



2014-06-19

The Challenge of Happily Ever After: How Once Upon a Time Fanfic Fairy Tales Model Strategies for Ordinary Life Challenges

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The Challenge of Happily Ever After: How *Once Upon a Time*

Fanfic Fairy Tales Model Strategies

for Ordinary Life Challenges

Christa M. Baxter

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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June 2014

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ABSTRACT

The Challenge of Happily Ever After: How *Once Upon a Time* Fanfic Fairy Tales Model Strategies for Ordinary Life Challenges

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Although many feminist fairy-tale scholars have theorized how the tales shape the lives of their readers, few have explicitly examined what readers themselves have to say about how fairy tales impacted their choices and expectation. This article turns to fanfiction written by fans of ABC's *Once Upon a Time* television series to discover how these fans challenge or reify fairy-tale expectations, particularly in terms of gender. After outlining the brief history of fairy-tale reception studies concerned with gender, the article then turns to a close reading of three *Ouat* fanfiction retellings of Beauty and the Beast that show the couple in contemporary settings dealing with ordinary and magic-less problems, such as a loveless marriage, sexual violence, and the stillbirth of a child. The close reading of these stories reveal that even as they challenge the passive princess ideal seen in many early Disney retellings, they also challenge the ideal of the handsome prince who can ensure a happily ever after. Instead of saving the heroine from impending trauma, the hero must support her as she copes after trauma has already struck. In each of these stories, the couples must empathetically relate to each other's pain, support rather than force the recovery process, and redefine happily ever after as dynamic, peaceful moments rather than an absolute, static ending. The analysis of fanfiction writer and reader interactions reveals that these stories are also used as models for the readers' and writers' own experiences in supporting friends who have gone through trauma, emphasizing that fairy tales are still relevant to their readers' lives.

Keywords: Fairy tales, feminism, masculinity studies, reception studies, fanfiction, *Once Upon a Time*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my parents, Rita and Steve Baxter, who taught me to love stories. I am also deeply grateful to my husband, Shawn Drake, for his support and confidence in me. Without my dear friend Becca Hay, I never would have landed on this topic, and for her exuberant support and faith I am deeply thankful. Finally, I would like to thank my mentors: Jill Terry Rudy, for her patient encouragement, listening ear, and wise writing advice; Kristin Matthews, for her engaging courses and helpful feedback; Brian Jackson, for his optimism and help with organizing this project; and Gloria Cronin, for her faith and high expectations.

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The Challenge of Happily Ever After: How *Once Upon a Time*

Fanfic Fairy Tales Model Strategies

for Ordinary Life Challenges

Through the centuries, fairy tales frequently have been adapted to convey their tellers' social values. Diverse groups have used them to envision an ideal world and map out strategies for surviving a flawed one.¹ More specifically, fairy tales have modelled specific, gendered behaviors and have promised a happily ever after for those behaviors—much to the alarm of both scholars and normal readers alike. In recent decades, popular fairy-tale retellings have come under fire for promoting passive female behavior and rewarding docile heroines with a charming prince and happily ever after—a model that isn't particularly liberating for females or males. Feminist critics in particular warn that popular fairy tales fail to prepare readers to recover from loss or take charge of their own lives.² But many readers of fairy tales are capable of diverse responses to these stories, including retellings that model more empowered actions, envision more ordinary happy endings, and call for an egalitarian model of romance.

One venue for these retellings is the fanfiction community of the ABC's series *Once Upon a Time* (*OUAT*). Because of the show's setting and structure, it prompts fans to explore both an attainable happily ever after and the behaviors that can lead characters there, despite

¹ See Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* for a discussion on how fairy tales operated as coming-of-age instruction tales for young women learning to navigate arranged marriage, relationships with mothers-in-law, and other challenges (219). According to Lewis Seifert and Domna Stanton, women in the 1600s used fairy tales to critique arranged marriages and call for the right to choose their own spouse (28–29).

² While this paper focuses on larger feminist fairy-tale studies concerned with reception, the question of how fairy tales and trauma intersect is a fruitful one worth exploring. Scholars of trauma theory will find much material to analyze in *Once Upon a Time* fairy-tale fan fiction.

facing challenging problems. In the show, a familiar cast of Disney characters have been cursed by Snow White's wicked stepmother, Queen Regina, to forget their fairy-tale personas and live in the contemporary Storybrooke, Maine. Through the use of frequent flashbacks, the characters are portrayed both in their past lives in Fairy Tale Land and in Storybrooke, where in the first season, most people have forgotten that magic exists and muddle through their daily struggles more or less the same way their viewers do ("Pilot"). Characters must wrestle not only with magical curses and wicked stepmothers, but also with more ordinary problems like paying rent, reconciling with a spouse, and handling an unplanned pregnancy. Because these problems are relatable for viewers, the happy ending becomes both more desirable and more doubtful, and that tension is part of what keeps viewers coming back season after season (Hay and Baxter).

Furthermore, because *OUAT* is a television series, its commercial structure indefinitely defers the happy ending so the show can go on and the profits can keep rolling in.³ That deferment allows the show's writers to introduce more fairy-tale characters and more relatable problems. In turn, fanfic writers have more starting points from which they can explore, in their own stories, how characters can recover from loss and find a happy ending. As a byproduct of this creative process, these writers reveal changing attitudes towards what actions can bring about a happy ending.

Like the show, these *OUAT* fanfic fairy tales focus on the tension between challenging problems and the hope of a happily ever after. These stories are filled with traumas and issues that are often even more serious than those depicted in the show. In these tales, the happy endings are more than "symbolic act with wish fulfillment, role-playing, idealization, survival"

³ The *OUAT* spinoff, *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, illustrates this point: the show was so unsuccessful that the fairy-talefairy-talefairy-talefairy-talefairy-tale wedding and happily ever after arrived at the end of a truncated first season due to the show's early cancellation ("And They").

(Bacchilega 4). Rather than functioning solely as a longed-for destination, the happy ending works as a narrative and conceptual challenge that reshapes the entire story: how will Belle find a happy ending when she's been trapped in a loveless marriage for years? How can the Beast prove he's not a monster to a Belle who has been a victim of dating violence? For these stories to be appealing, they need more than magic, a pretty princess, and a handsome prince for a happy ending to materialize. This narrative challenge creates the opportunity for fans to explore, via fanfiction, different behaviors and actions that help the characters overcome their problems, take charge of their lives, and find a happy ending.

Far from being fictional flights of fancy, these stories are intimately connected to fans' lived experiences. The community discourse around these stories (via prefaces and comments) demonstrate that fans incorporate their own experiences into the stories; in turn, fans apply specific actions from the stories to their own relationships, particularly with friends dealing with loss. This creative process mirrors some of the oldest functions of fairy tales. As fairy-tale scholar Maria Tatar puts it, "The staying power of these stories, their widespread and enduring popularity, suggests that they must be addressing issues that have a significant social function—whether critical, conservative, compensatory, or therapeutic" (xi). Similarly, as they address issues relatable to their writers and readers, the *OUAT* fanfic fairy tales work in therapeutic, critical, and compensatory ways to develop maps (specific actions) for handling ordinary catastrophes. Writers and readers discuss how their characters can find a happy ending after all, and in the process they both envision an ideal world while mapping out strategies for surviving a flawed one.

The *OUAT* fandom incorporates aspects of both fairy tales and fanfiction, creating a novel space where characters work through actual (as opposed to magical) problems but aim for

a believable happily ever after. These fanfic tales critique the popular fairy-tale model, particularly common in early Disney films, of rewarding passive, beautiful characters with an equally passive (but unrealistic) happily ever after; in contrast, the fanfic tales model specific actions that both the hero and the heroine can undertake to recover from loss and find a believable happy ending. But these stories also borrow heavily from fanfiction narrative conventions: they use the hurt/comfort trope⁴ (wherein a character in emotional or physical pain is comforted by another, often in a developing romantic relationship) to introduce relatable problems and add to the story's pathos. These stories are also circulated within a digital fandom community, a change from past fanfiction models (where groups met in person) that allows writers and readers some anonymity if they wish to discuss how the stories relate to their own lives (as will be shown later in this project). This intertextual corpus provides crucial insight for both feminist fairy-tale scholars and reception scholars into how readers respond to and rework fairy tales, especially in terms of their messages about gender. Because of the popular angst over fairy tales and gender, as well as the lack of fairy-tale reception studies in recent years, this study is timely and needed.

