

## Fairy Tales: Gilded Persecution

Growing up with Disney movies being my main exposure to fairy tales, I was immediately drawn to the *Grimm Fairy Tales* as I began reading them in college. Being a German Studies minor, I was exposed to them in brief readings for classes and then wanted to take my interest further and enrolled in a course that focused on *Grimm Fairy Tales*. What was it that drew me into these tales?

Most of the Disney tales that I had seen involved a maiden or princess, much the same as the other tales that were young and impressionable. All are described and valued solely on their beauty and other passive qualities, such as unrelenting patience or kindness, and must in some way be saved by a male figure, most times that male being a prince. These “heroines” do not have any defects and are not allowed or required to develop further as the story continues. Many of those same stories contain a female villain as well, which creates the stereotype of the innocent beauty that is victimized by a bitter old woman. The young girls reading or hearing the stories easily identify with these victimized characters with mothers who, in their own eyes, are oppressing them by telling them what to do. It is these characters, the repressed and victimized, which are among the most idealized but also the most cherished by readers. I naturally fell into the same category at first; I was becoming like the intended audience of young, impressionable females.

Hans Christian Andersen wrote the original story for *The Little Mermaid*; it was the first tale that really struck me as being so different than my childhood Disney film version. The mermaid did indeed fall deeply for the prince, but not for love. It was because she sought an eternal soul like the humans. The process she went through to become human was deeply tragic, and left an impact on me. She does not merely lose her voice, but loses her tongue so the sea

sorceress can make a potion to give her legs. The pain does not stop there, however. When she becomes human, every step she takes causes her immense pain and she leaves a trail of blood, as if she were walking on needles. This dedication, despite the pain, led to an ending that made me incredibly sad. Her refusal to kill the prince to save her own life turned her to sea foam. Disney's *Little Mermaid* and Hans Christian Andersen's version of *The Little Mermaid* depicted a strong contrast between the written and animated fairy tales of my childhood.

I simultaneously watched the Disney films as I read the written tales for the first time, and I realized that the passiveness and over-idealized female characters generated issues with my individuality and created the idea of an unrealistic romanticism for me, who later grew into the woman I am now, still engrained with these ideals. "Someday my prince will come." What if he doesn't come? It becomes an issue of the role of females in society and I became increasingly interested in how fairy tales shaped my own thinking. The Disney movies have depleted the energy of my female imagination. By creating stereotypes, especially in the case of the Disney Princesses, primarily the children's perception is greatly altered. Instead of reading about the characters and creating one's own versions of the characters, purposeful imagery was created by Disney to instill modern ideals of the female character into young minds, such as impossible proportions of the female body; there was no way I was ever going to have the same proportions as some of the Disney princesses. The Disney tales have further objectified women by creating an image and have also centered the tale almost purely upon an idealistic romance. The tales are no longer about the passion and aggression of life and love, but rather unreachable ideals.

After reading *The Little Mermaid* and watching the Disney version, I moved on to more Grimm tales, expecting to read more of strong female characters that risked everything to get

what they wanted and for what was right, but I was very disappointed. The “heroines” that I read of in the *Grimm Tales* were not as strong as *The Little Mermaid*, but rather more passive and compliant. In comparison to Disney and *The Little Mermaid*, the female characters in Grimm tales fell between the spectrums of the heroine and the over-idealized female. The beauty of the romance in *The Little Mermaid* was just as magical in other Grimm tales I read, but the females were more passive and unwilling to act out of context or misbehave. The Grimms’ female characters lacked a spark I was looking for after reading *The Little Mermaid*. I became increasingly frustrated with how docile they were, even when they were being persecuted.

Upon researching the *Grimm Fairy Tales* and it became apparent to me why the female characters were written how they were. The Brothers were one of the first to collect folk tales and print them so that they were widely available to society. They not only recorded the stories, they also took many creative liberties. They “weakened once-strong female characters, demonized female power, imposed a male perspective on stories voicing women’s discontents, and rendered heroines powerless by depriving them of speech, all in accord with the social values of their time.” (Haase, 2004) In their recreated tales, they shaped the topics to fit with the social values of their time. Fairy tales became a male-dominated genre with the repression of any topics that were positive references to female power or sexuality. They “reifie[d] females as powerless aesthetic objects and subvert[ed] their creative power,” (Haase, 2004) despite the fact that majority of the stories they collected from female storytellers.

