked at all, and when you got down to it all she really liked about Bert Hobbis

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<sup>138</sup> Benton, Jill. *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography*. London: Pandora Press. 1990. Pages 70-72

<sup>139</sup> Mitchison HG: 74-89

<sup>140</sup> Wallace: 65

was that he was a mathematician too” (64). Mitchison inverts Snégurotchka’s infatuation and Lel’s rejection to make Bert hopelessly pursue Mary while she does not reciprocate. Doing so, she removes one of the questionable motifs from her source, as I find it odd that Snégurotchka should have what appears to be a romantic infatuation for Lel when she is not supposed to be able to feel love. Read this way, the story implies that what she wishes for is the ability to love someone she has no feelings for. However, by removing this aspect altogether, Mitchison’s Mary is evidently wholly uninterested in the concept of love as the story begins. The ensuing conflicts between lovers as George Higginson enters the scene, as is evident from the synopses as recounted above, is quite straightforwardly translated from the fairy tale play to the modern tale.

Again, the Snow Maiden is left perplexed at strange change in her friends. Unhappy, haunted by feelings of violation at the memory of George Higginson’s embraces, she cannot resort to talking about mathematics with Bert or “class-work and hockey” (68) with Betty, who has lost interest in both her and school as they only have eyes for each other. While Bert has taken a step into adulthood with a secure income by getting employment as a draughtsman, Mary is subjected to the nagging of Mrs. Smith and the judgement of their neighbours who accuse her of leading George Higgins on. On her evening walks she sometimes sees Bert and Betty together, dreaming and planning for the domestic bliss of “a little house and a bit of garden” (67), giggling coyly as they went past the windows of baby shops. Both Betty, who “was a council scholar and ever so good at languages and history” (63), and the mathematician Bert who had planned to become “a great professor at the University” (68) have left their academic aspirations as they are all swept up in the social norm of settling down and marrying early, and needing to provide immediately for a family. “But Mary, she just couldn’t understand,” says the narrator, “she couldn’t get it straight in her head that men and women do just fall in love with one another and then they don’t care any more about their friends nor what they used to want to do and be” (68).

Again, the happiness of the new couple’s engagement functions as the catalyst which drives the Snow Maiden’s despair of her difference into definite action. To emphasise this, Mitchison plays upon the melting motif with a cold/warm dichotomy: though she normally “didn’t mind being cold really, not like some – mostly she worked better so” (69), now her body and her mind is cold, so that the mathematical patterns which used to comfort her do not makes sense. The new feeling of coldness mirrors her sudden hypersensitivity to her own difference, and when her mother April visits her she begs for a love like Bert and Betty’s:



Then April's face, it got all still and solemn, like the last minute before a rain-storm, and she said: 'You remember about the Sun.'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'I remember and I don't care. I won't go on just being Snow.'

And April said again: 'You have to decide, but if you choose wrong, it will be too late afterwards.'

But Mary said: 'I've got to understand. It spoils everything if I don't know this. Once and for all, Mother, I have chosen. Make me understand. Give me what they've got. I don't want to be different any longer' (71).

And so, April unleashes all her creatures on her – “primroses and cowslips and lambs” and “misty soft mornings” (71) and more. The next day Mary is somehow more preoccupied with her looks than her school work; to the dismay of her teachers she announces that she intends to get married, which “meant an end to all the scholarship plans” (72). As the narrator explains: “George Higginson told her to drop all this schooling – what was the good of it for a commercial traveller's wife? – he didn't want a scholar, he wanted a pretty kid to come back to evenings, and to take out to pictures or cuddle up at home” (73). The overt objectification and infantilising in George's illustration of the ideal wife reveals his egotistical expectations that she should live only to cater to his need and wishes, a doll-like creature without interests of her own.

And exactly this, the narrator suggests, is what awaits Mary after her wedding; “she just seemed to melt away, to fade right out somehow” (73), and much more sudden than it normally happened with other girls. In the modern tale, rather than evaporating, she is simply drained of personality and motivation – a common theme for women writers in the 1930s who wanted, as Wallace writes, to “reveal the very real risks of marriage for women: boredom, frustration, self-delusion, [and] loss of self.”<sup>141</sup> “Once again” chimes the narrator, repeating the opening words as the circle closes on the ever repeating pattern: “once again the Snow Maiden melted away, was dissolved into nothing, became no more than a story which is ended” (73). However, though the story's use of the fantastic elements of its source has been faithful up till this point, Mitchison subverts the ending by making the final fantastic element metaphorical – as the narrator says: “That poor little Mrs. Higginson [...] She just seems to have melted away. There is no other word for it” (73). The magic of what the Russian tale presents as the literal melting, or evaporating, of Snégurotchka has been replaced with a sense

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<sup>141</sup> Wallace: 67

of drain of personality. The recurring use of the language and narrative techniques of the fantastic throughout the story makes the effect of the ending disrupt the reader's expectation, grounding the meaning of the ending in a very real occurrence.

Like in the marriage plot so favoured in fairy tales and novels alike, marriage is the goal and the end which is strived for – “Oh well,” says the narrator, “they always say the nicest time in a girl's life is when she's engaged to a fellow, don't they?” – but, as this story suggests, the price is high when the brief time of bliss is at the cost of women's creative ambitions outside the home. Though the prospect of marriage seems grim after reading Mitchison's tale, the story and the conversational style of the narrator prompts questions from the reader of why Mary should have to discover love in this way and why it is necessary for her to give up her passions and personality. Mitchison sets up a dichotomy of love/marriage which, I argue, she wants the reader to feel ambivalent about in the end. In a dystopian tale about the negative forces of social pressure within a dominant ideology, she uses the intimacy of the narrator and Aesopian language to persuade the reader of an alternative utopian possibility and to influence her to break the spell of tradition.