In this study, I demonstrate how these fanfiction stories envision a more egalitarian mode of romance than the dyad of the pretty passive princess and handsome powerful prince. Instead, the stories show more ordinary relationships between imperfect people who love and support (but never fix or rescue) each other. This egalitarian mode of romance sees each partner as an individual rather than a reward or a rescuer. Therefore, I argue that readers are not merely passive receptors of fairy tales' social values; these readers actively author fairy tales to convey

⁴ Hurt/comfort storylines are often referred to as a trope in online fandoms. See fanlore.org, allthetropes.orian.org, and tvtropes.org. For a more scholarly discussion of the hurt/comfort trope, see this project's "Fanfiction and the Hurt/Comfort Trope" section, beginning on page 12.

their own social values, particularly in terms of gender roles. This finding is important especially now when it seems that fairy tales have become the province of animation studios and publishing houses. When fans combine fairy tales with fanfiction, they explore the tension between ordinary life problems (sometimes their own) and the hope of a happy ending. In the process, they model specific actions rather than accept static traits for their protagonists. And while these fanfiction fairy tales feel modern in the mode of online fandoms, they fulfill a traditional role of fairy tale: using stories to map out better ways to cope with life's challenges.

To better understand fan fiction's unique insights into how fairy tales impact their readers and how writers impact fairy tales, I will first review feminist fairy-tale studies concerned with reception, a narrow but important field that has rarely been historically traced. Then I will briefly explain the communal aspects of fanfiction and its hurt/comfort trope, moving on to analyze how the fanfiction community both alters popular fairy tales and extends scholarly knowledge of fairy-tale reception. This context will allow me to demonstrate how these fanfic fairy-tale writers are challenging gender norms in their fairy tales and articulating more egalitarian ways for men and women to relate to each other.

Feminist Fairy-tale Studies and Reception Studies

For centuries, people have used fairy tales to perpetuate or challenge ideas about gender, but in the twentieth century this practice came under renewed scrutiny. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that fairy tales are used to socialize girls and women (305–306). By the 1970s, writers from Angela Carter and Anne Sexton to Margaret Atwood and Jane Yolen began addressing contemporary feminist concerns through their own fairy-tale retellings (Haase, Preface vii-ix). Furthermore, feminist scholars began debating in earnest the impact fairy tales have on their readers' behavior and gender identities (Haase, "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship")

2). In particular, scholars like Allison Lurie and Marcia Lieberman debated whether fairy tales modeled helpful or harmful behavior for young (primarily female) readers. Although most studies explicitly focused on female readers, they implicitly raised the question of how fairy tales impact male readers as well, though this area has received much less attention. Allison Lurie kicked off the controversy when she famously argued in her 1970 essay “Fairy Tale Liberation” that many tales encourage empowering traits, such as independence and strength, in young girls (42–44). In 1972, Marcia R. Lieberman rebutted that although a handful of stories do contain empowering messages, the majority of well-known fairy tales limit girls’ conceptions of their own abilities and model behavior that will be “acceptable” to future romantic partners (385). According to Lieberman, the popular Andrew Lang and Walt Disney retellings merely “serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles” (383), framing girls as objects and implicitly training them to accommodate themselves to a patriarchal society’s expectations. Lieberman further argued that “millions of women must surely have formed . . . their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales” (385). Put simply, fairy tales taught girls not only what to do, but also what to want. They modelled how girls “should” act and what their happy ending “should” look like. But what remained to be seen was what the readers themselves had to say about how fairy tales had impacted their lives.

To further examine how fairy tales shaped young readers, feminist scholars like Kay Stone, Kristen Wardetzky, and Rita Comtois turned to the concerns and methodologies of reception studies. In 1970, the German scholar Hans Robert Jauss outlined this growing field’s aims in his book *Rezeptionsästhetik* (translated in 1972 as *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*). More historically focused than reader-response studies, reception studies are concerned with how

a text's meaning changes over time as readers' own knowledge, experiences, and literary expectations evolve ("Reception theory"). To further outline just what kind of meaning is studied, I turn to Janet Staiger's 2005 book, *Media Reception Studies*: "Reception studies asks, What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time? And do those meanings have any effects? Cognitive? Emotional? Social? Political?" (2) By naming domains in which the meaning of texts (or films or other media) have effects, Staiger emphasizes the importance of reception studies: "All texts have political and social meanings and values—'positive' or 'negative,' 'reinforcing' or contrary to the beliefs of their various readers" (3). Some feminist fairy-tale scholars, from Kay and Comtois to Kristen Wardetzky, took up reception studies' concern with how readers absorb, resist, and construct meaning from fairy tales, particularly in regards to fairy-tale messages about ideal femininity.

Kay, Stone, Wardetzky, and others borrowed not only from reception studies' concerns but also from the field's methodologies. Henry Jenkins wrote that reception studies "seeks empirical evidence, through historical or ethnographic research, that documents the production and circulation of meaning" (*Reception Theory*). These scholars conducted in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and group discussions with adults and children to document fairy tales' production of meaning. In particular, Stone and Comtois investigated how readers internalized or resisted popular fairy tales' messages about ideal female behavior and rewards for that behavior. Their complex findings revealed that while individuals did exert some control over their interpretation and memory of fairy tale themes, the tales did not prepare readers for loss or model how to take charge of their own lives. For example, in her 1975 interviews with forty women of varying ages, Stone acknowledged that many North American women absorbed messages of passive femininity from Disney and Grimm retellings, which idealized heroines that were "not

only passive and pretty, but also unusually patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet.... Even Cinderella ... is a heroine only when properly cleaned and dressed” (“Things Walt Disney” 44). The tales taught girls not only what to be but also what to want: some interviewees admitted to wishing they too could catch a husband and a “suburban castle” with little effort (48). One woman acknowledged her life was nothing like a fairy tale, but felt that it was her, not the tales, that needed to change (49). I argue that these gendered messages did not prepare women to take ownership for their own lives or model how to cope with trauma and loss. Yet according to Stone, some women recalled the same stories with more active heroines, as when they overemphasized the aggression displayed by Gretel when she pushed the witch into the oven. This exaggerated remembrance implied they could subconsciously disagree with the stories’ logic and refashion the tale into something more to their liking. In her reflections on the study a decade later, Stone wrote, “If women remember fairy tales, consciously or unconsciously, they can reinterpret them as well. It is the possibility of such reinterpretation that gives hope that women can eventually free themselves from the bonds of fairy tale magic” (“Misuses of Enchantment” 143). I suggest that the impact of fairy tales is not a monolithic, static force, but rather something the reader can negotiate with and reframe throughout her life, particularly if it doesn’t resonate with her lived experience.

Although other studies looked at children’s reception to fairy tales, it wasn’t until 1995 that another qualitative study examined how adult women responded to fairy tales’ messages on gender. Rita Comtois conducted a qualitative clinical psychology dissertation on this issue, interviewing nine women to “explore the meaning that [they] place on fairy tales and the consequent significance and influence the tales have had on their perceptions, ideas, and behavior” (abstract). Her study’s findings echoed that of Stone’s: adult women had grown to

expect a personal happy ending, complete with a partner and a secure life. But as adults, fairy tales provoked cognitive dissonance for these women because they recognized, sometimes painfully, the distance between their own lives and the romanticized fairy-tale endings they had grown up hoping for. Some were frustrated that their lives didn't resemble a happily ever after, others that they didn't match the physical beauty emphasized in princesses. One woman developed an eating disorder to become more "princess-like," while another embraced passivity and waited for her happy ending to come along (241). In these cases, the social values of popular twentieth century tales harmed readers who tried to imitate them before they were critically aware enough to challenge and reject them. Comtois concluded that fairy tales left many women "disillusioned and disenfranchised" (240). Feminist fairy-tale studies focusing on adult reception affirm that fairy tales can have a diverse impact on their readers, but the effects are usually negative. Some women absorb empowering messages from fairy tales that encourage active, empowered behavior; some women even exert their own values on the stories themselves, reimagining their heroines as more active and autonomous than they were. But many women internalized the passive feminine behavior modelled in the tales, only to grow disillusioned when such behavior failed to secure a charming prince or happily ever after. In Karen Rowe's 1979 essay "Fairy Tales and Feminism," she predicted how these idealized behaviors would fail women: "As long as modern women continue to tailor their aspirations and capabilities to conform with romantic paradigms, they will live with deceptions, disillusionments, and/or ambivalences" (252). No matter how pervasive fairy-tale logic might be in their childhoods, adult women could clearly see that beauty, passivity, and sweetness could not guarantee a happily ever after—but not always before they had tried to attain those qualities, often to their detriment.

