Articles

Destabilizing Happily Ever After: Dickens's Conflation of the False Bride/Fairy Bride Motifs in *David Copperfield*

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Life was more like a great fairy story, which I was just about to begin to read, than anything else.
—David Copperfield

Introduction

In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50), naïve David calls his wedding to Dora Spenlow a "fairy marriage" (531), apparently using the term in the same sense that "fairy-tale wedding" is popularly used today: to describe the romantic obtainment of happily-ever-after between a bride and groom, characterized by a sense of the fantastic or unreal. As a child, Dickens too had been seduced by a dream of fairy-tale ecstasy: in a nostalgic description of finding "Little Red Riding Hood" on his Christmas Tree, he reminisces, "She was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding-Hood, I should have known perfect bliss. But," he continues significantly, "it was not to be" (*Christmas* 291). While David is a blind young dreamer, Dickens the adult writer is made sadder and wiser not only by his deeper understanding of fairy tales but also by his own life experience. Dickens knew by then that traditional fairy tales don't always end on the wedding day—often as not, they go on to relate the continued torments visited upon the bride and groom by nightmarish in-laws, or by one another—and this knowledge runs through the heart of the novel. The truth is, as Kelly Hager explains, "Dickens's most autobiographical novel is concerned in a multiplicity of ways with the institution of marriage and the miseries it causes" (990). Dickens's use of the phrase reveals his understanding of its true implications: "fairy marriages" are as likely to result in misery as in happiness.

Dickens uses fairy tale conventions in complex ways in this novel. He employs the fairy tale plot of the "false bride," and ultimately Dora proves a false bride, Agnes Wickfield the true bride. However, Dickens rejects a simplistic portrayal of Dora as a fairy tale villainess. To create a portrait more psychologically complex and true to life as he understood it, Dickens complicates the "fairy marriage" of Dora and David by additionally drawing on "fairy bride" tales, a characteristically British type of fairy tale that depicts human marriages with fairies. Such tales have no clear villains, but they inevitably end in tragedy. A close examination of Dickens's use and transformation of both conventions reveals Dickens's recognition of both the inherent bliss and the inherent tragedy in "fairy marriages."

Literature Review: Dickens's Love of Fairy Tales

Dickens was a voracious reader and a lifelong lover of fairy tales, and his extensive use of fairy tales in his novels is well established. In *Dickens and the Fairy Tale* (1972), Michael Kotzin notes that the importance of fairy tales to Dickens was first observed within his lifetime and continues to be recognized in a strain of Dickens criticism that, according to Edgar Johnson, characterizes his aims as more "adventurous" than mere attempts to achieve "literal realism," understanding that in Dickens's fiction, "the elements of the fairy tale are superimposed on the every-day world and the deep symbolic truths of myth gleam through the surface" (qtd in Kotzin 1-2). Kotzin's important contribution to this strain of criticism is a survey-style exploration of "the relationship between Dickens and the fairy tale as it was regarded and used in his own time" (2). Given Dickens's vast body of work, Kotzin's wide-ranging overview of patterns in Dickens's uses of fairy tale character types and plot structures cannot cover every instance, much less engage in deep analysis of each pattern's significance. Though Kotzin identifies Betsey Trotwood as a fairy

godmother, Uriah Heep as a subhuman supernatural villain, and David as a fairy tale hero (at least in his own conception), he has little to say about Dora or Agnes. In fact, his suggestion that Agnes's love magically lifts David from despair in a transformational moment reminiscent of "Beauty and the Beast" seems not only simplistic, but inaccurate, as David largely recovers from his depression by going through a crisis while on his own, before he is able to move on to Agnes.

A more sophisticated exploration of the two characters in fairy tale terms can be found in the best and most comprehensive examination of Dickens's use of fairy tales, Harry Stone's seminal monograph *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making* (1979). Stone argues that Dickens's use of fairy tales is "so basic and pervasive" that the "study of Dickens's commerce with the invisible world can take us to the very heart of his creative vision" (xi). His extended section on *David Copperfield*, called "The Fairy-Tale Method Perfected," analyzes characters like David, Betsey, Uriah, Dora, Agnes, and several others in depth, as well as a host of minor characters in brief, to demonstrate the unity of effect of Dickens's fairy tale vision. Stone demonstrates that "the fairy tale mechanisms, far from weakening the story, or being simply ancillary to it, underline and deepen it" (200).