Most of the female fairy tale characters are severely punished or restricted at a time when they would be finding independence creatively and sexually. For example: Rapunzel is locked in a tower, Snow White is hidden away in a cabin, and Cinderella is forced into servitude. Sexuality and curiosity is seen to be threatening to the females as well, like Brier Rose, who experiences

something close to death for looking into a forbidden room at puberty. Having a frightening situation happen to a character, one that a young girl can relate to, is something that is instilled into her mind and subconsciously deter her from the same actions. The Grimms transformed these folk tales into “training manuals” for women, making them more passive and subdued. The tales were meant to teach children, girls especially, “what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself.” (Farrer, 1975)

Wanting to focus on the interesting themes of confinement, passivity, and dependence of female characters, which are inherent in the *Grimm Fairy Tales*, I set out to create pieces questioning the female’s role in society today. I am also fascinated and intrigued with the concept of that which is beautiful can still be detrimental, and so I combined these in my project. I altered the aforementioned themes in my pieces, making the passive wearer take an active role in resisting the action being forced. My sculptural jewelry pieces physically represent the restraints on female individuality and independence depicted in the stories of *Brier Rose*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *Snow White*.

Since the tales I chose focused mainly on female characters, I chose jewelry as my medium. The piece of jewelry represents the force within the story that is restraining the female character, and my female wearers are fighting these forces and the female characters’ inaction in resisting in the stories. Adornment or jewelry is viewed primarily as a feminine enhancement, and it is a passive object that is to be worn mainly by females. Wearing jewelry to adorn or supplement a woman’s appearance, for her viewers or herself, increases her passivity as she is then viewed as an object to be observed. According to Freud, female symbols are those that propose the possibility of entrance or entrapment, which I translated into my jewelry, as they are worn by the female body and ensnare them in some manner. (Freud, 1980) Because the jewelry

ensnares the female wearer, it is more sculptural than practical for everyday wear, and it makes the wearer take a more active role in wearing the pieces. She engages in a relationship to the piece, fighting against its restraining nature. With my pieces echoing these limitations and making them apparent, the modern female audience recognizes the repression of the female characters. They no longer sympathize with them, but now question why the females acted the way they did in the stories. The constrictive natures of the jewelry pieces recreate the situations in the tales for the wearer, causing the situations to become more real and experiential. The fairy tales are stories; if the reader cannot directly relate to the character's struggle, they do not understand the unpleasantness of the situation to its full capacity.

Being forced into an action or situation by the jewelry, which is intricate and visually appealing, comments on being harmed by that which is beautiful. It is something that interests me; something that is beautiful can be deceiving and detrimental. Fairy tales in today's society, mostly due to Disney adaptations, are thought to be purely magical and mostly about receiving a happy ending. This is not the case in every *Grimm Fairy Tale*. Most of the stories have very realistic and brutal aspects, as in Snow White: her mother dies and is replaced by a stepmother, but the stepmother is vain and tries to kill Snow White. To create a visually appealing piece to contrast the gruesomeness, I chose sterling silver and mixed sheet metal and filigree technique to create an intricate, delicate feel about each piece. The elegance of the pieces gives the feeling of being expensive and luxurious, yet still whimsical, much like the tales. Traditional jewelry's purpose was mostly for ornamentation and decorative purposes and I use this to my advantage in my pieces. By making the pieces decorative, the alarming nature of the action being enforced speaks to the viewer and comments on judging a piece of jewelry purely on its aesthetic qualities

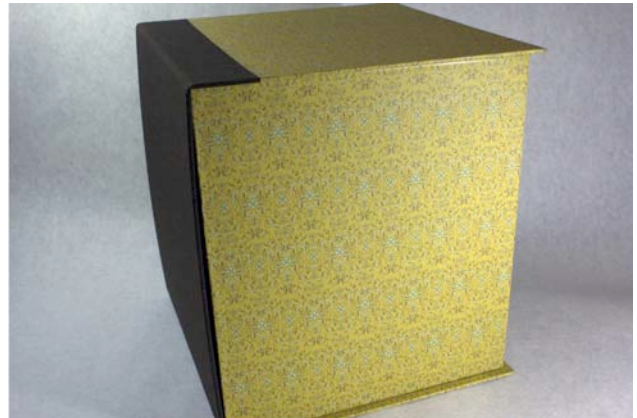
and not viewing jewelry as potentially conceptual. Contrasting these allows for a shock-factor for the audience and to raise discussion as to how jewelry is perceived.