As newer fairy tale retellings modelled wider ranges of male and female behavior, feminist scholars like Kristin Wardetzky also began to study younger readers of both sexes.⁵ In the late 1980s, Wardetzky departed from previous models by eschewing interviews and group discussion and instead prompting children to write original fairy tales. In this early authorship reception study, Wardetzky created six story prompts and then distributed them randomly to 2,500 German children between the ages of eight and ten years old. The children were instructed to read the prompt and finish the story. Wardetzky then analyzed what behaviors children modelled through their heroes and heroines. She also was interested in seeing how younger audiences defined a happily ever after. Their short fairy tales showed that the children used the stories to reflect their own ideal world, one where children are loved and respected. For example, the majority of stories ended with the protagonist returning to his or her parents' home (170), a far cry from what a teenager or young adult would call happily ever after. Wardetzky also observed that the other characters' behaviors corresponded to how the children wished to see the world. For example, when the protagonist runs away from home, the parent would "come to their senses," apologize, and promise to avoid anger and do the housework (165). Wardetzky writes that this story pattern "apparently corresponds to the child's need to assert itself and to justify its autonomous efforts" (166). The stories also perpetuated some gender stereotypes. For example, if the child's story prompt involved a victim (though not necessarily a passive one), the children tended to make that protagonist female. Story openings with more active characters were usually written as males. On the other hand, when boys wrote about female protagonists, they quickly transitioned her from a victim to an active heroine, similar in bravery to "dragon-killers" of

⁵ Where Comtois and Stone had explicitly explored women's responses to fairy tales, Wardetzky studied young children of both sexes.

European tales (164). Girls, however, followed more traditional scripts for their heroines. When girls wrote about heroes, however, they always cast them as part of a romantic plotline (165). These choices not only give insight into the children's perceptions of gender, but also show that boys would challenge gender roles if they were given a prompt traditionally associated with a female protagonist. While these findings complicate the picture of how fairy tales impact their audience, they do reaffirm that readers can break gendered patterns if it serves their own purposes, (as when the boys transformed female victims into brave heroines).

In the decade after Wardetzky's study, feminist fairytale scholars also examined what kinds of masculinity fairy tales model for boys and men. The male role models of popular fairy tales are often reduced to rescuers and guarantors of a perpetually happy ending—a tall order and rather dehumanizing role. In 1999, Sheldon Cashdan wrote about this limited and impossible role: “In contrast [to witches, god-mothers, and other female characters], male figures are relatively minor figures in most fairy tales. The prince tends to be a cardboard character, almost an afterthought, who materializes at the end of the story to ensure a happy ending” (28). In her book *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation*, Amy Davis points out that although fairy-tale princesses are regularly lambasted for their passivity, in some ways early Disney princes were even less proactive and more objectified, breaking curses by accident (as in Snow White's kiss) and having little backstory or even names, as in *Snow White* and *Cinderella* (149). Essentially, the princes lack personality and depth even as they guarantee a happy ending. In a PaleyFest interview with the cast of *OUAT*, actor Josh Dallas described the limited role of fairy-tale princes: “I think in all the incarnations that we've seen Prince Charming, we don't know much about him. We knew he comes in and saves the day, kisses the girl and that's kind of it.” This limited male role is particularly prominent in early Disney films,

which are the basis of several *OUAT* characters.⁶ These fairy-tale princes are saddled with “ensur[ing] a happy ending” for their princesses, sometimes without even having a name, much less a backstory or individual personality. Many popular fairy tales encourage women to earn a happy ending by being pretty, docile, and sweet, not to mention passively waiting for someone else to provide it. But if the ideal fairy-tale man is expected to save the day and provide a happily ever after, that role is also objectifying, not to mention difficult to live up to in everyday life.

Despite this increased emphasis on fairytale messages about masculinity, few reception studies have examined the influence of fairy tales on children of both genders since Wardetzky’s landmark project. The handful of fairy-tale reception studies since Wardetzky’s have focused on children in specific demographic groups or small sample sizes.⁷ Indeed, Donald Haase asserts that the complex methodology required by qualitative reception studies (based on interviews and surveys) has deterred many scholars from giving a much-needed update to this field; another potential barrier is the difficulty in soliciting spontaneous fairy tales for authorship studies like Wardetzky’s. As Haase puts it, “Although scholars can demonstrate how fairy tales have been intentionally manipulated to serve in the processes of socialization and constructing gender, we have a much more difficult time documenting personal responses of recipients and the genre’s actual influence on their attitudes and behaviors” (25). But if scholars do not gauge fairy tales’ actual influence, what is the point of generating new analyses of each new retelling? A quick

⁶ Because *OUAT* is produced by ABC, which has corporate connections to Disney, the show is free to rely on Disney retellings’ backstories and appearances for the *OUAT* characters (Hay and Baxter). Although the cast includes characters ranging from the earliest films to *Frozen*, many of the main male characters are based on early Disney films like *Peter Pan*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and *Sleeping Beauty*.

⁷ See Bourke (2008–2009) and Robertson and Karagiozis (2008) for reception studies on how American first graders and Greek-Canadian elementary students, respectively, envision their own fairy tales.

Google search reveals the extent of popular anxiety over fairy tales, with concerns ranging from passive princess culture to the fairy-tale weddings complex.⁸ With accusations flying that fairy tales model harmful behaviors and promise impossible happy endings, it's critical that we investigate how ordinary readers today perceive the influence of fairy tales in their own lives. Doing so will shed light on how contemporary readers, who receive an increasingly diverse range of fairy-tale retellings, are impacted by the genre.

From feminist fairy-tale reception studies like that of Kay Stone and Rita Comtois, we see that some readers do model their life choices and expectations on the behaviors and rewards they see in fairy tales, often with negative effects. On the other hand, Kristin Wardetzky's study reveals how even young readers can flip the tables and, to some degree, impose their own preferred behaviors and rewards back onto the fairy-tale structure. My study will show older readers do not need an invitation to impose their personal values onto fairy tales. Indeed, they are already doing so in the *OUAT* fan text.⁹ Rather than fitting themselves to a fairy-tale ideal, these readers-turned-writers are patterning the stories after their own lived experiences. They use the genre therapeutically to cope with their flawed world and envision strategies to move towards a better one. Furthermore, instead of focusing solely on women, these stories envision specific behaviors for women and men that defy the fairy-tale ideals of a passive, pretty princess and invincible, perfect prince.

⁸ For an example of popular angst over the ways fairy tales shape gender relations and identity, see Peggy Orenstein's book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*.

⁹ This term collectively refers to all fan fiction about a particular film, book, TV show, and so forth.

Fanfiction and the Hurt/Comfort Trope

Recently, reception studies has begun to overlap with another field: fanfiction studies. When *Star Trek* emerged in the 1960s, a large network of fanfiction communities grew around the series. Scholars like Camille Bacon-Smith began studying these fanfiction communities in their own right (see Bacon-Smith's book *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*). Most academic attention to fanfiction came through cultural, communication, media, and literature studies (Coiro 594). But as fanfiction became more well-known, scholars like Henry Jenkins recognize the field's potential insights into audience responses to the shows, books, and films they wrote about. In his 1992 book *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins applies Michel de Certeau's idea of "poaching" to fanfiction practices. Certeau wrote that "readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprints, salvaging bits and pieces of the found material in making sense of their own social experience" (qtd. in Jenkins 26). By extending this description to fandoms, Jenkins framed fanfiction as evidence of audience meaning making and responses to films, books, shows, and other media.

Since the publication of *Textual Poachers*, many fanfiction communities have emerged online, offering reception scholars unprecedented access to global, multilingual responses to a vast range of shows, books, and other media (Coiro 593). Scholars no longer need hypothesize about abstract readers; instead, they can pour through a vast, spontaneous, and multimodal range of responses from real readers online.¹⁰ British scholar Ika Willis further explains why fanfiction

¹⁰ For example, Tosenberger has pointed out that the Harry Potter fandom includes not just "experimental fiction, [but] slushy romances, visual art, and densely academic analyses" (200). With the anonymity of the internet, fans are free to creatively and spontaneously reimagine their favorite characters in different settings and relationships (as the vast amount of queer and slash fic stories makes clear). And while it is difficult to pinpoint the exact demographics

is a fruitful setting for reception studies: “Given that fanfiction is precisely that; reading, interpreting, then creating something in response, its practice can offer space to explore academic concepts [like reception studies]” (qtd. in “Fanfiction Gets a Good Reception”). Several scholars have explored this fruitful overlap between fandom studies and reception studies, including Catherine Tosenberger’s articles on *Harry Potter* fandoms.

Still, digital fandoms are not merely a fruitful archive for reception studies, but a unique field with generic conventions that should be understood on their own terms. For example, online fanfiction communities are just that: communities where writers and readers discuss their works online (“Fanfiction Gets a Good Reception”). These community discussions allows reception scholars to examine not only the stories but also the discourse around them between writers and readers. Another convention of fanfiction is the hurt/comfort trope, where one character is hurt and another character comforts him or her. As I will show, the use of hurt/comfort stories in fanfiction communities provides an emotional outlet for writers while also eliciting support from the fan community reading their stories. In the *OUAT* fanfic community, writers often use this hurt/comfort trope by following the show’s lead and placing the fairy-tale characters in difficult straits. By combining the hope of a happy ending with the traumas and problems of hurt/comfort, these fanfic writers explore what a happily ever after looks like when the heroine and hero must recover from loss. Furthermore, the writer/reader discourse around these stories reveals that the tales play a therapeutic and educational role in the fans’ lives.