Despite their popularity in the 1960s and '70s, critical readings that focused on Dickens's use of fairy tales have fallen out of favor since the '80s. Simon Edwards writes dismissively of "the wrong kind of critical attention" that *David Copperfield* has attracted, and the worst, in his view, are "the self-delighting 'fairy-tale' readings, [which] are essentially *unhistorical"* (64, emphasis in original). Edwards's scorn is unwarranted. Kotzin grounds fairy tale criticism in history, and the coherence of Stone's compelling analysis of Dickens's "fairy-tale method" in this novel can hardly be overstated. Nor are fairy tale readings a well that has run dry; even Stone leaves some issues unaddressed. While his analyses of Dora and Agnes are perceptive, Stone is

more interested in them as fairy tale character types than in how they function in recreated fairy tale plot structures. Stone identifies Dora as both "the fair maiden, [who] is guarded by the fearsome dragon, Jip" (255) and as a "puissant enchantress" who blinds David to the truth of her insufficiency (248). Without recognizing that fairy tale marriages often lead to misery, Stone can only explain the fairy-tale language that surrounds David and Dora's wedding as "iron[ic]" (250). Stone contends that Dora is "weak, dependent, fearful, inadequate" (248) and, most of all, "profoundly destructive" for David (232). Such an interpretation of Dora's character is insufficient, as is Stone's categorization of Agnes as flat angelic paragon. Thus, further investigation of the "false bride" and "fairy bride" plot patterns that underlie Dickens's shaping of these two characters, particularly of Dora, is warranted.

Which Fairy Tales Did Dickens Know?

The fairy tale plot device of the false bride dates back at least as far as the seventeenth century with multiple uses in Giambattista Basile's *Il Pentamerone* (1634-36), and there are plentiful models in fairy tales that Dickens would have been familiar with. Several of the most well-known tales that use the false bride motif were collected by the German folklorists and brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, such as "Aschenputtel" (Cinderella), in which the heroine's stepsisters successively take her place on the way to the altar by cutting off parts of their feet to fit into the golden slipper, and "The Goose Girl," in which a princess is forced to switch places with her wicked waiting-maid as they journey to the city of her betrothed. In tales like "Aschenputtel," the false brides are exposed before the marriage takes place, but in others, the hero actually weds a false bride; and in tales like "The Goose Girl," he lives with the false bride for some time before

the deception is uncovered, and the villainess must be killed so that the husband can replace her with the true bride.

A necessary caveat to any comparative analysis of Dickens's plots with specific tales is that despite his well-established affection for fairy tales as a genre, Dickens's knowledge of particular tales and variants is sometimes difficult to determine. Basile's *The Pentamerone* was translated into English in 1847 by John Edward Taylor, with plates by Dickens illustrator George Cruikshank, and Dickens is likely to have read it for the sake of his friend[1] as well as for his own pleasure. The first English translation of the Grimms' tales, Edgar Taylor's *German Popular Stories*, appeared much earlier, in 1823, and was also illustrated by Cruikshank. Dickens likely read this tremendously popular collection for himself, to his children, or both; in a letter to "an unidentified woman" about her translation of "Little Red Cap" (the Grimms' version of "Little Red Riding Hood"), he wrote that he remembered reading that particular version of the tale (which differs significantly from the Perrault-inspired version that would have been on his childhood Christmas tree) before. He adds, "I have read Snow Whitey [sic] to my two little girls with prodigious success. I have six children … and expect a seventh child some fine morning in May. So you see I command a pretty large audience for Fairy stories" (qtd in Kotzin 35). Even if Dickens did not read the J. Taylor or E. Taylor translations, he would have read English magazines that reprinted some of the tales along with original and imitative tales in the same style, "which were commonly found in [magazines] during the 1830s" (Kotzin 36). In the 1840s, he read translations of Danish tales by Hans Christian Andersen, who was (for a time) a friend of his; when Dickens and Andersen met, Dickens particularly mentioned "The Little Mermaid," which he knew from the translation that had been printed in 1846 in *Bentley's Miscellany* (Bredsdorff 15). "The Little

[1] Dickens's infamous falling-out with Cruikshank over the proper way to tell fairy tales began in 1853, with the publication of "Frauds on the Fairies" (Stone 13).