### **3.3 Satirizing Sexual and Marital Morals in “O If I Could But Shiver!”**

Where Mitchison's “Snow Maiden” is a subtle and bitter-sweet tale, Christina Stead's “O If I Could But Shiver!” is a burlesque exploration of psycho-sexual mechanisms, an “X-rated odyssey” to use Maria Tatar's words.<sup>142</sup> Stead, an Australian who lived in Europe and later America during the interwar years, was one of publisher Peter Davies' literary discoveries, and his company published her first work in 1934, the same year as *The Fairies Return*.<sup>143</sup> According to Hazel Rowley, Stead's creative spirit did not lead her to covet the life of the “New Woman,” with the lack of security and the social stigma which still discriminated unwed women, especially mothers, despite the many victories in the struggle for women's rights. As Rowley says: “To her, it was not marriage that represented a form of female bondage; it was spinsterhood.” Stead believed that “committed love (ideally marriage) was a

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<sup>142</sup> Stead, Christina. “O If I Could But Shiver!” In *The Fairies Return*. Ed. Peter Davies. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 302-324. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter

Tatar I: 22

<sup>143</sup> Rowley, Hazel. *Christina Stead: A Biography*. Richmond, Victoria: William Heinemann Australia. 1993. Pages 104-105

wonderful liberation for women,” and according to Rowley this view was heavily reflected in her work as the goal of all her female protagonists. However, it must be understood that for love to be committed, for a marriage to be happy, in Stead’s view, equality and spiritual companionship was required, with the freedom to work and create.<sup>144</sup>

Ludd, the hero of Stead’s modern fairy tale, is an irresponsible and wild young man who is thrown out by his father after a series of mischievous episodes and told to only come back if he can do so “wealthy, honourable, famous or otherwise respected” (305). But rather than attaching his lack of social conformity to moral shortcomings, Ludd obsessively attributes it to his inability to physically shiver. On his way out into the world he seeks the aid of the people he meets to teach him how to shiver through unthinkable horrors. After an unsuccessful night spent under a tree with seven hanged men for company he learns of a haunted castle and the treasure which awaits there for the daring youth who could stay three nights. Because Ludd remains calm in the face of the various fearful traps of the castle he discovers that the duke who owns it runs an illegal counterfeiting operation there to support himself and his children. He is rewarded with a job distributing counterfeit money until the duke turns him over to the police as revenge after Ludd has “fallen in love with and seduced in turn the duke’s three daughters and his middle-aged maiden sister” (311). After a year in prison he escapes and lives amongst the poorest of the poor for a while – “nothing daunted him, simply because he could not shiver” – and after a stint as a society fakir he marries, quite honourably, the rich lady Esther and fathers a son.

But soon he is “festooned with the chains of domesticity” (317), and it does not take long before Ludd runs away with a shop girl. A series of affairs follows, resulting in more children as well as another marriage, and the struggle to attain an income and pay alimony leads to several months spent in the gaol. In the end he is reunited with Esther who hits him with a “great green-hide thong” (322) across the face so that he faints. When he wakes up it is in the bedroom of his first wife, now “wrinkled and wasted, but he saw the fires of passion still burned” (323), and then, when faced with this lustful “savage,” he shivers, and continues to shiver all his days. What will be discussed in this section is the effect of Stead’s deviations from and additions to her source material, and how she stages an exploration of the Grimm tale’s ending as it could transpire within the marital debates of the 1930s.

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<sup>144</sup> Rowley: 67

### 3.3.1 Grimm's anecdote of horror and its fearless youth

Known by many names, the story of the boy who cannot shiver, or shudder alternatively, was first published in its most famous version by the Brothers Grimm, and was featured in Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), dubbed "The Tale of a Youth Who Set Out to Learn What Fear Was."<sup>145</sup> As Maria Tatar has observed the story lacks much of the formal trademarks of fairy tales, and could more easily be classified as a saga or an extended anecdote.<sup>146</sup> The hero, known only as "the boy" or "the youngest son," is as stupid as his older brother is clever. However, as Tatar points out, the boy is not a typical youngest son: he is not aided by magical helpers in accomplishing his obstacles by virtue of being compassionate and humble, and thus worthy of the social rise above his brother and the right to grant him favours.<sup>147</sup> Instead, the boy tackles his adversaries on his own and in his own unique way. Neither is he a hero of the Jack type which has been discussed earlier, who shows courage, cleverness and chivalry in the face of his adversaries and is rewarded according to his hard work – and whose fear and anxiety is a non-issue. As the most prominent of the group of fairy tale heroes marked by naiveté, according to Tatar, the boy of "The Tale of a Youth Who Set Out to Learn What Fear Was" is the quintessential fearless hero who is too dim-witted to understand the danger that he is in. In ironic, humorous, and bizarre twists his stupidity allows him to outwit his foes by reacting and acting in unforeseen ways.

Moreover, as Bruno Bettelheim has shown in his analysis of the story, the lack of fear itself becomes the crux of the story; a deficiency which the hero focuses on from the very beginning and which constitutes the whole point of his enterprise.<sup>148</sup> At home the boy is lazy and incompetent, and so his older brother must perform all the chores – unless it requires going through the churchyard at night as it makes the brother shudder just to think of it.<sup>149</sup> This puzzles the youngest son greatly because he cannot even shudder – "It's probably an art quite beyond me" –, and when his father despairs that the boy's life and education is wasted the boy replies "I will gladly learn – in fact, if it were possible I should like to learn to shudder; I don't understand that a bit yet." After an episode in which the boy injures the sexton who tries to scare him, he is sent out into the world by his ashamed father, who forbids

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<sup>145</sup> Lang BFB: 69-76

<sup>146</sup> Tatar, Maria. *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company. 2004. Page 14

<sup>147</sup> Tatar, Maria HFGFT: 94-97

<sup>148</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1976. Page 280

<sup>149</sup> Lang BFB: 69

him to disclose his origin to anyone. What then follows is one horrendous tests after another, introduced by the challenge to sleep below seven hanged men (Stead stays very faithful to her source's rendering of this episode in her version), leading to three nights in a haunted castle. The boy has now left the familiar world of the village and the road and entered the fairy tale realm when he is tasked with disenchanting the castle. Unlike the inanimate corpses of the dead men by the road, the cursed castle stages numerous attacks of supernatural horrors: large talking black cats and dogs; a rolling bed which takes him on a ride throughout the castle; a man who falls down on him parted in two who reattaches his parts on the boy's command; the appearance of the corpse of his dead cousin which attacks the boy after he has warmed it back to life with his body.<sup>150</sup> All these nightly terrors are calmly disarmed by the boy, but when he tricks them and vanquishes them it is not out of valour but rather because their spectacle ceases to entertain him and he grows weary with them.