Hurt/comfort stories have had a strong presence in fanfiction from the start. Simply defined, they are stories in which one character endures trauma or pain, prompting another

of the fans, there is ample material to investigate, as the ever-growing field of fandom studies has demonstrated. See Jenkins for more on fandom studies.

character to comfort the victim. The well-worn trope appears across genres, particularly because the comforting encourages the characters to bond emotionally, usually in a romantic context. In terms of story structure, hurt/comfort is often used to bring together two characters who would otherwise never confess their true feelings for each other (Kee 143). In the case of these fanfic fairy tales, authors employ hurt/comfort tropes as a way to progress a romantic plotline that faces more nuanced, complex obstacles than an evil stepmother or dragon. For example, when Rumpelstiltskin is moved to comfort Belle while she weeps over her sexual assault, the heroine develops more trust in him and begins to consider romantic feelings for him.

But hurt/comfort fan fiction also serves as an emotional outlet for the authors who write it, and in that way it fulfills a therapeutic function similar to that of early fairy tales. In her ethnography of the early *Star Trek* fanfic community, Camille Bacon-Smith found that hurt/comfort fanfiction allowed the predominantly female writers to work through their own personal traumas, even though they virtually never wrote about problems identical to their own. Because these stories were often workshopped and shared in person, writers rarely discussed their problems directly. Rather, they created fictional traumas that allowed them to express loss indirectly through their characters' point-of-view, in a form of mediated grieving. Bacon-Smith asked fan writers what they were experiencing when they wrote hurt/comfort stories and reported that "in all cases when I asked about specific fictional stories I received descriptions of real psychic pain" (268). For example, one fan writer had suicidal depression while another was dealing with a daughter's drug addiction. They did not transfer these exact problems to Kirk or Spock, yet the *Star Trek* fanfic writers still benefited emotionally through their stories and their community. Bacon-Smith explains:

Through the process of talking story, the fan writer or reader has direct and immediate contact with warm and caring friends. She can ask for advice about her story from any fan of the genre and, while they talk story, the participants move back and forth from the personal to the grammatical, hiding in sentence structure when the feelings become too intense or when a stranger passes by. (269)

The communal aspect of fanfiction allowed these writers to give and receive emotional support, even through the guise of talking storylines and character development. The story endings themselves focused not on averting trauma, but on how the characters supported each other emotionally after the traumas already occurred—precisely the need that these women fulfilled through writing and workshopping their stories.

According to Maria Tatar, fairy tales similarly help their tellers to work through difficult experiences: “[They] register an effort on the part of both women and men to develop maps for coping with personal anxieties, family conflicts, social frictions, and the myriad frustrations of everyday life” (xi). Since hurt/comfort stories and fairy tales both help their tellers to process emotional pain, it’s fitting that these genres would overlap in the *OUAT* fanfic tales. One key difference, however, is that fanfic writers may now remain anonymous online, allowing them to more freely depict painful traumas they may have experienced, if they choose. These hurt/comfort fairy tales, include such difficult issues as sexual violence, child abuse, unexpected death, stillbirths, and more. Just as the traumas become personal, so does the hope of a happily ever after, suggesting that fairy tales are still a relevant tool for mapping out ways to deal with life’s problems.

OUAT Fanfic Fairy Tales

OUAT fanfiction fairy tales explore how characters cope with loss and work towards an attainable happy ending. The writers combine fan fiction's hurt/comfort trope with the fairy-tale hope of a happily ever after, creating stories that are therapeutic and pedagogical. Whereas early Disney retellings emphasized static traits such as beauty and passivity in females and strength and wealth in males, these fanfic tales model specific actions that readers can perform in their own lives as they cope with loss or support others in that process. In particular, these stories emphasize the actions of sharing vulnerability as a way of building trust, supporting rather than coopting the victim's recovery process, and reframing happily ever after as dynamic, recurring moments rather than an unchanging, monolithic state.

Furthermore, these actions are discussed and critiqued in the fan community, with several comments affirming the relationship between the fans' lives and the stories they produce and consume. These coping actions are not mere wish-fulfillment, but actions taken from writers' lives and modelled for the readers to use themselves. The fanfic community discourse reveals what fairy-tale scholars assume about earlier communities: the tellers' lives and their stories mutually influence each other. Together, both the stories and the discourse around them show that fairy-tale readers are capable of more than passive reception of the tales' social values. Instead, readers can actively reframe the tales to explore and promote their own social values.

One *OUAT* couple that most invites this connection between fairy tales and fans' lives is the pairing of Belle and her Beast, Rumpelstiltskin.¹¹ This couple is the show's most written-about romantic pairing. Even more significantly, because Belle is one of the few characters with

¹¹ *Once Upon a Time* often repurposes characters as they combine the casts of multiple tales into one complex story. For example, Rumpelstiltskin has also served as the Crocodile to Captain Hook ("The Crocodile") and the abandoned child of Peter Pan ("Think Lovely Thoughts").

no Storybrooke counterpart (at least in season one), her narrative gap invites readers to create their own “real-life” alter-egos for Belle. In the *OUAT* fandom, many stories still arrive at the typical fairy-tale ending (heterosexual romantic union).¹² Along the way, however, Belle and Rumple face more contemporary challenges like dating violence, disappointing marriages, and the loss of a child.

If fanfic writers were solely interested in producing and consuming romantic happy endings, they could simply expand upon the romantic scenes from the show. Yet fan writers instead create stories with different and often darker, more violent traumas for Belle to endure, suggesting a different motivation than wish fulfillment. I argue that fan writers use Rumbelle¹³ stories to explore contemporary issues they and their loved ones face, allowing them to articulate what a happy ending could look like in the wake of those problems. In this way, the writers invoke what sociologist Arthur W. Frank has called “the ability to tell the story differently and to begin living according to that different story” (10). Even if on a small scale, these fanfic fairy tales perform their own transformative magic by creating a space where writers and readers can depict traumas and discuss strategies for both individuals and couples working through them.

Many Rumbelle stories take place after Belle and Rumple have already undergone a terrible loss, using the hurt/comfort trope to show how they cope afterwards. I have limited this project to studying three stories that not only show Belle and Rumple dealing with loss, but also model a more empathetic and vulnerable masculinity than is often seen in popular fairy tales.

¹² Although this study focuses on the show’s most popular pairing (Belle and Rumpelstiltskin), the slash pairing of *OUAT*’s Emma Swan and Regina Mills is the second-most popular pairing and merits its own discussion of how fairy-tale tropes are transformed in queer retellings.

¹³ The fans’ term for stories that develop a romance between Rumpelstiltskin and Belle. For example, over 340 stories on archiveofourown.org are tagged as Rumbelle stories.

These stories challenge fairy-tale expectations for women and men by modelling a more egalitarian romance as Belle and Rumple cope with loss. The first story, a series called *Nightmares*, was written by MarquesadeSantos and published in the summer of 2012 on archiveofourown.org. This story spans both *OUAT*'s fairytale setting and its Storybrooke setting; in the former, Belle has been sent to Rumplestiltskin's castle as a servant, and she is grieving after being sexually assaulted by Gaston, her former fiancé. In the Storybrooke setting, Belle has been cursed to be Zurie, a local woman who was sexually assaulted by a classmate in high school. She works as a house cleaner for Mr. Gold (Rumplestiltskin's Storybrooke counterpart).

The second story I analyze is called *Carry That Weight* by Lady Dulcinea, published in March 2013 on archiveofourown.org. This story describes how Belle and Rumplestiltskin recover from the stillbirth of their first child. The third story I analyze is a series called *Plain Jane*, published by Luthien on archiveofourown.org in January 2013. This story depicts Belle and Rumple in Storybrooke, where Belle has been cursed to be a plain librarian known as Jane and trapped in a loveless marriage to Mr. Gold, Rumplestiltskin's Storybrooke counterpart. The story opens as Gold remembers his past fairy-tale life and realizes he is married Belle but has mistreated and neglected her for years. The story chronicles how Gold works to regain Jane's trust and affection.