Mermaid" includes an important variant on the false bride motif (and is also arguably a variant of the "fairy bride" story; and, like a fairy bride story, it has a tragic ending). In the 1850s and '60s, Dickens's own magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* printed fairy tales and Dickens-authored articles about them (Kotzin 37). In addition to "The Little Mermaid," it may be stated with reasonable confidence that Dickens had read translations or imitations of the Grimms' version of "Cinderella," "The Goose Girl," and/or other tales with similar false bride plots, such as those from *The Pentamerone*.

The motif occurs in fairy tales worldwide, but it is less clear whether Dickens also knew any specific false bride tales originating in the British Isles, such as the characteristic "The Black Bull of Norroway." While this tale was not collected in print before 1894 (by Joseph Jacobs in *More English Fairy Tales*), it is possible that a British variant of this tale or a very similar one was in oral or ephemeral print circulation in Dickens's time (as other tales in Jacobs's collections certainly were, including some of Dickens's favorites such as "Whittington and his Cat" and "The Babes in the Wood"). As context for my examination of Dickens's use of the motif, I will use three characteristic examples of false bride plots: "Cinderella" and "Goose Girl," which Dickens certainly or almost certainly knew, as well as "Black Bull," which he may have known. A fourth tale, "The Little Mermaid," is also useful, especially since it is certain that Dickens read it, though the tale is atypical.

Use of the False Bride/True Bride Motif

Dickens uses the false bride motif relatively straightforwardly to structure the novel's plot thread of David's successive marriages to Dora and Agnes. As in nearly all false bride stories, the true bride, Agnes, both precedes and succeeds the false bride as a potential love interest in David's

life. Her status is signaled both by her patience in waiting for her lover to realize his mistake, and by the hardships she must undergo as she waits. Cinderella and the Goose Girl are trapped in servitude and harassed by their inferiors, while the heroine of "Black Bull" must travel the world in search of her lost love in a pair of iron shoes nailed to her feet.[2] It is David who travels the world before they reunite rather than Agnes, which emphasizes her patient waiting—she is more like the "meek and patient" Goose Girl (157) than the world-traveling, actively striving heroine of "Black Bull"—but the true bride's trials are nevertheless recognizably transformed into Agnes's torments by the repulsive, "'umble" Uriah Heep, who like the goose boy Curdken wants to "take hold of" the true bride with his low-class hands (155), and by Heep's mother. In this function, Mrs. Heep mirrors Cinderella's wicked stepmother (who keeps the prince from Cinderella and goads her daughters into attempting to take Cinderella's place), the Sea Witch in "The Little Mermaid" who cuts out the little mermaid's tongue, and the trickster mother of the false bride in "Black Bull."

At a crucial moment in the novel, when David's failure to recognize Agnes as the true bride guarantees years of misery for him, Agnes, and Dora alike, Mrs. Heep's witchlike powers are at their height. David describes her thus:

> Whensoever, slowly pondering over my letter, I lifted up my eyes, and meeting the thoughtful face of Agnes, saw it clear, and beam encouragement upon me, with its own angelic expression, I was conscious presently of the evil eye passing me, and going on to her, and coming back to me again, and dropping furtively upon the knitting … What the knitting was, I don't know, not being learned in that art; but it looked like a net; and as she worked away … she showed in the firelight like some ill-looking enchantress. (482)

[2] In this she resembles Andersen's little mermaid, whose deal with the Sea Witch for human feet stipulates that every step she takes on land will feel as if she is "treading on a sharp knife" (293).