After the three nights have come and gone and the curse has been lifted, the boy is rewarded for his lack of fear but is still disappointed that he has not achieved his goal of learning to shudder:

The next morning the King came, and said: "Well, now you've surely learned to shudder?" "No," he answered: "what can it be? My dead cousin was here, and an old bearded man came, who showed me heaps of money down below there, but what shuddering is no one has told me." Then the King spoke: "You have freed the castle from its curse, and you shall marry my daughter." "That's all charming," he said; but I still don't know what it is to shudder."<sup>151</sup>

Even after he is married the youth continues to despair about the fact that he cannot shudder, to the dismay of his new wife; as Bettelheim explains, the hero recognizes that he is not ready to be married unless he can master the art of shuddering.<sup>152</sup> Bettelheim goes on to argue that the lack of anxiety in fairy tale heroes of the clever and chivalrous stock illustrates the repression of oedipal anxieties – including sexual anxieties – necessary to stage the oedipal fantasies of glory.<sup>153</sup> As he writes: "By repressing all feelings of anxiety so that they appear absolutely fearless, these heroes protect themselves from discovering exactly what they are anxious about." The boy of this story, however, desperately wants to learn how to shudder,

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<sup>150</sup> Lang BFB: 72-75

<sup>151</sup> Lang BFB: 75

<sup>152</sup> Bettelheim: 281

<sup>153</sup> Bettelheim: 280

but he fails to identify the one anxiety, the sexual, which has caused the unconscious repression of all anxiety, and so his search among supernatural horrors is in vain. Though she agrees with Bettelheim in her earlier writing, Tatar argues in her more recent annotated collection of the Grimm's fairy tales that Bettelheim's explanation that the youth's sexual anxiety is linked to his inability to shudder in the face of terror "is not terribly persuasive" because "the story does not engage with sexual and conjugal matters until its very end." Instead, she attributes his lack of fear to the boy's artlessness and simplicity, in addition to his youth.<sup>154</sup> I would contend that Tatar's alternatives are likely additional factors to Bettelheim's assertion, as the boy shows some awareness to the nature of his disability as he enters the castle and proclaims: "Oh! if I could only shudder! [...] but I shan't learn it here either."<sup>155</sup>

So, when the hero eventually shivers in the original fairy tale it is in the marriage bed, a scene which Stead radically alters. According to Bettelheim's psycho-sexual analysis the shuddering at being doused with cold water and gudgeons (small fish) by his wife represents the entanglement of his sexual repression and the reaching of sexual maturity.<sup>156</sup> The youth recognizes that access to his repressed feelings is necessary in order for him to become a full person, and that shuddering naturally follows when these are unlocked. As the story has unfolded there has been a subtle shift of focus from inability to fear – as shown in the story's title<sup>157</sup> – to an emphasis on the inability to shudder; indeed, the hero's problem is mostly referred to as the inability to shudder and that he cannot understand how to. The difference between fear and anxiety, and the body's physical reaction to the two feelings, claims Bettelheim, reveals the story's focus: "Sexual anxiety is experienced most often in the form of repugnance; the sexual act makes the person who is anxious about it shudder, but does not usually arouse active fear." Though Bettelheim's theories have been controversial, his analysis is useful when discussing Stead's modern tale's intertextual relationship to its source and her embellishment on the sexual and marital theme of the ending, along with Tatar's argument of the boy's immaturity. Specifically, Bettelheim's assertion that within the tale's logic the hero must access his feelings in order to transition into mature humanity and to be happy in his marriage, and that is the function of his female partner to bring "out the humanity in the male – because to feel fear is human; not being able to fear it is inhuman." The next section will analyse how Stead averts ascribing meaning to Ludd's initial sexual encounters in

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<sup>154</sup> Tatar *ABG*: 16

<sup>155</sup> Lang *BFB*: 72

<sup>156</sup> Bettelheim: 279-282

<sup>157</sup> Though alternative variations of the tale are titled with "learn to shiver" and even "feel the creeps"

her version of the tale and how she instead subverts the sexual connotations of the event which finally makes him shiver.

### 3.3.2 Ludd of the 1930s

Unlike his intertextual inspiration, Christina Stead's Ludd is not necessarily incompetent, but whatever talent he has is employed for mischief. Seemingly without self-restraint or grasp of consequences, he is marked by an immaturity which hinders him from hanging on to a job. As we witness in the story's first scene, the temptation to duck the senior apprentice at his new job at the rubber-stamp maker's in the river, and that on his very first day. It is after this incident, when Andy the apprentice ascends from the cold water that Ludd makes the humorous observation which offsets Stead's narrative:

“Look at the senior apprentice! He knows his trade; he shivers like a half-set jelly, like a wet shirt on a clothesline, and I can't shiver at all. Oh, what a trade is that that men learn, that the innocent can't do at all and that old buffers do to perfection, shivering and palsying until the grave stills them forever. What a man I should be, what a rubber-stamp maker, if I could but shiver!” (302-303)

Ludd makes it clear that he is aware that learning to shiver is a necessity in becoming a mature adult. The title of Stead's story reveals the narrowed focus, as it removes the mention of fear altogether from the story. Of course, his realization does not change his nature at all – a round of night-time terrorizing and pranks in the village with his “juvenile band of townboys” (303) would be too much of a laugh to pass out on. As with the boy of “Learn to fear,” Ludd must be turned out of his home for his journey of self-discovery to begin, and again he is given strict orders not to mention his name and origin (304). Apart for the very beginning Stead follows the plot of her source quite faithfully for this section of her modern fairy tale, as mentioned above, up until the point where Ludd goes to the haunted castle. Stead quite quickly disenchanting the castle and the narrative in one blow when Ludd reveals the supposed supernatural horrors as simple “bogeys and katzenjammer contraptions” concealing the duke's illegal counterfeiting business and letting him be rewarded with employment as a criminal for his inability to shiver. But perhaps more disenchanting is the offhand revelation that Ludd has “fallen in love with and seduced” (311) not one but four women, and – if we are to assume that he slept with them all – without learning to shiver. For Ludd, the sexual act

itself is not the catalyst which it is for the youth of the tale's source, and so his story continues.