These fanfic fairy tales reveal their writers' ability to challenge popular fairytale notions of femininity and masculinity and instead envision more egalitarian modes of romance. In particular, these stories jettison objectifying traits and roles—such as female passivity and beauty or male responsibility to provide a happily ever after—to focus instead on specific actions each character can perform. As these stories depict three couples recovering from loss, they emphasize three specific actions: sharing vulnerability to build trust, supporting recovery by

respecting the victim's autonomy, and reconceptualizing what a happy ending looks like. These first two behaviors are specific actions that move the couple towards a happily ever after. The third behavior is something the characters model but invite the readers to participate in: changing their view of happily ever after from a monolithic and static ending to fleeting but recurring moments of peace in the midst of life's ongoing progress. Significantly, these stories require not only an empowered heroine but also a nontraditional hero. Together, the two form an imperfect but committed, supportive romantic relationship that complicates notions of idealized femininity and masculinity. Close readings of three *OUAT* fanfic fairy tales will show how they model the three specific actions. Then, an examination of the fan community's discourse around these stories will show how the tales fulfill a therapeutic and pedagogical function for their community.

Sharing Vulnerability to Build Trust

The first action these stories model is that of sharing vulnerability in order to build trust. In order to progress towards a happy ending, both Belle and Rumpelstiltskin must draw on their own vulnerability to connect to the other's grief. Despite the harsh nature of their traumas, at some point in the narrative both Belle and Rumple each empathetically listen to the pain the other has experienced. It is that ability to listen and share each other's pain, rather than resort to magic or strength to fix that pain, which allows them to gain trust in each other and move forward towards a happy ending.

Indeed, Rumpelstiltskin's willingness to relate to Belle's grief becomes a romantic strength. In these stories, tragedy and loss have already struck, and it's too late for a magical prevention or daring rescue. Instead, Belle needs support and understanding as she engages in the difficult work of recovering from loss. And Rumple's vulnerability, if he is willing to show it to

Belle, is his best resource in empathizing with her loss and proving that he is worthy of her trust. For example, in “When Nightmares Choke the Naiads,” MarquesadeSantos’s first story in the the *Nightmares* series, Rumpel can recognize Belle’s grief through his own:

With a jolt, he finds he has knealt [sic] beside her and is peering at the [crying] woman ... huddled in the hallway corner. His eyes grow impossibly larger as recognition floods his senses. He knows this, this emotion that transcends social and magical tiers, this emotion that is bound to make itself known to the sojourners of life, but that he should find it in her bearing distresses him.

Rumpelstiltskin knows grief. . . . Grief, that cruel mixture of guilt and self-hatred and sorrow, the sort that rips moans from one's throat and leaves the voice raw for days. Her face is contorting into a pain he knows all too well.

Rumpel’s vulnerability becomes a strength because it enables him to relate to Belle. Although Rumpel does not explicitly share his painful past with Belle in the Fairy Tale Land settings of the *Nightmares* series, Mr. Gold does in Storybrooke. Often, he comforts Zurie when she has nightmares of her sexual assault. And in return, by accepting Rumpelstiltskin’s vulnerability, Belle models a healthier response from women to male weakness and pain. She also comforts him when he has nightmares of the son he abandoned years ago (MarquesadeSantos “Of German Fae”).

In this setting, Belle and Rumpel grieve over different experiences, but their grief helps them to understand and comfort each other. Significantly, they don’t try to force a recovery in these moments or comfort each other’s pain away. Belle doesn’t insist that Rumpel “man up” and hide his grief. She does not try to fashion him into an invulnerable fairy-tale prince. In

return, Rumple does not pretend to be a prince charming who can guarantee a happily ever after. He doesn't assure Belle that he can make everything better when clearly he can't. Instead, the two characters simply witness the other's suffering and refuse to leave each other alone in grief (MarquesadeSantos "Of German Fae").

In the fanfic *Plain Jane*, Belle's Storybrooke persona, Jane Gold, is trapped in a loveless marriage with Mr. Gold, Rumpelstiltskin's cold and heartless Storybrooke self. The story begins with a cursed marriage, where the wealthy Gold is distant and unloving towards his plain, timid wife. As the curse blocking everyone's memory begins to break, the average-looking Jane realizes how deeply unhappy she is, although she doesn't yet remember her previous life as beautiful Belle. Mr. Gold, on the other hand, wakes up from the curse enough to remember both his and his wife's fairy-tale identities, and the story focuses on how he tries to regain her trust and love. The narration is limited to Jane's perspective and therefore gives no insight into Rumple's psyche or past grief. But the story does depict Rumple's visible insecurities as he tries to change the dynamic of his relationship with Jane. And it is those very insecurities, those moments of vulnerability, which help Jane begin to trust him. Theirs has been a relationship marked by near invisibility on her part and derision and neglect on his. When Gold appears unsure and tentative, his vulnerability actually helps Jane trust him because it evens out the power dynamic that has so often been stacked against her in the past (Luthien "Plain Jane").

The story begins with a hurt/comfort scenario where Mr. Gold awkwardly tries to help Jane, who has just sprained her ankle. For example, when Gold sees that Jane has sprained her ankle and wishes to help her, "He reaches down, fingers stretched out, but he stops just short of actually touching her. His hands hover in the air just above her ankle, as though he's uncertain of what to do next. Watching him, Jane is shocked all over again: his hands are trembling"

((Luthien “Plain Jane”). Jane’s shock comes from seeing her husband, known for his self-assuredness, actually appear unconfident and unsure. And this change in character helps Jane notice another: her husband seems to be genuinely concerned for her wellbeing. When he pleads for her to actually eat a solid breakfast, she’s surprised to realize he is actually asking rather than demanding, that his neglect has been replaced with vulnerable concern. The author, Luthien, heavily emphasizes this vulnerability:

The truly different thing, the shocking thing, is that he's letting himself be vulnerable before her. And it's not as if it's something he wants to do, either. She can tell that this is not like any of his carefully thought-out plans, or even any of the seemingly casual put-downs with which he usually silences her. It's as if he has no choice but to care, and to let her see that he cares, to open himself to the possibility that she might say something that will ... well, something that will make him flinch. It's as if all of it, her reactions and their arguments, quite as much as the looks she keeps surprising on his face, are more spontaneous, more real, than anything that's ever been between them. (Luthien “The Day After”)

By appearing unsure and weak in front of her, Mr. Gold begins to create a different power dynamic in their relationship, one where she can see him stumble and where she won’t be ridiculed for doing the same. By showing humility and concern, Rumple begins to demonstrate that he is worthy of Jane’s sympathy and trust.

Shared vulnerability also plays a pivotal role in the final story of this study, *Carry That Weight*, which describes how Rumplestiltskin and Belle cope with the stillbirth of their first child. Rumple’s vulnerability and willingness to grieve with Belle is what gives the two lovers hope for a happier future. After the stillbirth and the couple’s grief-tinged squabbles, they come

back together as they hold their lost child's tiny body: "He was openly crying now as well. 'I love you, wee bairn,' he whispered as she transferred the baby to his arms." Although Rumple does comfort Belle, promising that they'll "get through this," his comfort is matched by his open grief. Rather than stoically doing away with her pain, he openly shares it (*Lady Dulcinea Carry That Weight*). And by sharing her grief, he is that much more able to share her future joys and their life together.

Supporting by Encouraging Autonomy

In addition to modelling shared vulnerability, these stories also model the action of supporting rather than coopting the victim's recovery process. In each story, Belle is struggling to recover from loss. The very chronology of these stories, occurring after tragedy has struck, mean that Rumplestiltskin cannot play the fairy-tale prince and rescue Belle to prevent her suffering. Yet while Rumplestiltskin watches Belle grieve, he must resist the urge to rush her recovery and try to fix her problems for her. Instead, he must patiently support her and wait for her as she recovers on her own timeframe.

For example, in the Plain Jane story, Rumplestiltskin remembers his fairy-tale past romance with Belle, but he can't break the curse for her and make her remember the past as well. Furthermore, he can't just undo the pain he's caused her over the past twenty-eight years of their loveless marriage, where she felt like "just the dull little wife who faded into the background long ago." In fact, when he tries to be solicitous and helpful, his gestures nearly frighten her because she is so unused to his kindness. The story becomes a detailed waiting game as Rumple slowly works to regain his wife's trust through small acts of kindness, rather than demanding she get over her distrust and give him another chance (Luthien "Plain Jane").

Rumplestiltskin also cannot fix Belle's grief after her stillbirth in *Carry That Weight*. In fact, when Rumplestiltskin tries to micromanage her recovery, it only ratchets up the tension in their relationship. For example, when Belle's estranged father, Moe French, tries to visit Belle in the hospital, Rumplestiltskin forbids it, hoping to prevent more stress for his partner (LadyDulcinea *Carry That Weight*). But Belle is upset when she learns that Rumpelstiltskin has prevented her father from seeing her, and the two get into an argument, ceasing to work together as a team. Rumple presumes to know whether or not Belle should see her father; despite his good intentions, he overrides her free will. Belle is hurt by this action, telling Rumplestiltskin, "I would like to have seen [my father]. He should have been allowed in... I do get a say, don't I? Of who can see me?" Rumple backs down, apologizing for his power play (LadyDulcinea *Carry That Weight*). Significantly, even as these stories model specific actions and a more egalitarian relationship, they don't fashion Rumplestiltskin or Belle into the perfect executors of these themes. They each struggle, make mistakes, acknowledge their errors, and recommit. The stories do not provide an idealized model of an egalitarian relationship, but rather a messy journey towards one.