Though she acts on behalf of her son, a false mate for Agnes rather than for a false mate for David, the end result is the same. Like the deceptive "old washerwife" in "Black Bull" who fools the knight into betrothing himself to the wrong girl, Mrs. Heep's evil influence keeps the true pair separated. Like the Sea Witch in "Little Mermaid," she silences any potential declarations of love. Whenever David meets Agnes's gaze, he quickly feels it negated by Mrs. Heep, who casts her "evil eye" on both of them. An "evil eye" grants the ability to curse; folklorist Alan Dundes draws a special connection between the evil eye and desiccation or "withering" (298), in this case the withering of the potential flowering of love between David and Agnes. Instead of marrying her true love, Agnes is in danger of being ensnared in a "net" and carried away from him by this "ill-looking enchantress" and her evil spirit of a son. In this scene David is located as a potential barrier between the net and Agnes, but his act of letter-writing to Dora's aunts is what will lead him down a false path and away from Agnes, abandoning her to worse torments ahead. As if enchanted to forget his true bride (a common motif in this tale type), David is "blind, blind, blind," and while his fairy godmother Betsey can identify the spell, she cannot break it (425). On the day of his marriage to Dora, David "seem[s] to see nothing" (531), eats without "believing in the viands," and speaks in the same "dreamy fashion" without knowing what he is saying (533).

While true brides undergo trials that they must bear patiently, false brides are often exposed through their unfitness for marriage. The stepsisters in Cinderella literally do not fit into the golden slipper, but their mother convinces them to take knives to their oversized toes and heels, reassuring them, "Once you become Queen, you won't have to walk any more" (83). But the trail of blood streaming from the shoe gives their unfitness away, and their gruesome fate is mirrored in Dora's loss of the use of her legs after her miscarriage, obliging David to carry her up and down the stairs once she can no longer "r[u]n nor walk" (589). In "Black Bull," the false bride cannot perform the

domestic task of washing a stain out of a shirt, paralleling the contrast of Dora's utter failure at housekeeping with Agnes's virtually magical ability to perform as a superior housekeeper from her childhood. Like Cinderella, who receives supernatural help from her mother's grave to perform impossible domestic chores set by her stepmother, Agnes has apparently inherited her domestic magic from her deceased mother, whose place in her father's household she occupies and whom she so closely resembles that she appears to David to be the "original" of her mother's portrait (194). Dora's dead mother gives her no help from beyond the grave—instead of a benevolent mother, she has a witchlike guardian in the form of Miss Murdstone—and the result is her embarrassing ineptitude.

Transformation of the False Bride Motif

However, Dickens also swerves from the false bride motif in significant ways. False brides meet grisly ends. Cinderella's stepsisters do not die, but in addition to being rendered lame by their own hands, they each have their eyes "pecked out" by vindictive doves (84). The false bride and her mother in "Black Bull" are "burnt" to death by the knight, angry at being fooled. Even in "Little Mermaid," in which the false bride wins the prize, the rivals cannot both survive the night of the marriage, and upon relinquishing her right to plunge a knife into the other's breast, the good little mermaid "dissolve[s] into foam" (231). Most memorably, the false bride in "The Goose Girl" pronounces the punishment for treachery that will be enacted upon herself after the truth comes out: that "she should be thrown into a cask stuck round with sharp nails, and that two white horses should be put to it, and should drag it from street to street till she is dead" (158). False brides suffer some of the most gruesome deaths in fairy tales, matched only by the horrific fates of child-cannibal witches of the type that appear in the Grimms' "Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel."

Like any false bride, Dora must die to clear the way for the true bride, but she does not undergo a Dickensian version of a grisly fate: she is not viciously beaten to death by her lover, nor does she spontaneously combust, nor fly to pieces upon being hit by a train. On the contrary, her death is marked by angelic serenity and a fuller ability to comprehend her situation than her husband possesses, and her dying words are no vicious pronouncement of jealousy. Instead, it is a heartfelt bequeathing of David to her successor Agnes. Dora's behavior at her death does not neatly fit the pattern of the succession of false bride by true bride.

