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**CHALLENGING THE GOOD/BAD MOTHER MYTHS:
FAIRY TALE ELEMENTS IN
CARMEL BIRD'S "A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING"
AND HELEN CUSHING'S "LARA AND I"**

In September, 1998, I turned the television on and watched *Oprah*, a US day-time talk show that has "become a common source of information and opinions about relationships, psychopathology and gender" (Squire 1994: 63). I continued to watch because it was relevant to my research on mother-daughter relationships. Oprah was discussing "Difficult Daughters," taking her theme from a book with that title by a Dr Charney Herst. Herst, a psychologist, was present to help the discussion along and to give advice. Focussing on the overwhelming blame that has been (mis)directed at mothers, particularly in their relationships with their daughters, Herst began by suggesting that it was time for mothers to revolt against the constant blame directed at them. Daughters needed to take some responsibility, she argued, for their own actions, their own lives, instead of blaming their mothers for everything.

To provide a basis for discussion, the show provided three mother-daughter pairs whose relationships fitted into the categories of "distant," "dissatisfied" and "dependent." For the daughter whose relationship with her mother was defined as "distant" it was quickly decided that the problem was the mother's actions—or inactions. The daughter complained that she had never felt loved by her mother who had always put work and new relationships with men (after her divorce) before the daughter. The daughter seemed annoyed that her mother—the mother of six children—had lived her own life, that is, she had "exhibited some independent behaviour that did not maintain the centrality of the daughter[s] needs" (Phillips: 123). (With six children it's a wonder she has any time for independent behaviour, I thought.) The mother, in the daughter's opinion, had not been "good enough." Without hesitation, the mother agreed she was at fault. It was an amazing, but not surprising, automatic reaction and a good strategy since being defensive would have been unsuccessful in this increasingly polarised debate. Herst seemed on the verge of suggesting the daughter forgive the mother—for being a "bad" mother? for being more than a mother? But she was interrupted by Oprah who, perhaps with her own mother-daughter baggage, placed all the "blame" for this distant relationship on the mother. Importantly, no one mentioned the father and his role—if he had one—in all of this. In fact, throughout the programme, fathers were only noted by their absence.

Then it was the turn of the dependent daughter. Ignoring the daughter, the first question was directed at the mother who was asked whether she had allowed her daughter to be independent as she grew up. Put on the spot, and for probably the same reason as the "distant" mother, she admitted that she probably hadn't. There was a rumbling of mother-blame from the audience: "Well then, what can you expect?" The daughter did not get off without any criticism but the general feeling seemed to be "poor her with such a mother." Another "bad" mother bit the dust.

By the time the last "difficult daughter"—the "dissatisfied" one—began to discuss her "bad" mother I turned the television off. I was sick of the blaming and the search for simplistic answers.

It's not my intention to diminish the pain that these mothers and daughters were, perhaps, feeling although there does seem to be something about day-time talk shows that heightens emotions, makes ordinary behaviour seem worse than it really is, turns people into actors and the simplest events into major "dramas." But if *Oprah* set out to deflect mother-blame, it failed. Instead, she confirmed that mothers are to blame for their daughters' problems. It also showed how easy it is to categorise mothers as "good" or "bad"—and more likely bad—on the scantiest of information in a matter of minutes.

Oprah demonstrated that the good/bad mother myths live on. They alienate mothers and daughters from each other and leave mothers openly vulnerable to a "powerful tradition of mother-blame that pervades our whole culture" (Caplan 1990: 3). It is a tradition that requires mothers to strive for an unattainable perfection and blames them, when they fail to live up to the ideal, for everything from turning their children into "terrorists" to "tooth decay" (Eyer 1996: xi), from "ulcerative colitis" to an "inability to deal with colour blindness" (Debold *et al*: 21). From being one component of the "romantic tableau" of mother and child, the mother has become the pathogenic core of the family in the eyes of experts "trained to search for the pathology ... which lies under the healthiest exterior" (Ehrenreich & English 1978: 203).

Codifying and reflecting the conflicts and concerns of earlier generations of tale tellers (Barzilai 1990: 516) fairy tales provide many stories of mothers who are either good or bad or dead. In an attempt to be more subtle in their denigration of mothers, these tales replace them with wicked stepmothers, witches, evil fairies and "fiendish older women" who have "more force, more truly powerful magic" than their "good" counterparts (Debold *et al*: 27). Importantly, by the time the story reaches its "happy ever after" climax there is a safety net, for bad mothers are invariably punished in some way.

This unrealistic polarisation is being revised by some Australian women writers of short fiction. A marginalised genre which is often overlooked in favour of forms that are seen as "part of official or "high" cultural hegemony" (Hanson 1989: 2) these short fictions provide glimpses of the fairy tale and make use of it to challenge the dichotomy.