This theme of respecting the victim's recovery process, even after making mistakes, is also modelled in the *Nightmares* series. In both the Fairytale Land setting and in Storybrooke, Rumple/Gold tries to reach out to Belle/Zurie and help her recover from her sexual assault. She is willing to confide in him about her trauma and grief, but she must engage with life on her own terms and at her own pace—something that Rumplestiltskin has to learn from her. In the Fairy Tale Land setting, Rumple and Belle begin to fall in love, but she pulls back because Gaston's assault has led her to second guess romantic love and her ability to judge character. After

Rumple and Belle share a kiss in the chapter “Saudade,” she later withdraws emotionally, explaining,

“I like you, Rumpelstiltskin. You're dear to me. I thought you'd be like Gaston, at first, but you're not, and I'm glad, but... I can't. I just can't. Not yet. Not when all I can remember is how it was with him. It hurts too much. I see him behind my eyes and I can't breathe and I'm scared. I'm not who I was, anymore. I don't trust my own heart, anymore. It led me astray, you see.” Her voice has grown to a whisper and her head is sinking downwards. (MarquesadeSantos “Saudade”)

The assault has left Belle isolated and alone in her grief and distrust of others, including herself. This is no curse that Rumple can rescue her from; rather, he can only support Belle as she learns to trust herself again. In other words, I argue that Rumpelstiltskin models a masculinity that doesn't need to fix Belle to prove his own worth. He's more interested in her own healing process than his part in it.

In the Storybrooke setting, where Zurie (Belle's Storybrooke counterpart) works as Gold's housekeeper, she is more open to romance with Gold, but the two struggle when Gold tries to force Zurie out of her isolation. Worried at how she's cut herself off from the world, Gold arranges for Zurie to volunteer at the local school library. But the plan backfires when being at her high school reminds Zurie of Doyle, the classmate who raped her, and triggers her trauma and grief. Gold tries to understand, but also feels defensive and impatient, and finally he snaps at her. In response, Zurie cries, “You don't understand, and you never will, and if I say I don't want to talk about it, I won't!” Gold watches as Zurie flees to the backyard and “crumples to the ground,” sobbing in the rain. In a moment of reflection, he realizes that “he doesn't know what to

do. He doesn't know how to help her. He wants to go out and drag her out of the rain, but he knows that won't help matters any" (MarquesadeSantos "When the Storm Hits").

I argue that each of these stories models a more egalitarian relationship than what is portrayed in early Disney films. In each story, the Rumpelstiltskin character cannot repair Belle's deep loneliness and isolation, whether caused by sexual trauma, the loss of a child, or years in a loveless marriage. Each iteration of Belle no longer quite trusts herself or her place in her world. And each version of Rumpelstiltskin desperately wants to reach out to her, to break the spell of isolation and grief. But rather than slay a dragon or break a spell, Rumpel must demonstrate that he is worthy of trust and wait for Belle to come to him. They must break the curse together, Belle by trusting him, Rumpel by showing he is worthy of that trust.

It's important to note, however, that these are pedagogical and therapeutic stories, not instruction manuals, and the characters learn just as often through their mistakes as through their successes. As shown in the example above, when Rumpel/Gold tries to force Belle's hand and compel her to trust him, his efforts backfire. In *Plain Jane*, Belle's alter ego is so sensitive to Mr. Gold's track record of coercion that she won't even accept the breakfast he's prepared for her because he didn't ask her what she wanted (Luthien "The Day After"). Even not being allowed to choose her own meal feels like another kind of coercion to her. In *Carry That Weight*, Belle is extremely upset when Rumpel presumes to know when she should and shouldn't see her father after the stillbirth (LadyDulcinea *Carry That Weight*). And in the *Nightmares* series, despite Gold's good intentions, Zurie only regresses further into anguish when he schedules outings and tries to help her engage with life again (MarquesadeSantos "When the Storm Hits"). The lesson is clear: no matter how noble his intentions, Rumpel/Gold is not the arbiter of Belle's happiness, health, or recovery from pain. Only she can determine when she is ready to trust life and to trust

him, and the authors carefully depict a Beast who must relinquish his pride and learn to support from the sidelines, rather than make his rescue efforts the main show. One value these authors emphasize is that the victim, in this case Belle and her alter egos, must still be in charge of her own emotional recovery. After having her own free will violated through coercion or violence or medical trauma, Belle must regain her autonomy, especially as she heals.

A Happily Ever After in Moments

Finally, these stories model a more egalitarian romance by redefining what happily ever after looks like. In these fanfic fairy tales, Belle and Rumpelstiltskin can only find happiness when they allow each other space to heal. Neither can rescue nor fix the other. But they can patiently support each other, and this is where each couple's happy ending is found: not in avoiding tragedy, not in a rescue from grief, but in a willingness to share it and experience it together. Just as in the final scene of *Carry That Weight*, these stories end with a promise that the couples will continue to face life together rather than alone. In the *Nightmares* series, after Mr. Gold and Zurie fight over just how and when she should engage with the world again, they make up with each other. But in lieu of a fairy-tale wedding, the couple simply settles in for an evening of watching TV and cuddling. It's practically mundane, but after the traumas they've both been through, a cozy evening at home is their happily ever after. The series ends with Zurie asking Rumple if they're alright, and him promising, "Yes dearie, we're alright" (MarquesadeSantos "When the Storm Hits"). The *Plain Jane* series similarly concludes with a simple, open-ended, and hopeful resolution as Mr. Gold helps the injured Jane leave the house and go to work: "He opens the door and steps back to let her go out first. His ingrained, old-fashioned courtesy is clearly one thing that has not changed. He follows her out the door, locking it behind him, and

they go out to face the world together for what feels to Jane like the very first time” (Luthien “The Day After”).

Because these stories end with an increased commitment between the two lovers to face life and its challenges together, they are not only believable but also hopeful. Instead of the happy ending being a static state of wealth and romantic bliss provided by a charming prince, happily ever after becomes recurring moments of peace and affection in an otherwise ordinary, challenging life. When the each partner can open up to the love and support given by the other, together they can develop greater hope and trust in future happy moments to come. Significantly, this happy ending requires effort and commitment from both of them, rather than being something a prince charming alone must provide. This attainable happy ending humanizes these fairy-tale characters by modelling a cooperative, egalitarian model of romance. In so doing, these stories demonstrate the flexibility of the genre and its ability to continue speaking to contemporary issues.

As fairy-tale happily ever afters go, these endings are perhaps tepid, even mundane, by comparison. But of course they are more attainable for fans than a fairy-tale castle or prince, and they map out a romantic dynamic that is based on cooperation and mutual support rather than magical rescue. Instead of empowering female characters by substituting a matriarchal power hierarchy for a patriarchal one (see Crowley and Pennington), these fairy tales depict two complex people who must rely on each other to grow through their shared vulnerabilities. Rumple can understand Belle and earn her trust because of, not in spite of, his vulnerabilities. And both of them negotiate their boundaries with the world and with each other as equals respecting the other’s autonomy.

As these stories map out strategies for romantic love to respond to difficult trials, they call for both respect for individual choice and a cooperative interdependence through shared grief and shared hope. The stories illustrate how vulnerable empathy can empower individuals to learn to trust again. They also demonstrate how vulnerable empathy can reshape the norms and accepted patterns in romantic love, modelling a romance where women need not be passive beauties and men need not be invincible guarantors of happiness. In the words of Cristina Bacchilega, these tales “interpellate [their writers and readers] as consumers *and* producers of transformation” (5). By becoming tale-tellers, these writers can transform their own views and that of their readers on romantic love and happy endings.

A More Egalitarian Romance

To understand why these three actions—connecting through vulnerability, supporting instead of fixing, and reframing happily ever after as cooperative and recurring moments—are significant, it’s worth remembering how popular fairy tales, such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, have framed relationships between men and women. As mentioned earlier, many women learned from fairy tales that in order to attract a prince and win a “suburban castle,” the ideal heroine must be beautiful, docile, submissive, and even passive. Unlike the more diverse array of Grimm stories, early Disney fairy-tale films showed men as rescuers and guarantors of happily ever afters. Popular fairy tales inhibited both female and male identities by limiting the former and placing impossible expectations on the latter. But in these fanfic tales, the writers model vulnerable actions instead of encompassing traits for both their heroine and their hero. By their nature, these actions are something the characters can test out, repeat, and learn from—in other words, they are specific strategies that ordinary, imperfect people can attempt, rather than totalizing attributes readers can never live up to. By modelling more

egalitarian ways for men and women to relate to each other, these fanfic tales work against the masculinity valued not only by Disney Prince Charmings but also by popular American culture.