And unlike most true brides, Agnes does not simply patiently wait for David (much less strive on behalf of her claim); instead, she retains perfect sympathy for her rival, advocating for Dora, lending her considerable influence with David to legitimize the mismatch. David says, "And how [Agnes] spoke to me of Dora … and round the little fairy-figure shed some glimpses of her own pure light, that made it yet more precious and more innocent to me!" (439). During the wedding ceremony, Dora is "always clasping Agnes by the hand," refusing to be separated from her, favoring Agnes "above all the others" (533-34). If anything, the marriage between David and Dora can only take place with Agnes's permission and blessing, while the marriage between David and Agnes can only take place with Dora's permission and blessing.

This concordance between rivals fails to fit the pattern of most false bride stories. It does, however, align with "The Little Mermaid," a notable exception to the pattern of bitter rivalry when the mermaid loses the prince to another bride. The prince has promised to marry only the girl who saved him on the beach after his shipwreck. The little mermaid knows that she was his savior, for she brought him out of the water onto the beach; but, even though he mentions marriage to the little mermaid once, the prince eventually marries the beautiful "temple girl" who first found him on the shore (230). Besides the fact that the mermaid is the story's heroine, there is no particular

reason to think that it is the temple girl rather than the little mermaid who is the *false* bride.[3] Though she is heartbroken for herself, the little mermaid bears no ill will toward her rival: she stands "holding the bride's train" during the ceremony, laughs and dances at the reception more "brilliantly" than she ever has before, benevolently kisses the "handsome brow" of the prince who has chosen another, and dies (230-31). In her supernatural beauty, her childlike littleness, her status as an important but temporary distraction in the prince's romantic life, and her untimely death, the little mermaid bears more resemblance to Dora than to Agnes. Of course, the little mermaid, as a magical being, is also a fairy bride, making permanent marriage between herself and a mortal impossible, because in the end, fairy brides always return to the supernatural world they came from. Andersen's successful combination of the two motifs in a single story may have inspired Dickens's attempt of the same feat.

While it is useful to recognize that Dickens begins with a false bride/true bride rivalry, to characterize Dora simply as a false bride is not sufficient. Particularly once the two women have been introduced to one another, there is no trace of rivalry to be found. Moreover, Dora's death is imbued with a tragic sense of loss, not of justice or vengeance served. Understanding Dora as a *fairy* bride, and uncovering the unusual role that Agnes plays in this fairy bride story, requires looking beyond their false bride/true bride opposition, and ultimately provides rewarding insights into Dickens's depiction of both characters.

The Fairy Bride Motif

Like false brides, captured supernatural brides can be found in tales worldwide. British folklorist Katharine Briggs's entry for "Fairy brides" in *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* (1978)

[3] Disney's 1989 adaptation, of course, returns to a straightforward "false bride" plot, conflating the characters of the Sea Witch and the false bride; and in their version the mermaid does wins and weds the prince in the end.

identifies the fairy bride tradition as a descendant of ancient stories of mortal couplings with "goddesses and nymphs" (135). Half-human, half-animal brides like seal maidens (selkies) and swan maidens—brides captured through the theft of their animal skins—are part of the fairy bride tradition, as are stories of a mortal man's capture of a bride from Fairyland. Fairy bride stories involve a fraught process of wooing, involving theft or capture of the bride (or bribery with gifts), and often include a quest challenge for the would-be groom (for example, learning the bride's true name). Fairy brides are of "more than human beauty," fruitful, and supernaturally competent at the domestic arts, bringing multiple children, wealth, and prosperity to their spouse's home (136). A universal feature of the tale type is a taboo, which the husband must not break lest he lose his wife. In selkie and swan maiden tales, the husband must keep her sealskin or cloak of feathers hidden from her. Variants of these tales from the British Isles provide classic examples of how the motif functions. In W. Jenkyn Thomas's "The Fairy Wife" (1907), a typical version of the bride-from-Fairyland motif, the husband may not strike his fairy wife with iron, or she must return to Fairyland (56). Similarly, in Thomas's "The Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach" (1907), the story of a fairy bride from beneath a lake, the husband will lose his wife if he strikes her "three causeless blows" (3). Of course, the taboo is inevitably broken, the hidden skins found, the blows struck; the fairy wife always returns to the other world, the husband is always left behind; and the children may or may not accompany the fleeing wife.