Carmel Bird's "A Place for Everything" (1988) has a title that reinforces the idea of perfection with the partial use of the saying, "A place for everything and everything in its place." It highlights the pressure placed on women—perhaps not just in Western society—to fit, and to make sure that everything else fits, into some sort of perfect ideal—with tragic results. Told in the first person by the daughter, the narrative tries to reinforce the notion of perfection by its division into neat sections: "the street, the house, the garden and ... the things that happened" (63). It is, perhaps, an attempt to arrange the narrative, to make it fit, as the mother would have—perfectly. Similarly, the narrator endeavours to maintain a concern with things, as the mother once did. It is an effort to do so, however, and she is often deflected from this path into a discussion of people, in particular, the mother.

It is no surprise in this story that the mother who strives for perfection lives in a "nice street," a "respectable street" (63), where the occupants of the houses are defined by the occupation of the men of the household. There is, it seems, no one definition for the varied occupations of women. No surprise either that most of the houses in the street "looked like houses in picture books illustrating nursery rhymes or fairy tales" (63). To reinforce this image—the story of the "The Three Little Pigs" comes to mind—most of the houses were built of brick.

In his analysis of the "The Three Little Pigs", Bettelheim argues that this tale teaches children that they "must not be lazy and take things easy, for if we do, we may perish. Intelligent planning and foresight combined with hard labour will make us victorious over even our most ferocious enemy—the wolf" (1976: 42). For Bettelheim this fairy tale is "symbolic of man's (sic) progress in history: from a lean-to shack to a wooden house, finally to a house of solid brick" (42). Simultaneously, it offers a comparison between the "pleasure principle" and the "reality principle" (Bettelheim: 42). In this respect, the two little pigs who build houses of straw and wood do so in order that "they can play for the rest of the day" while the "third and oldest pig has learned ... to postpone his desire to play ... He is even able to predict correctly the behaviour of the wolf—the enemy, or stranger within, which tries to seduce and trap us" (Bettelheim: 42).

That Bettelheim sees the tale as "symbolic of *man's* progress" (42, emphasis added) is relevant in Bird's story where for one woman the security/permanence of brick has little to do with progress, where the exterior of

her house is nothing more than a façade, and has no relation to what goes on inside. The mother lives her life in strict accordance with the reality principle while completely neglecting the pleasure principle. She has not merely delayed her desire to play but has, in her striving to attain perfection, in reality forgotten how to. The suggestion is that she does so at her own peril. In contrast to the fairy tale, where "hard labour" equals victory (Bettelheim 1976: 42), in this house built of brick there is no victory, no protection from the wolf of depression/suicide who can still so easily huff and puff and totally annihilate the "dream"/perfection, particularly if that seems to be the only reality and guide to live by.

Ironically in Bird's story, and again a deviation from the fairy tale, while most of the houses are built of brick, the one house that stands out from the rest is the fairy tale's more easily destructible wooden one. "[B]igger" and "older" (63) than the brick dwellings, the wooden one seems to show an endurance that the brick houses have yet to prove they have, undermining the fairy tale idea of its impermanence. Occupied by the radio announcer and his family, it also has "more dogs and books" (63) and children, and its occupants do not appear to be as preoccupied, as the daughter's mother is, with having "a place for everything": "Once the children and I took a wardrobe from the house and used it as part of a fort in the orchard and the radio announcer and his wife didn't seem to mind" (64).

In contrast, the house where the mother and daughter live is the personification of orderliness. It is "extremely clean," "shining," "spotless" (64) and controlled, as all attempts at perfection have to be, by "a lot of rules" (64) which the mother also enforces. These rules verge on the obsessive, including the taking off of "shoes at the gate so as not to dirty the path" (64), and the daily washing of the daughter's hair which, ironically it is hinted, is the reason she gets hair lice in the first place (65). This seems to confirm that any extreme—pleasure or reality, good or bad—can be unhealthy. But for this mother, as she attempts to live the fairy tale, there can be no blemish on the perfection. When there is, as with the daughter's ink-stained tartan skirt (65), while the daughter attempts to clean the stain, the mother does not. The imperfect skirt is burned (65) for its imperfection.

It would be easy to caricature this apparently obsessive/compulsive mother. The narrative, however, prevents this by highlighting the disastrous consequences for women when they become trapped by the high expectations placed on them to be the ideal wife and mother and when they fail, because of these expectations, to keep the wolf of depression/suicide from their door. The mother, brought to life by this narrative, although silent within it, obviously finds the striving for perfection too much to bear. In an act of irony she kills

herself by drinking “the best part of a bottle of Phenol” (66)—one of the many cleaning fluids she used. Not wanting to spoil the perfection of her house, even at this point, she rushes “into the front garden in her slippers” (66) and collapses, dying later in hospital. She has spent her adult life—perhaps longer—trying to fit the ideal, silencing her feelings, her self. She complains, indirectly, to a relative that the dusting was getting her down—a small cry for help. But her declaration is “dusted” over. That she is forever cleaning seems to be her own fault, rather than being seen as an attempt to fulfil the expectations of a society that demands such perfection. When the mother finally “speaks” and voices her dissatisfaction with her “perfect” life through the act of suicide, she does so by punishing herself. It is not the conventional “death or dishonour,” but a more contemporary choice between “death or perfection.” In this final act she undermines the ideal. She would rather die than continue to keep up the façade of the fairy tale. Not as fortunate as the third little pig, the mother’s perfect brick house provides no protection against the wolf. He does not have to huff and puff at her brick house perfection. Nor does he have to attempt to come down the chimney. Her life is so regimented, so confining in its striving for perfection, that she sees no alternative other than to let the wolf in. Her tragic death challenges the fairy tale notion that “only those who have done something really bad get destroyed” (Bettelheim: 44).