From Stead's departure from the original tale, Ludd is put through a gradual demise in circumstances as the story turns into, as Tatar says, an "anti-fairy tale about the enduring tortures of love and marriage" which questions the original's happy ending and provides the modern one with its ambiguous moral.<sup>158</sup> From Ludd's escape from prison he moves on to live amongst the poor, assisting in "murders and druggings" (312), sleeping one night with a girl whom he finds dead from plague when he wakes, and ending up amongst rotten tenements "inhabited by more human creatures and more families than could fit into ten times as many mansions in the west-end" (313). This section mirrors the supernatural horrors of "Learn to fear," though made all the more horrible by the evasion of the fantastic elements of the source, which is replaced by a grim reflection of reality – for one in Ludd's attempt to warm a cold corpse back to life with his own warm body, only to wake "in the morning with the dead man's jaw biting his cheek" (313). More importantly, there is the reproduction of the episode from "Learn to fear" which makes the boy grieve that he cannot shiver. In Stead's source it is the interaction with his dead cousin, while in her own tale the author exposes Ludd to the tragic scene of the decomposed bodies of a family, the mother with her new-born child in her arms. Seeing them he cries "with true feeling: 'O if I could but shiver,' for he realised that there was something wrong with him that he couldn't shiver at that" (313-314). Reminded of his task he "tries to tear out of his breast, in his boyish ignorance, the secret of immense success" (314) – implying perhaps that his sadness for the dead family and his immaturity leads him to think of his own family and the promise he made to only come back to his parents once he is a successful man – as he resolves to wander the roads again. When he there comes across the body of young man having killed himself, and finding the counterfeit money he himself distributed in the man's pockets, he determines to try once again for honest work in the service of the seer Madam Maritana.

As mentioned earlier, Ludd then tries for married life after meeting the incredibly rich and unhappy forty-year-old spinster Esther, a woman "severe in dress, cultivated in conversation, [and] religious in practise" (317). For once he insists on attaining to the lady's honour and to wait for a proper wedding rather than the elopement she suggests – but neither does marriage in and of itself prove to be the means of teaching Ludd how to shudder. Stead is a mischievous fairy when she again robs the reader of the fulfilment of her expectations

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<sup>158</sup> Tatar I: 23



based on the knowledge of the original tale. Playing the part of “the perfect family man” (317) he complements his wife for a while in her staging of idyllic domesticity as she caters to his every need though he is always under her financial and social control. There is something reminiscent of Jack and Primrose’s relationship in A.E. Coppard’s “Jack the Giant Killer” which was discussed in the first chapter, and the role of men as stand ins in society and business for their powerful and ambitious wives. Though Jack, I venture, would not mind such an arrangement, there is a sense of fear of emasculation in the narrator’s remark that young women would look at him “jeeringly as the smart young Alec who married the family diamonds and had been converted into a safe-deposit” (318) As such, Ludd soon tires of the domestic chains and the lack of freedom, and is easily tempted by the beauty of a young shop girl whom he persuades to run away with him.

As in the period of his criminal life, the organizing principle of the following period centred around his numerous affairs, to paraphrase Tatar, is not his quest for the knowledge of shivering but rather egotistical sexuality.<sup>159</sup> Unfortunately for Ludd, under British law his desertions of wives and children is also a criminal activity when he fails to support them, and his jealous ex-wives do their best to have him put in prison, as well as held in the country when he tries to run abroad. When Ludd is caught in Esther’s last trap she has lured him with the prospect of secure work if he married the young shop girl he first ran off with, who he thinks he is going to meet. When Esther finally have him within her reach after all these years, she uses her formidable physical power to strike him down and detain him, filled with jealous wrath. Waking up in the presence of the great “man-eating ogre” (323) and seeing her as she undresses and vaults into the bed, older but beautiful from “the fires of passion,” “Ludd felt himself convulsed in a long network of cold sensations, as if a delicate knife gently lacerated and penetrated his skin and muscles; from head to foot shuttled the blades in all his limbs.”

By changing and adding to the narrative’s conclusion, Stead has cunningly subverted the sexual connotations of the ability to shiver and thus provided the story with a discussion of the nature of male and female sexual pleasure itself. As Tatar writes in her introduction to the collection, it is when “one libidinous fiend meets another” that Ludd finally shivers.<sup>160</sup> And then he shivers, day and night, for the remainder of his life, “ma[king] his money and keep[ing] his place” (324). I argue that it is in this moment when Ludd truly recognizes

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<sup>159</sup> Tatar I: 23

<sup>160</sup> Tatar I: 23

Esther's sexuality and lust as equal to his own that he is able to mature. The reference to Esther's increasing likeness to Madam Maritana with age as well as the use of makeup, I contend, gives a possible clue to this: all of Ludd's sexual conquests are presented as to suggest that he has been the active part in seducing them; Madam Maritana, on the other hand, remains the only woman who tries to seduce Ludd, but he does reciprocate (315-316). Following this argument, the tale's final scene has Ludd shivering in recognition of his own seduction. When Esther reveals her true self driven by raw sexuality, having shed the constructed wifely role, Ludd is able to recognize her female libido as his equal to his own – a necessity, the tale suggests, for monogamous marriage of two partners to work. Applying Bettelheim's analysis of "Learn to Fear" onto Stead's subversion, Ludd finally becomes a moral adult man with access to his repressed feelings, thus relinquishing his immaturity and innocence. Thus, by applying such a logic to a tale with a male protagonist, Stead's modern tale proposes that the recognition of and consideration to female sexuality is in the interest of men if they want married bliss.

### 3.4 Transcending the "Cinderella" Myth

Robert Speaight's "Cinderella," found in *The Fairies Return*, offers a different approach both to the intertextual rewriting of the narrative plot of their sources and to the questions of love and marriage.<sup>161</sup> Whereas "The Snow Maiden" and "O If I Could But Shiver!," as we have seen, follow the marriage plot but provide their endings with ambiguous or alternative meanings, Speaight subverts it by giving Cinderella a new iconic role altogether. Speaight, also known as an actor and a literary critic, was another literary find of Peter Davies, who published Speaight's first book, *The Mutinous Wind*, in 1932.<sup>162</sup> Speaight's modern "Cinderella" is built as a frame narrative where we follow a first-person narrator as he seeks out and visits a famed woman of great wisdom in her cottage in "a secluded valley somewhere in our Western England" (271) for help in a "private matter" which, as he tells us, "I shall not retell here for it does not concern my story" (274). The woman, "who has just entered upon her middle age," gives her name as Cinderella, and upon meeting her the narrator is struck by "an active and yet a painful memory of youth" which is retained in her

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<sup>161</sup> Speaight, Robert. "Cinderella." In *The Fairies Return*. Ed. Peter Davies. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2012. Pages 271-301. All subsequent references to this fairy tale are to this edition and will be cited in the text within this subchapter

<sup>162</sup> Speaight, Robert. *The Property Basket: Recollections of a Divided Life*. London: Collins & Harvill Press. 1970. Page 152

face and “the history of some intense experience” which remained written on her brow: “to whatever she had known of pain or pleasure she was now reconciled, for there was a total absence in her expression of that conflict which wears down the resistance and withers the serenity of the soul” (272). Cinderella of the 1930s is a philosopher, “known as Socrates, as Shakespeare, as Christ are known” (276), loved like they are loved yet also as “unfathomably apart” as they were from the people surrounding them.