Compared to his direct use of the "false bride" trope, the significance of Dickens's use of the "fairy bride" motif is more obscure, partly because the motif itself is not as ubiquitous, at least not in the form of a wife from Fairyland. A great deal of Victorian literature is informed by fairy tales, but continental tales tend to dominate, such as "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "Beauty and the Beast." The narrative structure of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is shaped by the

French tales "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard," rather than by, say, quintessential English favorites like "Jack and the Beanstalk" or "Tom Thumb." Kotzin observes that "most of the native fairy tales once available, and drawn upon by Shakespeare, Spenser, Peele, and Jonson" had all but disappeared from English literature by Dickens's time (9). With the "fairy bride" theme, Dickens makes use of a fairy tale motif that originates from the British Isles, in the tradition of Shakespeare.[4]

In *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (2002), Briggs observes that fairy brides are found especially often in Welsh folklore: "The fairy wife is a universal concept, but the particular form she takes in Wales is characteristic" (88). Briggs identifies the fairy bride tradition as one of few that are "native to these Islands [of Britain]," driven into the margins by the "foreign invasion" of classical tales and other countries' myths and folklore (174). In "The Fairy Bride Tradition in Wales," Juliette Wood notes that the story of the fairy bride from Llyn y Fan Fach was printed in 1861 (56). The timing makes it unlikely that Dickens had read a printed version of a typically Welsh rendering of the tale. Nevertheless, he could have known the story through oral tradition; Wood explains, "About three dozen variants of the tale dating from the tenth to the twentieth century are known" (56). Wood additionally suggests that the tale's popularity was "beginning to lose ground" in the 1880s (65), which implies that it was still popular in the years leading up to Dickens's writing of *David Copperfield.*

[4] Not coincidentally, the most in-depth study I found of the fairy bride theme in English literature was in Regina Buccola's *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith* (2006), in which she discusses Shakespeare's use of the fairy bride motif in *Cymbeline* (1611) and *All's Well that Ends Well* (ca. 1598).

Dora as Fairy Bride

When David first sees Dora, he instantly recognizes her as a fairy: "She was more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don't know what she was—anything that no one ever saw, and everything that everybody ever wanted. I was swallowed up in an abyss of love in an instant" (331). The moment parallels a mortal man's first vision of his fairy bride. In "Fairy Wife," when the hero spies fairies dancing in the field, his eye falls

> on one of the fairy damsels, whose beauty was beyond anything he had ever seen in a human being ... her voice was like the voice of a nightingale and as gentle as the breeze of a summer evening in a flower garden: her bearing was graceful and noble, and she tripped on the greensward as lightly as the rays of the sun had danced a few hours before on the ripples of the lake hard by. He fell in love with her over head and ears. (54)

David likewise says of Dora, "She had the most delightful little voice, the gayest little laugh, the pleasantest and most fascinating little ways, that ever led a lost youth into hopeless slavery" (353). In Herman Hofberg's "The Swan Maiden" (1895), the young hunter becomes so "smitten" that "neither night nor day could he tear his thoughts from the bright image" (72) forcing him to seek advice from his mother on how to woo her. In "Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach," the youth becomes "love-stricken" and "bewildered by a feeling of love and admiration for the object before him" from the first moment "he beheld, sitting on the unruffled surface of the water, a lady; one of the most beautiful creatures that mortal eyes ever beheld, her hair flowed gracefully in ringlets over her shoulders" (1-2). David, too, is "moon-struck," smitten, and bewildered by Dora's ringleted beauty (401).