Each piece of jewelry in the series is created for a separate story. I began with *Brier Rose*, more commonly known as *Sleeping Beauty* today. It is a tale of a young princess whose curiosity and fate compel her to prick her finger upon a spindle and fall into a deep sleep for one hundred years. Because she is under spell, pricking her finger to fall into a deep sleep is an inevitable outcome; however, it is because of her curiosity that this punishment is fulfilled. I entitled the piece inspired by the story *Scarcely had she touched it*. It is worn on the index finger and thumb, and an abstracted spinning wheel is between. Looking at the piece, the viewer is not aware of the danger until curiosity of how it is worn overcomes them and they become the wearer. Hidden under the wirework on the finger is a sharp prick, and because of the tight fit of the piece, the wearer must push their finger in somewhat forcefully, thus experiencing pain. In addition to it being tight to put on, it is also tight to take off, making it difficult to resist the painful prick of curiosity, reflecting the message embedded into *Brier Rose* by the Grimms.





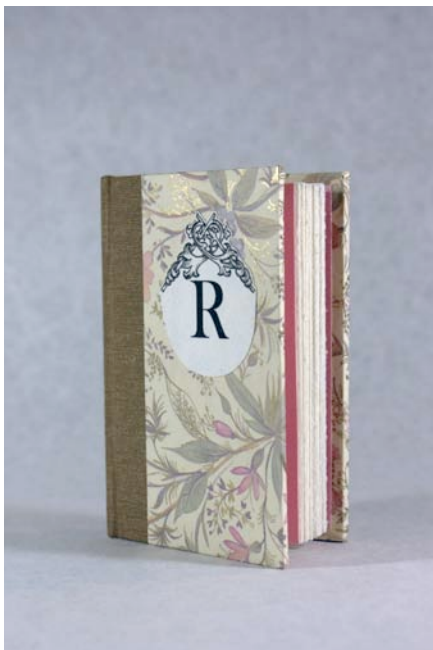
*Hansel and Gretel* is a story of abandonment and disorientation. The siblings' problem essentially arises from being left in the forest by their parents and becoming lost. Gretel, who is unaware of how they will find their way home, relies on Hansel, a male, to find the way. *Just wait until the moon has risen* is a piece that reflects the feeling of loss of depth perception and anxiousness. It is worn across the eyes; metal leaves are attached to branch-like structures that cover the left eye. This obstructs the view of the wearer and disorients the wearer, reflecting her experience of panic. The wearer is able to see where she is going, but the depth perception is skewed enough to create an unsettling and potentially harmful experience for the wearer.







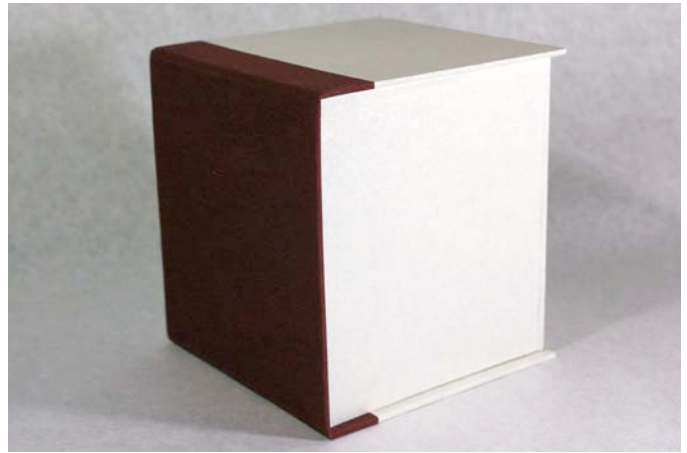
*Rumpelstiltskin* is a story of a small man who appears to a miller's daughter who has been forced into servitude. The daughter becomes queen after Rumpelstiltskin spins straw to gold three nights in a row for trinkets and the promise of her first-born child. It is this promise that binds her to him and it is only the discovery of his name that will free her. *I'll give you three days' time* is a large collar neckpiece that restricts the posture and the ability to speak for the female wearer. The mouth is obstructed, but the metal is pierced so that speech can still be heard, yet with difficulty. The difficulty with which the wearer is able to speak alludes that men's problems are more important than women's, no matter the gravity of the situation. In many of the *Grimm Fairy Tales*, the female characters are silent and do not speak up, hinting at the idea that women are to be seen and not heard in that period of time.