Intrigued by this incredible woman, the narrator explains that her story, her “secret,” came to him in a dream, which he feels the Gods have obliged him to inscribe. Thus, nestled between the narrator’s framing remarks, we learn that Cinderella is the youngest of three daughters living in a house overlooking the same valley. While the eldest daughters share the nature of their mother, who, we learn, is shallow and superficial, Cinderella is the apple of their father’s eyes; the two “would often go out together for the day and explore the high places of the hills, while the others remained at home, cultivating the art of criticism.”(279) Despite their wickedness and the maliciousness in their acts towards their sister they are unable to confront her with them, as her good nature and “untroubled mien”(280) unsettles and baffles them, especially when she passes up ample opportunities to humiliate them.

Though the setup of Speaight’s revision is similar to its source there is a slight change in circumstances which radically changes the direction of the plot: when Cinderella remains at home while her sisters are to be presented at Court it is simply because she is still too young, rather than a deliberately cruel exclusion by a spiteful (step)mother. As Tatar writes in her introduction to the collection, “Cinderella” is “our quintessential rags-to-riches story,”<sup>163</sup> but such a story necessitates the illustration of upward social mobility and a humiliation which the heroine must endure to deserve her retribution which simply does not exist in this modern take on the tale. Rather, Speaight introduces the idea of a mystery of the meaning of love which increasingly preoccupies his protagonist’s mind – similar to the mysteries which, as we have seen, troubles Mary Snow (to experience love) and Ludd (his inability to shiver) in their respective stories, where they are plot devices inherited from the tales’ intertextual sources. The effect is a shift of purpose for Cinderella, a refocus from a quest for revenge to a quest for knowledge of the nature of love – but the reader who expects fairy tale romance will be sorely disappointed. Instead, Speaight offers a cynical comment on the construction of the fairy tale heroine and her notions of romantic love in collision with the transgressive modernity of the 1930s.

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<sup>163</sup> Tatar I: 21

### 3.4.1 Subverting bourgeois notions of society and gender: intertextual links to Perrault and the Brothers Grimm

One of the most reproduced narrative plots in folktales worldwide, the two most famous versions in modern Western culture stem from the tradition of the literary fairy tales from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de verre” (“Cinderella, or the little glass slipper”) by Charles Perrault and “Aschputtel” by the Brothers Grimm.<sup>164</sup> Perrault’s version was published in an English version in Andrew Lang’s *The Blue Fairy Book* from 1889, who had published a scholarly edition of Perrault’s fairy tales in French the previous year. The general plot of the tale is so widely known that I will not spend time elaborating it here, but I will go into the details of the modern tale’s intertext which Speaight subverts. Once the modern narrator begins the story of Cinderella the change of a major motif stands out immediately: the fact that the mother in this version is indeed the birth mother, and that all the three sisters share the same father. In the French “Cendrillon” from 1697, writes Armando Maggi, the casting of the maternal figure as a stepmother is quite deliberate as Perrault uses the juxtaposition of Cinderella and the stepmother (and stepdaughters) to illustrate moral and immoral female behaviour. As such Cinderella’s morality is directly linked to her passivity, opposed to the stepmother’s active ambitions.

Speaight removes the distance placed upon the characters by making them biological relatives, but only slightly readjust the dichotomy of female behaviour from the canonical tale. In his modern story, he creates a contrast between the mother and sisters on one hand and Cinderella on the other based on their personalities and tastes. As already mentioned, the sisters cynical and superficial nature is used to enhance not only the goodness of their sister but also her genius, determination, and principles:

Their mother had schooled them carefully; and in all they did they were taught to eschew enthusiasm. They were remote from anything so energetic as attack, anything so serious as conviction. They recognized the importance of modernity and money, and while they would have said that all revolutions were vulgar and most religions were absurd, the title of Tory or Atheist would have equally displeased them (279).

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<sup>164</sup> Maggi, Armando. “The Creation of Cinderella from Basile to the Brothers Grimm.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014. Page 150-151. A third popular version to today’s audience is Walt Disney’s animation released in 1950, which was based on Perrault’s version.

In Speaight's fairy tale there is a falsity and artificiality about the elder sisters which renders them passive followers of the dominant culture, while Cinderella is portrayed as natural and without pretence, an active heroine who follows her own standard rather than the trends – displaying itself in “a taste for Homer, Fairy-Tales, Church-going, country walks, and the novels of Sir Walter Scott” (280). Like Mitchison's *Mary Snow* she stands out by her rather unfeminine interests, but here they are presented as more womanly than the counterfeit behaviour of her sisters. As such, Speaight contrasts the sisters' modernity with Cinderella's traditional virtues, based on a dichotomy where, as the tale suggests, modern norms and virtues are construed as false against the profundity of Cinderella's unfashionable standards. Cinderella's father has cultivated an archaism in his youngest daughter which almost makes her an anachronism within the modern context.

However, throughout the dream-sequence the narrator expressively links these dichotomous traits to the physical appearance of female character's bodies, an exaggeration of the dichotomy the mother/sisters and Cinderella represent which unfairly jumbles together physical and personal traits. This is especially troubling considering that this is used as a narrative motif to explain Cinderella's journey towards becoming the wise woman we see in the beginning of the story. The mother is introduced as the father's great mistake in life, and his initial attraction to her is justified as a lapse of judgement of his early twenties when a “slim figure and [a] boyish look” can “exercise so strange a fascination over men” (277-278). But, as the narrator goes on, this fascination of the modern aesthetic of short hair and trousers and counterfeit mannerisms is not enough to hold a man's loyalty – “Their appeal is to something superficial, restless and almost perverse in his nature” (278). While the mother, and in turn the eldest daughters, “lacked the dignity, the repose, and the easy rhythm which lend a permanent beauty to her sex,” Cinderella's – which already in the cradle “gave the promise of perfect womanhood” (278) – more voluptuous figure lend her a gracefulness and delicateness enhanced by her voluminous dark hair and her dark voice.