Although a country as large and diverse as the United States of America has many versions of idealized masculinity, one recurring convention is the denigration of male vulnerability. After conducting several qualitative interviews and workshops investigating the gendered messages of shame, social worker and researcher Brene Brown concluded, “Men live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: Do not be perceived as weak.... You’d better be great and all powerful” (91). Masculinity scholar Neill Korobov has documented how Western men find themselves in a double bind when it comes to vulnerability: men who embrace traditional, strong masculinity risk higher rates of sexual disease, mental and physical health issues, and addiction. Yet men who do not conform to this gender role “are vulnerable to ostracism, teasing, and even physical harm” (Korobov 52). This double bind manifests itself in romantic relationships as well. Citing her interviews with men and women, Brown writes, “Here’s the painful pattern that emerged.... [Women] ask [men] to be vulnerable, we beg them to let us in, and we plead with them to tell us when they’re afraid, but the truth is that most women can’t stomach it. In those moments when real vulnerability happens in men, most of us recoil with fear and that fear manifests as everything from disappointment to disgust” (92). Fairy tales are not the only place where men are encouraged to be invulnerable, nor are boys and men the only ones to internalize and project ideas about masculinity. Rumpelstiltskin’s character on the show actually exemplifies this double-bind between male and female expectations of male invulnerability: during a flashback in the second season of *OUAT*, he is drafted by male rulers to fight in the Ogre Wars, where he knows he will likely die and leave his wife and child without a

husband and father. But when he maims himself to avoid dying in war, he is scorned by his wife, who eventually leaves him over the shame of his flight (“The Crocodile”).

Just like femininity, masculinity is a diverse and evolving concept that can be influenced and changed over time, which is precisely why stories like these fanfic fairy tales matter: they are performing social change by envisioning new modes of masculinity. Over the past thirty years, masculinity studies have investigated how the concept of masculinity is constructed and enacted across different demographics. In the groundbreaking work *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell asserted that “gender is not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction. [There is a] making and remaking of [gender] conventions in social practice itself.” The study of how masculinity is constructed matters because, as Joseph Pleck argued in 1981, boys and men often suffer psychological damage as they are pressured to conform to socially-constructed masculine conventions (25). But if masculinities are socially constructed and vary across demographic groups, masculine behaviors and expectations can be changed. For example, Connell asserts that “the idea that masculinity is the internalized male sex role allows for social change.... Since the role norms are social facts, they can be changed by social processes. This will happen whenever the agencies of socialization—family, school, mass media, etc.—transmit new expectations” (23). More recently, masculinity scholars have documented deliberate efforts to create more egalitarian masculinities. This emphasis has become a major political and sociological goal for pro-feminist masculinity scholars. For example, in the introduction to their anthology *Men and Masculinities around the World*, Elisabetta Ruspini, Keith Pringle, Jeff Hearn, and Bob Pease write that major goals of pro-feminist masculinity studies include “chang[ing] gender power relations that oppress women and girls, broadening the scope of [men’s] emotional and communicative skills, [and] relat[ing] in more positive and rewarding

ways to women, children, and other men” (4). One way the field realizes these goals is by documenting how agencies of socialization—families, mass media, or in this case, fanfiction fairy tales—convey new gendered expectations. By depicting a more egalitarian masculinity in these iterations of Rumpelstiltskin, these fanfic fairytales constitute a spontaneous, on-the-ground effort to convey egalitarian gendered expectations.

These fanfic fairy tales matter because they challenge not only popular fairy-tale masculinity but also the larger emphasis on male strength and invulnerability. In an approach similar to the goals of pro-feminist masculinity studies, these stories envision a way for men to “relate in more positive and rewarding ways to women” and “broaden the scope of [men’s] emotional and communicative skills” (Ruspini et al. 4). The masculinity modelled in these stories doesn’t require men to prevent trauma and provide a happily ever after, but instead use their own vulnerability and pain as points of connection and empathy. Male vulnerability becomes one of the greatest gifts Rumpel/Gold can give Belle and her Storybrooke counterparts, and it is a rare gift. It is through Rumpel’s own painful life experiences that he can empathize with Belle. Furthermore, when Rumpelstiltskin supports Belle in her recovery without trying to fix her, he implicitly acknowledges that he trusts her to know her own needs. He models a love that doesn’t boost his own ego by fixing or rescuing, but instead builds up Belle by believing she can meet her own needs and cope with her loss. Finally, by seeing happily ever after as recurring moments instead of a static ending, both characters show their trust in each other and their trust in life. They can’t be sure of much, but they can be sure that they will continue to learn, grow, and love together.

The Writer-Reader Discourse Community

Because fanfiction includes not only original stories but also community discourse through prefaces, comments, and other feedback, these *OUAT* fanfic fairy tales give insight into how the stories and the fans' lives interact. In the community space, *OUAT* fans critique the recovery strategies presented in the stories and discuss their own approaches for helping loved ones heal. In this way, this online fanfic community fulfills many of the same functions of older, oral fairy tales: bringing people together to work through life's difficulties and envision a better reality. For example, fans often relate to the healing process between Belle and Rumpelstiltskin, as in this comment about the *Nightmares* series: "Oh, this is perfect. Because sometimes healing is being able to step back and just panic that it's all going too fast, and that you can't always cope, and time returning to Storybrooke would just make it worse. Basically, this is brilliant" (neverwheredreamer).

The reader appreciates the relatable portrayal of developing trust in someone after being hurt. The reader also seems to speak from experience, relating Belle's healing process to something she can relate to more than a traditional fairy tale ending. Rather than just express excitement for or connection with the characters, this reader analyzes how healing happens, connecting a story inspired by the author's lived experiences back to the reader's lived experience.

As the readers critique the stories' narrative strategies, they also discuss the stories' conflicts and social issues in more general terms, giving them room to recognize how pervasive these problems really are. For example, in response to the *Nightmares* series, one reader named Joylee commented, "Nicely done. Some might say that you're a bit hard on on Gaston and Sir Maurice, but historically the attitudes you have them display were not only acceptable but

regarded as normal. And by historically I mean in the last century. We have come a long way, baby.” However, MarquesadeSantos challenged Joylee’s optimism: “To be perfectly honest, there are some people today who think its [sic] totally fine and believe rape cannot occur within a relationship. It happens to this day.” Another reader, named djarum99, concurred: “You're right, unfortunately, those attitudes about acquaintance/partner rape still rear their ugly heads today.” In this exchange, both writer and readers relate Belle’s fictional trauma with a major issue many face today. The first step towards addressing a social problem is making people aware of it, and the story and community discourse around it help readers understand that sexual violence is still a common problem in our society. Once the readers recognize the extent of sexual violence, they can see the *Nightmares* series not just as a romantic fiction, but as an instructive model of how the readers themselves can lend support to their own friends who have survived sexual violence.

Of course, many readers need no convincing that these fictional traumas have far too many living counterparts. Indeed, the fans’ comments reveal that the believable treatment of Belle’s various problems is part of the appeal. For example, one fan of the *Plain Jane* story left the following comment:

I absolutely adore this piece for the sheer realism of it! It could be anyone in a long and unloving reationship[sic], suddenly finding themselves in situation that would otherwise be ordinary, but the introduction of such forgotten feelings like hope and love compeletly [sic] upend their world! Your writing is totally accessible- we RELATE with them, and that is priceless when it comes to the delicious angst that is Rumbelle. (DirtyAim)

By emphasizing that she adores the piece because of its realism and relatable characters, this fan demonstrates that readers are drawn to stories and characters they can relate to, even in a genre tracing back to the sparser conventions of fairy tale. By referring to the interpersonal conflict as “delicious angst,” the commenter also demonstrates how invested fans can become in such conflicts. I argue that fans enjoy these tales for their therapeutic elements as they depict relatable characters and struggles. Furthermore, because the tales are therapeutic and therefore enjoyable, they are more likely to succeed as pedagogical tools implicitly instructing readers on how to support their own friends working through trauma and loss. In this way, these fanfic fairytales perform the same functions as older, oral fairy tales: envisioning ways to survive life’s challenges while working to create a better world.