Again, in Helen Cushing’s “Lara and I” (1990) it is hard to overlook the fairy tale links. After all, teenage narrator, Heather, romanticises “every night” of “him, him, him, my Prince Charming, my knight in shining bedsheets. Each night I held him until pumpkin hour” (71). The story gives Heather the opportunity to discover “him” (71) and allows her and her sister, Lara, to experience, temporarily, a version of their own fairy tale.

The sisters get that chance on Christmas Day when their mother has what seems to be a nervous breakdown—the wolf huffing and puffing again:

Mother’s mind fucked up on Christmas Day. She went off her head when the turkey burned and the cat went screaming up the Christmas tree, tipping it over smashing the blue vase I’d given her and shorting out those bloody flashing lights (71).

Sidestepping the categorisation of the mother as overtly “evil” she becomes, instead, unhealthy, a mother who has “gone berserk” (71). She is unfit (euphemistically “bad”). In any event, it is determined by those who come to the rescue—fairy tales often overflow with rescues—that the mother can no longer take care of her daughters. She is removed for her own and her daughters’ good, to undergo treatment—perhaps a session of “normalization” to make her “fit” in both senses of the word. Not for the first time, Heather and Lara fall back on their “escape strategy” (72), a temporary flight from the

"mother-gone-berserk." But this time Cecil, the "fairy god-ghastly", arrives, "throw[ing] a spanner in the pumpkin" (72) and delivers both girls to Heather's (fairy) godmother, Bronwyn.

In traditional fairy tales it seems to be the job of the (fairy) godmother, the "good" mother, who often turns up when things are at their worst, to use her magic to help her "daughter" realise her dream—to find the prince?—and to provide her with some protection. Bronwyn is, however, a more contemporary godmother. She is "rich and beautiful and capable" (74). She has a career—other than godmother; looks like a "film star" who belongs on a "film set" (73)—a place where contemporary "fairy" tales are created; and, in contrast to godmothers in traditional tales, she has a son, Marty, a ready-made Prince Charming (73). Without a wand in sight or an incantation heard, Bronwyn provides the sisters with a "palace" to live in, and Heather with her prince. A late twentieth-century sort of godmother and, it seems, lay counsellor, she asks the girls "about life at home" and "about Mum in a way that was meant to be therapeutic" (74/75). But the sisters, rather than giving her any Cinderella-like sense of what life with their mother was really like, make up their own tales, "stories, elaborate fantasies of an interesting life" (75).

Bronwyn has a more difficult job than her fairy tale counterpart. In a traditional sense she does her job—Heather gets her man (or he gets into her) even though the sexual encounter does not quite fit Heather's romanticised version: "I think he forgot all about me as he fucked. Like so much meat, like so much meat" (77). As a more contemporary godmother, however, Bronwyn's powers fail because she is unable to prevent or protect Heather from becoming sexually involved. The idea in fairy tales that good (fairy) godmothers cannot protect their daughters is obviously still valid.

In any event, it is the "real" mother, now released from hospital and practising "relaxation techniques" (80), who puts an end to the visit, and possibly Heather's relationship with Marty, with a request for the return of her daughters. There are no traditional fairy tales I can think of that cover such a scenario particularly once the daughter has "had" her prince. The traditional goddaughter would have probably embraced the trappings of the good life: beautiful surroundings, a prince, an atmosphere "full of toast and honey and morning sunshine, all buttery and wholesome" (78). But Heather "realized [she] was missing Mum's scrambled eggs and tea bags" (78). Undermining the rules that govern the actions—or more often inactions—of daughters in the traditional tale, Heather awakes on this morning from all sorts of illusions including some romantic ones. Unlike Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, she does not wake to marry the prince. Instead, she wants to return home to the "screaming matches ... the uncertainty, the confusion" (76) that life with her

occasionally "unfit" mother offers, a return to that less than perfect but satisfying "woman's place of ours" (73).

Using revised elements of the fairy tale, both stories challenge the neat and simplistic categorisation of mothers as good or bad. Bird's narrative shows, in the most tragic of ways, that life can be impossible for the idealised. Hopefully the daughter learns something from the mother about the possible consequences of trying to be perfect. Chances are the daughter would willingly have parted with the ideal and accepted "ordinary" and a little "disorderly" rather than a suicide which absents the mother from the daughter's life completely and perfectly. Similarly, in Cushing's narrative, such labelling seems to mean little, particularly since Heather seems to prefer a mother who occasionally goes berserk. I breathe a sigh of relief and resolve to send copies of these complex and subversive stories to Oprah Winfrey.

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