The judgement of women's bodies of the father is repeated again later by the King and by Cinderella herself during the debutante ball at Court, which will be discussed further shortly, when he is drawn towards Cinderella because of her figure. First, the narrator says, Cinderella notices how many “flat girls” surrounds her, thinking to herself that “she had never seen a flatter pair than the couple immediately in front of her, when she recognised them as her sisters” (291); then, while the King beckons to Cinderella to come closer he demands that the other girls will be sent away, saying that his “family has never had a stomach for flat-chested

women, and still they come” (292). The link which the tale offers between a woman’s personality and the physical form of her body, and the suggestion that slim women are unwomanly, has not aged well. Furthermore, the story’s presentation of Cinderella as the King’s true love based on her conviction that she should be his wife and her appearance implies that her archaic beauty and virtues makes her better atoned to the needs of a husband.

Before going further, however, it is necessary to discuss the events which leads Cinderella to the ball. Not particularly interested in the Court to begin with and perfectly content within the boundaries of her valley, her wish to go comes upon her while out for a walk, when she contemplates the events which her family is experiencing and the things they are seeing. As she muses on these things her thoughts go into unfamiliar terrain when she “remembers that there is no Queen” (284), and is devastated at “the idea of a man without a woman” (284). The prospect, the narrator says, “sent her heart thumping in her bosom and rippled the usual serenity of her mind. It was this, in fact, which awakened her to the intimate imagination of love” (285). Only after this occurrence does she look with interest beyond the valley and at the prospect of leaving it, when she imagines that the King would be interested in a woman and she begins to ponder what kind of woman that would be. This episode functions as her point of maturation, the moment where she first begins to imagine herself not only in a relationship with a man but wanting to define herself in relation to this man. It is a sharp deviation from the arguments made in especially Mitchison’s but also Stead’s fairy tales and ideas, whose ideas of equality for women within their relationships with men necessitated the freedom to pursue ambitions outside marriage – a freedom, I would claim, to exist for themselves instead of for their husband’s needs.

This incident seemingly prompts the appearance of a strange older woman at her house, a woman which, in the capacity of arranging for Cinderella to go to the ball, fulfils the role of the fairy godmother of Perrault’s tale. In the French original, the godmother came to replace the function of Cinderella’s dead mother, who through magical animal helpers, a magical tree planted upon her grave, and other natural motifs aid Cinderella in return for her goodness and piety from earlier versions as well as in the Brothers Grimm’s later.<sup>165</sup> In Perrault’s tale, the fairy godmother is a substitute for the good mother who’s function is to test and advice the heroine.<sup>166</sup> Speaight’s godmother figure works to swiftly connect Cinderella’s mystery to its

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<sup>165</sup> Simpson: 116

<sup>166</sup> Lee, Linda J. “Mothers.” In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. Vol. 2. Ed. Donald Haase. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 2008. Page 637

revelation, a deus ex machina without an explicit connection to the girl's past, unless the similarities in her description – her appearance which, rather than belong to any period, seemed to “belong to the whole of time;” the “wise maturity” (287) of her face – are meant to hint towards the aged Cinderella of the beginning of the tale. In that case, the godmother would represent the type of woman which Cinderella will herself become, arriving to aid Cinderella, like her birth-mother cannot, through the rite of maturation. The godmother appears because Cinderella, unlike her sisters who caters to their society's expectations of marriage in terms of constructed social roles and rules, has wished for the knowledge of love to a man seemingly regardless of his stature. However, the test is not worded as to marry that man, but rather to know the true nature of love, a test whose potential outcome is distinctly more ambiguous.

### **3.4.2 A new Cinderella: breaking with the cultural mythology**

Fearless, Cinderella approaches the castle and the King, made bold by the notion that what awaited her was the knowledge “of a love that had no end on earth,” a love which “was not subject to the doom of things” (290-291). What Cinderella expects to discover seems to be an ancient power, constructing the traditional idea of romantic love as one of the pillars of the earth. After her arrival into the ballroom amongst the other ladies present and the initiation of their conversation which has already been discussed above, Cinderella wastes no time in stating her business. Her first words are to say that she loves him and to explain that she was sent there by a Lady so that he could teach her the meaning of love. As she makes him rest his wary head upon her lap, the King replies: “A beautiful woman is a restless thing [...] My family has always depended upon women. – I like your dress. – I love you. Would you care to be my Queen?” (293) Cinderella answers that that is her intention for being there, and asks when he can reveal to her the mystery which troubles her, to which he says that they will meet in “the Oak Room – at half-past eleven.”

However, the time comes she hears a couple of hurried steps in the corridor which she identifies to be the King's and those of a strange girl. Hiding behind a curtain, Cinderella overhears their conversation:

The King now raised his voice:

‘You were a fool to trust me. It is not in my nature to keep a promise to a woman.’

And a voice, light in timbre but tragic in its quiet appeal, replied to him.  
'What about your martyred, sainted ancestor? He was a faithful man.'  
'Poor, silly Charles,' said the King; 'he was a martyr and a saint and a magnificently self-conscious monarch, but I don't think that the rest of us would have described him as a man' (295).

The girl, Cinderella learns, had nursed the King back to health after he was thrown off a horse, after which he had made love to her and asked her to be his Queen, of what the girl had thought was God's inspiration. The King's answer is rather dismal: "It is rather difficult to live up to a legend,' he replied wearily, 'but I do my best. Surely it was obvious that I should ask you to be my wife, and surely it was obvious that I should break my promise. I thought you knew the rules of the game'" (296). What follows is equally metafictional, as the King says that he is "the last of the Romantics" and that the secret to his success is the knowledge that "Romanticism returns" (296); when the girl retorts that he lives "in a world of sentimental fiction," he replies that "[t]hat is the penalty for having inspired so much" (279). The King, as he is well aware, is a vital part to the marriage narrative which constitutes the aspirations of many young women, and he exploits it fully. Too add salt to the wound he calls her Cinderella, saying that "it's the name of such a pretty person" (297). Though his feelings for Cinderella is construed as true – the reference to him living in "sentimental fiction" might imply that he shares her traditional ideal of romantic love – his involvement with the sexual morals of the modern world is not reconcilable with Cinderella's standards.