Both readers and writers of *OUAT* fanfic fairy tales connect these stories to their own experiences in facing or helping others recover from trauma. In an author’s note on the last chapter of the *Nightmares* series, when Zurie and Gold fight and make up, MarquesadeSantos explains how the emotional support she receives from friends both in person and in digital spaces is reflected in her story: “Because I was really sad last night and my loved ones had to deal with it, and random people on tumblr also. But everyone was so nice... guyses [sic] sometimes I love you all.” Her readers then continue discussing the relationship between comforting and supporting in the comments. One fan with the handle Keyanna writes, “Sometimes sad comes and there's nothing you can do. I think that the part I have the hardest time dealing with is that no matter how much I want to, I can't make things all better for people, and sometimes I don't know whether it would be best for me to try and offer comfort or if I should just be there and let them feel the sadness that they're feeling.” This reader navigates the balance between comforting and empathizing that Rumpelstiltskin works through in the stories, demonstrating that the plot is both

relatable and relevant. These stories provide a safe space for individuals not only to face contemporary issues but also to plan how to comfort others going through them; in this way, both the creators and consumers are transforming their world, even if on a small scale, as they work towards their own happy endings.

Finally, the writer-reader discourse allows fans to comfort each other through their stories and feedback. Like the *Star Trek* fanfic community of Camille Bacon-Smith's ethnography, the *OUAT* community of fanfic fairy-tale writers and readers use the stories to process their own emotional pain and seek comfort. For example, the author of one story I examine, the *Nightmares* series, mentions fairly directly in comments that the story is inspired by her own experiences, at least in part. In the chapter "Of German Fae," Belle's Storybrooke self (called Zurie in this fanfic) rails against holidays celebrating soldiers because Doyle, her rapist, wants to join the military. She vents to Mr. Gold, "I don't like days like Memorial Day. All anyone can talk about is how fucking amazing soldiers are. And a lot are, you know? But some aren't. At all." As an introductory note to this chapter, the author explains her stance on the issue:

Warning: Possible Triggers. Mentions of rape. Nothing explicit, but has the possibility of triggering.

Also, I've nothing against soldiers. My cousin is in the military, and I couldn't be prouder. This is just something that came up regarding someone really awful I have the displeasure of knowing. He was accepted into the Navy, and will more than likely abuse his position. Lovely, lovely, lovely, isn't it. This story is somewhat a reflection of the turmoil I experieined [sic] this last Memorial Day. (MarquesadeSantos, Notes "Of German Fae")

Although the author is understandably ambiguous about her relationship with the “really awful” someone that inspired this piece, the note does suggest that writing the story becomes a way for the author to process that relationship and the “turmoil” it caused her. The act of telling the story is therapeutic, but as previously shown, the community discourse around the *Nightmares* series is also pedagogical because it teaches fans that sexual violence is still a recurring issue.

In precisely the way that Bacon-Smith outlined, the author and fans find ways to express and respond to pain as they discuss the story itself, demonstrating a communal aspect to fanfiction that parallels the communities of early fairytale retellings. In some cases, the narrative challenge of creating a happy ending helps writers work through the emotional challenge of addressing these painful topics. For example, in a note to the “Saudade” chapter of the *Nightmares* series, MarquesadeSantos writes, “I realized today that I write these from Rumpel's POV. Didn't mean to. I'm not brave enough to actually write this from the other perspective, I think [Belle, the victim]. I might do a parallel series that focuses on that aspect, at some point. Let me know if you think I should.” Although this comment is soliciting feedback on the quality of writing, the author strongly implies that her narrative decision is spurred by her personal feelings when she describes herself as “not brave enough” to write from Belle’s perspective. Her readers don’t overlook that disclosure; the fan nothingeverlost responds in a comment,

Saying “not brave enough” is the same as cowardly. And that might be how you feel, as Belle does, but it's not cowardly. You're writing the story you need to write, and if it's easier to write it from Gold/Rum's point of view then that's what you need. I think it makes sense, in part because it means we get his emotional

reaction, which is not as visual as hers, and because it feels like we get a larger view of things.

Interestingly, this reader uses her feedback not only to critique the story but also to validate its author when she talks about it as something MarquesadeSantos “need[s] to write” and the point of view as something the author needs. Without directly comforting the author, this reader validates her authorial choices by connecting them to the author’s emotional needs. And MarquesadeSantos responds to the feedback by even more explicitly connecting it to herself rather than her story: “Perhaps a better description would have been that I’m not strong enough to write one from her perspective, but thank you for your kind words (even if they are rather ‘listen. Stop moping. It’s not attractive’ tough love words, which I desperately need sometimes).” Even though the writer and reader are ostensibly talking shop, their exchange graciously affirms MarquesadeSantos not only as a writer but also as a person. Even in digital spaces, the act and community of fairy-tale retelling are still addressing individual’s emotional needs.

Although these fanfic fairy tales depict traumas more ordinary than magical curses or animal grooms, the people in this community enact the same function as early fairy-tale communities: creating fictional models of a happy ending and developing specific strategies for arriving there. These narrative strategies are not merely fictional devices, but approaches that the writers and readers discuss, debate, and draw on from their own experiences. In particular, these stories emphasize the strategies of sharing vulnerability as a way of building trust, supporting rather than coopting the victim’s recovery process, and reframing happily ever after as dynamic, recurring moments rather than a static, monolithic state. Perhaps most significant, these strategies model actions that the community can enact in their own lives. Indeed, in the comments fans and writers discuss how these strategies have helped them overcome difficulty or

comfort loved ones in dire straits. In this way, *OUAT* fanfic tales are not merely creative reimaginings of traditional stories, but sociological explorations of how to create a better world.

Fairy Tales as Transformative Tools

In his recent book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Jack Zipes describes the social power of these stories: “Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we try to change and make ourselves fit for the world” (2). In contrast to popular Disney retellings, both early fairy tales and fanfic fairy tales portray young women learning to adapt to the dangers of an adult world while seeking to change it at the same time. Historically, these changes occurred both on an individual and societal scale. For example, in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, scholar Marina Warner asserts that in their older versions, fairy tales prepared individual young women for encounters with their mothers-in-law, a hypothesis supported by the fact that in many Romance languages, the terms for stepmother and mother-in-law are in fact identical. So even tales of strained relationships between stepchildren and stepmothers could once have served as instruction for how soon-to-be brides could handle their mothers-in-law, especially since both parties depended on the same man for economic survival (222). Likewise, it takes no stretch of the imagination to see how animal bridegroom stories functioned as a loose guide on how a young woman could transform an arranged partner into a loving husband. Such stories positioned young women as active agents in their own stories; although they could not change everything about their lives, they could minimize the risk and discomfort of their situations.

Furthermore, fairy tales not only taught individuals to survive life challenges but also pushed for wider societal changes, particularly in the realm of gender equality. Women storytellers in Europe used fairy tales to call for a more equitable system of courtship and

marriage. Although more conservative tales taught young women to simply accept arranged marriages and gendered inequalities, by the seventeenth century, more liberal romances and literary fairy tales called for egalitarian notions like letting women choose their husband instead of tolerating an arranged marriage (Seifert and Stanton 28–29). As Deborah Ross puts it, “Progressive or feminist authors... have encouraged young women readers’ belief in fantasy to help them visualize what they want, perhaps as a first step toward going after it” (55). Although feminist scholars in the 1970s criticized popular fairy tales for teaching girls patriarchal expectations of what they should be and want, fairy tales have a much older tradition of allowing women to speak back to those expectations.

So it is to fanfiction fairy tales we can look to discover how tale tellers today are challenging current social norms and envisioning a better world through their fairy tales. These tales look not to avoiding catastrophe but to how to recover after a great loss. In the process, readers-turned-writers reject unhelpful, all-encompassing traits modelled for men and women in fairy tales; instead, they model repeatable actions anyone can implement in her or his life. These actions are dynamic and further developed through trial and error, just like the recurring happy-ending moments they lead to. Furthermore, these tales model a more egalitarian romance that can handle trauma and loss without resorting to the dubious ideals of male omnipotence and female passivity. Rather than focusing on a more empowered woman alone, the tales call for better ways that women and men can relate to each other as well as to themselves.

At a deeper level, these fan fictions show that fairy tales are still relevant to our times. As they have done in the past, they can be reframed to address problems their tellers confront while envisioning better solutions. They also reveal that the act and community of storytelling are both therapeutic and pedagogical. The fans’ lives influence the tales, which influence more fans’

lives. It's natural to assume that fairy-tale readers have always reframed the stories in the context of their own lives. After all, fairy-tale endings were as elusive centuries ago as they are now, and it's likely that people have always been strategizing about how to attain a happily ever after in light of life's challenges. But where these reception practices were implied or even assumed in history, now they can be transparently observed and analyzed in digital fandoms. Fans are deliberately recreating happy endings that fit their life experiences. Furthermore, this fandom is large and sprawling, inviting further analysis into fairy-tale reception, queer readings, trauma theory, and more. Ultimately, these fandoms digitally document what scholars think fairy tales were doing all along: allowing story tellers and hearers to critique their own lives and societies while mapping out strategies for better ones. These fanfic writers demonstrate Maria Tatar's assertion that "fairy tales can both shape our way of experiencing the world and endow us with the power to restructure our lives" (xii).

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