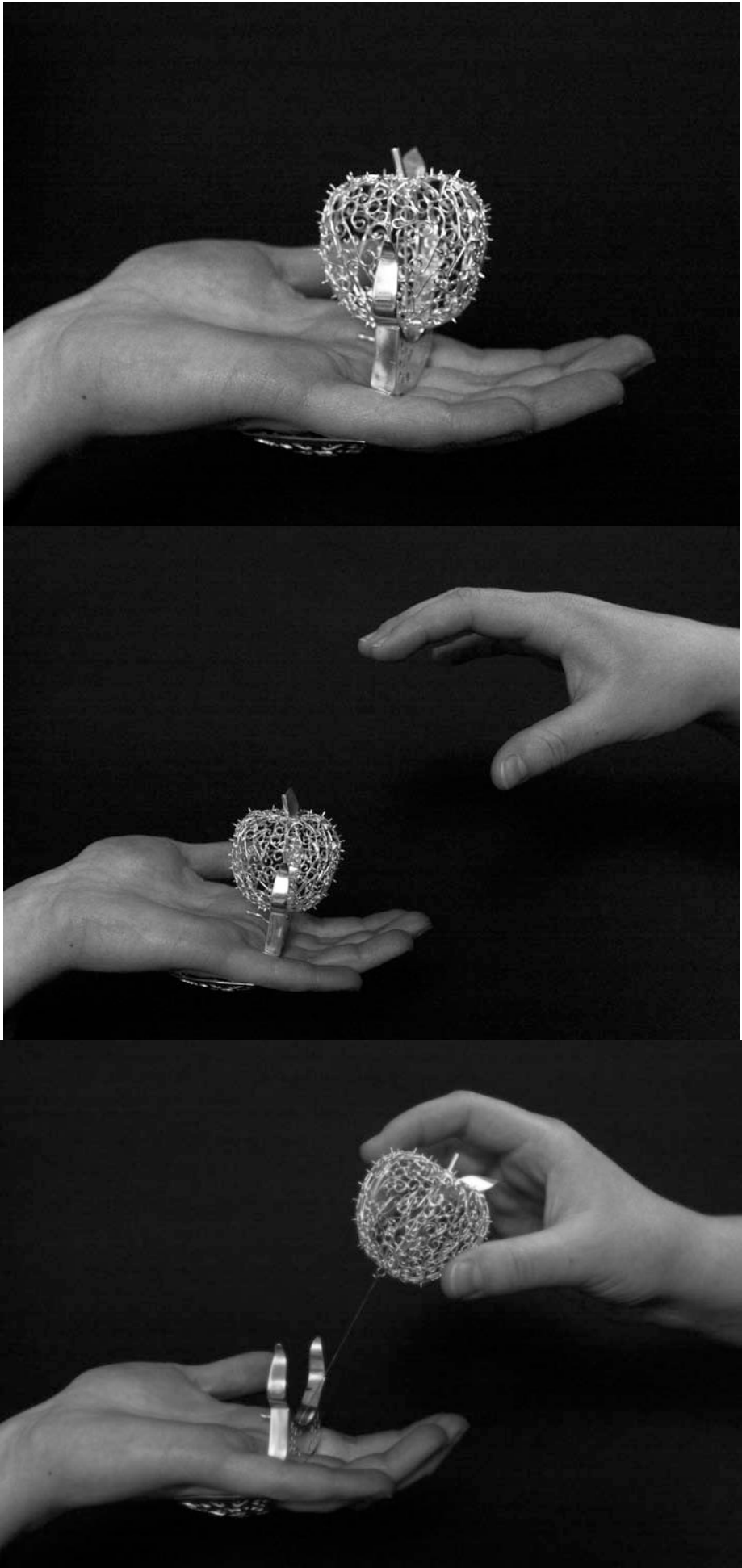




Alyssa Michelle Chambo 12

In *Snow White*, jealousy and temptation of vanity overwhelm Snow White's stepmother, and as a result she sentences the Snow White to death. She escapes with her life only to be tricked by temptation three times by the evil woman in the disguise of an elderly peddler. Focusing on Snow White's never ending trust and naivety, the piece involves two people, a wearer and a person who interacts with the piece and wearer. The wearer wears the ring that holds the apple, enticing the viewer. Yet, when the viewer attempts to take the piece, it is spiky and painful to pick up. They are deceived with slight discomfort and the inability to fully obtain the apple offered, as it is attached to the ring by invisible string.





Each of my jewelry pieces contains the theme of persecution of the female characters in *Grimm Brother Fairy Tales*. Female oppression in the stories sparked a dialogue between my childhood experiences and my present day self. I am fascinated and empowered by themes of confinement, passiveness, and dependence are carried throughout many of the stories. Seeing the helplessness of women in society then, and today I have the power to end my own oppression. I then looked at society today and realized that many of these themes have not changed; they are merely masked by a more complicated and faster world. I aim to break these traditional themes with my work and to empower my female audience.

## Resources

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