Cinderella then leaves at once, as she has been taught that which she came for, and knowing "that she could never be happy upon the ruins of another's happiness" (298). Upon leaving for the ball in the godmother's motor-car, she was given the usual interdiction of returning to the car before midnight, but she was also told to take good care of her slippers woven by "a very holy woman," meant for "the feet that stumble and the heart that does not fail" (289). Unable to follow the Lady's interdiction when she misses the car at midnight, she goes back in pursuit of her slipper when she hears the King, crying out the name. In tears she gives up the slipper and flees from the castle while she listens to the "breaking of a royal heart" (299). Though her foot failed as she ran, her heart remains true to her beloved, the quote suggests, but Cinderella's sacrifice to redeem the King creates an ambivalence towards the traditional idea of love and a disillusionment with its existence in the modern world. As Maria Tatar writes, she "seems to make a mad dash from the beautiful mysteries of the physical world to the brutal mysteries of the metaphysical. The awful secret she discovers



right near the altar of love has to do with betrayal, suffering, and ‘eternal crucifixion’: ‘love’s mystery laid bare.’”<sup>167</sup>

And as such, the modern “Cinderella” inverts the traditional narrative when its heroine abandons the route which the achievement of her goal should have taken her: rather than marrying her beloved but deceitful King, Cinderella chooses to live alone and use her newly found knowledge to help others. Rather than casting Cinderella as the martyr she is initially in Perrault’s tale, where, as Marcia K. Lieberman writes, she represents the trope of “the patient sufferer” who “submits to her lot” of abuse, Speaight’s Cinderella chooses the role of the martyr to atone for the King’s sins.<sup>168</sup> The wisdom she attains through her sacrifice makes her an icon of goodness, compassion, and genius to equal that of Christ, of Socrates, of Shakespeare, but like they she is an archaic remnant of a by-gone world. Speaight’s tale is an ambiguous tale about a woman who will live for her beloved at all costs, and follow her standards of marital morality long after they have been outdated. There seems to be no negotiation of the politics of traditional love in the world of the modern Cinderella. Thus, it offers a metafictional comment on the traditional ideal of love which is regressive within the context of the modern marriage, though remaining cynical about what forms and ideals should be attributed to love and marriage in the 1930s. “Here,” as Tatar points out, “the fairies return to make real mischief for those who aspire to fairy-tale romance.”<sup>169</sup>

### 3.5 Conclusion

As the introduction to this chapter makes clear, the fairy tales chosen for discussions revolves around the question of marriage, taking part of a literary trend primarily dominated by women which favoured marriage as the ideal relationship – but only on certain terms. It is these terms which are negotiated in the modern tales and their subversive takes on the marriage plots of their intertextual sources, when they question the very real conditions which women and men suffer under when they cater to their society’s marital norms and values. The demonstration of the idea of the mystery that evades the protagonists which is at the centre of all three stories, and which is presented as a necessity for their maturation into complete human beings, vary drastically from tale to tale. The tragic melting of Mary Snow raises the

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<sup>167</sup> Tatar I: 21-22

<sup>168</sup> Lieberman, Marcia K. “Some Day My Prince Will Come.” In *Don’t Bet On the Prince*. Ed. Jack Zipes. Aldershot: Gower. 1986. Page 194

<sup>169</sup> Tatar I: 22

question of the logic of the notion that marriage makes one a complete adult when succumbing to love when that necessitates shedding one's pre-existing interests and passions. For Cinderella, whose new role could have been construed as a personal ambition, the obsession of living for the man she loves turns into a life of atonement for his sins, her ardent self-sacrifice represented as the manifestation of true love.

Linked to this mystery is the exposition of a systemic egotistical masculinity which hinders marital happiness for one or both of the parties involved. "The Snow Maiden" is a cautionary tale about the selfishness in George Higginson's aggressive pursuit of Mary and the subsequent marriage in which the husband regards his wife as an object which should only cater to his needs; in "Cinderella," the King's egotistical seduction and rejection of another girl makes married life an impossibility for Cinderella, who decides to spend her life atoning for his sins. In "O If I Could But Shiver!," of course, the egotistical masculinity which hinders Ludd's marital bliss is his own, and only here, where the story follows the male point of view, does the unravelling of his mystery, his inability to shiver, provide the end which the protagonist sought. Once Ludd is able to recognize Esther's sexuality as equal to his own does he become comfortable with his own maturity within their marriage, and is able to become a respected lawful citizen. Though "Cinderella" remains a thoroughly cynical exposition of the nature love within the modern world, "The Snow Maiden" and "O If I Could But Shiver!" propose a utopian aspect of love and marriage when catering to women's needs as well as men's. These two latter tales, unlike their intertexts, suggest that there is an immorality in inhibiting women's equality, aspirations, feelings, and sexuality; instead, a consideration of these aspects of female life can lead to a more fulfilled and happy marriage for their husbands as well.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The aim of the thesis has been to situate the stories of the British fairy tale collections of the 1930s – *The Fairies Return*, compiled by Peter Davies, and *The Fourth Pig*, written by Naomi Mitchison – within their literary context as intertextual fairy tales which comments on political, economic and social issues inherent to the late interwar period. The main argument I have proposed is that while these tales use narrative techniques characteristic of the subversive fairy tale genre, their grounding in the concerns of intermodern literature separates them as uniquely historically and politically specific fairy tales. Their overtness – which, as was shown in the introduction to this thesis, have been argued by early critics to be a weakness – is a testament to the sense of urgency which characterizes the political literature of the 1930s, a trait which I hold is a sign of the fears and frustrations of a politically unique period of time in the Western world which are valuable to an understanding of that time. As shown, their involvement with the narrative methods of the fantastic, utopias/dystopias, Aesopian language, and satire in a manner characteristic to the political literature of 1930s makes the modern fairy tales explicit mirror images of a clearly defined cultural moment. As such, they give valuable insight into the lived realities and experiences behind the metaphors and allegories, and the work done to convince their readers of the injustices ingrained in the cultural rules they lived by. The claim that I have made is that the authors of the modern fairy tales directly or indirectly challenge their readers to question the morality of the dominant political and social structures of their society by intertextually linking their stories to canonical fairy tales which were traditionally infused with bourgeois values.

It has therefore been central to the thesis to discuss the eight stories which I have focused on both as part of the genre of subversive fairy tales and of the genre of intermodern literature, as their unique nature lies in their combination of the narrative techniques which are characteristic of the two narrative modes. The manner of which the intertextuality has been used in the tales differ greatly. Thus we find stories where the trajectory of the plot of a classic fairy tale has been straightforwardly applied to a modern setting, as in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and “The Snow Maiden,” where minor changes subtly inverts the meaning and the moral of a familiar narrative; alternatively, there are tales such as “Hansel and Gretel,” “O If I Could But Shiver!” and “Cinderella” which contradicts the reader’s expectations of the plot by changing the events of the ending by inverting or subverting it in a drastic manner. Then of course, there are the tales which does not follow the plot of their

source at all, but treat it in retrospect as in “The Fourth Pig” or create a new plot based on the characteristics of the protagonist, as in “Jack the Giant Killer” – “Soria Moria Castle” stands out as a tale which uses only a motif from its intertext. Likewise, the overtness of the political message of the tales is equally varying. “Hansel and Gretel” and “Jack the Giant Killer” for instance provide entertainment and humour while their use of satire additionally functions as Aesopian language to provide a sublevel of political and social critique; “The Fourth Pig,” which I have argued answers to the Disney animation and its song “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?,” must have been read as an explicitly political warning upon publication.

As I have shown in the analysis of the modern fairy tales, the levels of intertextual faithfulness and the levels of overtness in purporting their political ideas are intentionally used by the authors to create an effect based on the reader’s pre-existing knowledge of the fairy tales, as well as the controversy or lack thereof surrounding the subject of the tale’s distinct or ambiguous moral message. In the same manner, the fantastic elements of the fairy tale world, its magic, is used or avoided to manipulate the narrative – remembering that they function to exaggerate or invert what is familiar in order to alert the reader to how it is constructed. When translating fairy tale magic into a 1930s context, an intrinsic aspect of the authors’ subversions is the treatment of the magical instrument which traditionally allows the narrative to follow a desired path which would be prohibited for the listener or reader of folk and fairy tales in real life. In the modern fairy tales and their modern contexts, this magic can manifest in modern ways: Ally Barbers malfunctioning phone replaces the magical gateway happened upon by his intertextual brother Ali Baba, as money is more likely to be invested in illegal ways than hidden in caves in the 1930s; similarly, the Witch’s house in Mitchison’s “Hansel and Gretel” is made of money rather than food, reflecting the vulgar obsession with money in the modern capitalist world. However, the evasion of the magic of the tale’s source can be equally effective, as shown in “O If I Could But Shiver!” where the distance of the supernatural is removed so that one is left with the very real horror of the conditions of the poor.

The fantastic projections which the authors of the modern tales have brought to their rewritings of the canonical fairy tales reproduces the exaggerations integral to their genre as they juxtapose extreme versions of real world problems with their ethical solutions – a demonstration of the dystopian and the utopian reflections of a real issue respectively. As the discussions of this thesis has shown, the utopian and dystopian elements of folk and fairy tales are inherently in opposition to passivity, and their power to transcend the confinements of

reality is brought into the modern fairy tales to inspire real political change, and to show ambivalence towards progressing technological, political and social forces which seeks to control and dehumanize. When the authors rewrite the narratives that have become implemented into the social coda as norms, they reveal the underlying rules and their nature as social constructs. Thus, they can cast an ambiguous light over the morality of the damaging structures, and doing so they open up for the possibility of change. Their function as a literature of political ideas equals their function as entertainment to the point that they are intrinsically linked to each other, where some of the tales take on the moralizing qualities of the fairy tales they intertextually build on in order to invert and subvert their messages.

As was established in the introduction, though much of the same subjects are shared between the two collections, the difference in tone between *The Fairies Return* and *The Fourth Pig* is palpable. As evident in the following discussions in the chapters, the tales of Davies' collection are more bent on poking fun at the object of their satire, naturally, as well as delving into controversial and taboo subject matters, presenting ambiguous ending or alternative utopian possibilities; Mitchison's tales, however, are characterized by greater subtlety and insistence, treating her characters with a greater compassion and understanding while more often leaning towards dystopia and the cautionary tale. It is not a surprising development when remembering the order in which they were written and the progress of interior and exterior politics and socio-economic conditions from the publication of *The Fairies Return* in 1934 to the publication of *The Fourth Pig* in 1936.

Reading the British fairy tales of the 1930s today, there are obvious technological and social changes which have made them somewhat alien to the Western reader, but the political and social issues dealt with in *The Fairies Return* and *The Fourth Pig* remain or have become topical, perhaps eerily so. Because of political events and social currents the last couple of years, arguments has been made in media outlets to the effect that one should be vary of the parallels between our age and that of the interwar years.<sup>170</sup> Nazism and extreme right sentiments are beginning to gain an increasingly substantial following and the gap between a stronger right wing politics and a weakened left; poverty and high taxations of the middle and working classes is still an issue; women's rights for personal autonomy is still a feminist cause. In such a political climate, the intermodern fairy tales' warnings against passivity in the face of dehumanizing ideologies can remain a valuable lesson, as can their caution against

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<sup>170</sup> See for instance: Mason, Paul. "Are we living though another 1930s?" *The Guardian*. 01.08.2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/01/are-we-living-through-another-1930s-paul-mason>

greed in an increasingly materialistic world. Though marriage norms have become less strict in certain societies, fairy tales of female independence and the objectification of women is an intrinsic part of the canon of fairy tale subversions from Angela Carter's 1979 collection of stories *The Bloody Chamber*, to the work of Helen Oyeyemi, amongst many others, today; a tradition many of the fairy tales of the collections of the 1930s could be considered early examples of. Very little academic work has been done on the fairy tales of Davies' and Mitchison's collections, but as my thesis has begun to show there are ample potential of meaningful discussions on their nature as intermodern and intertextual fairy tales and the unique visions they provide of a fascinating tumultuous time and of the ideas of the creative minds which sought to change their society for the better, one fairy tale at the time.

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