False brides are the pursuers, while fairy brides are pursued. On balance, Dora's enchanting qualities seem more innate than calculated to ensnare. Like other mortals who would wed fairy

brides, David is the agent of action, overcoming multiple obstacles to win Dora, gaining her love through gifts and attention, and facing her father, Mr. Spenlow, and his attempt to permanently end their courtship. Similarly, the suitor of the Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach brings a series of gifts to obtain his lady's initial favor, and then must perform an impossible task set by her father (identifying his beloved from a pair of identical ladies). David approaches the task with a fairy tale hero's enthusiasm: "What I had to do, was, to take my woodman's axe in my hand, and clear my own way through the forest of difficulty, by cutting down the trees until I came to Dora" (439). Dora does not particularly encourage this pursuit; once the period of their initial innocent flirtation is past, she is distressed by David's terrible enthusiasm, burying her face, weeping and wringing her hands until David "felt like a sort of Monster who had got into a Fairy's bower" (459). In "Swan Maiden," the captured maiden "f[alls] upon her knees and beg[s]" to be released from bondage (72). In "Fairy Wife," after the man informs the fairy that he has her true name, she, "folding her tiny hands … exclaim[s], 'Alas, my fate, my fate!'" (55-56). Fairy brides, including Dora, eventually resign themselves to their lover's determination to possess them, but a lingering sense of reluctance and regret hangs over the stories.

Transformation of the Fairy Bride Motif

However, after the marriage, Dickens's use of the motif swerves from the typical in a significant reversal. Fairy marriages are happy, prosperous, and fertile while they last, partly because fairy brides are supernaturally domestic wives. For example, in "Fairy Wife" the narrator relates that

> Everything in the house and on the farm prospered under [the fairy's] charge. There was no better or cleaner housewife in all the country around, or one that was more provident

> and thrifty than she was. She milked the cows three times each day, and they gave the usual quantity of milk each time. The butter she made was so good that it fetched a penny a pound more than any other butter at Carnavon market … So wise and active was the fairy wife that he became one of the richest men of that country. (56)

Dora, of course, is preternaturally *in*capable at housewifery. David says in the chapter "Our Housekeeping," "nothing had a place of its own … I made no allusion to the skirmishing plates upon the floor; or to the disreputable appearance of the castors, which were all at sixes and sevens, and looked drunk; or to the further blockade … of wandering vegetable dishes and jugs" (542). Dora spends too much money on bad food, fails to discipline the pets or the servants, and cannot keep accounts or mind the keys. In fact, she is so much the *opposite* of a fairy wife that it seems this characterization can be no accident on Dickens's part, especially when all the qualities of domestic magic that a fairy wife should have are so close at hand—in Agnes. I shall return to this apparent contradiction shortly.

Dora's infertility raises several questions. When fairies, selkies, or swan maidens return to the world they came from, sometimes they are forced to leave their children behind, and sometimes they take their children with them—but there are nearly always children. But Dora miscarries her only pregnancy: David mourns, "It was not to be. The spirit fluttered for a moment on the threshold of its little prison, and, unconscious of captivity, took wing" (588). What's more, Dora's miscarriage is the beginning of the end. She soon loses the use of her legs, and not long afterwards the "Little Blossom" withers entirely (590). Earlier, I pointed out that Dora's death does not fit the "gruesome justice" model of false bride stories. Is the miscarriage that causes her death a form of narrative punishment for Dora's being a sexual creature, in a classic example of Victorian repression? Kelly Hager observes, "If things sexual cannot be mentioned, then they are to be found

everywhere" (992). Like many other critics, Hager notes that Dora is deeply sexualized, understood by David almost entirely in terms of her body (her soft little hands, her parted, pouting lips, her shaking curls) or by her physically playful charms (resting her head on David's chest, playing prettily with his buttons, his hand, or his hair). The logical implication of the false bride model of justice combined with the Victorian literary trope that sex kills (cf. *Oliver Twist*'s (1837-39) Nancy) is that Dora dies because she is sexualized—because she is the bad wife, and Agnes the good one. Yet this conclusion is too simplistic for *David Copperfield*; after all, "bad girls" Martha Endell and little Em'ly survive, as does the fertile Agnes. Dora's sexualized beauty is part of what makes her a fairy bride, but it is not the cause of her death.

Breaking the Taboo, Losing the Bride

Despite her lack of magical fruitfulness, Dora's death establishes her as a fairy bride, whose tragic loss is to be deeply mourned, rather than a false bride. In tales of brides from Fairyland, the reason that brides return home—metaphorically die—is that their husbands break the taboos against harming them. In "Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach," the husband's "three causeless blows" (3) cause his wife to return to the lake. In "Fairy Wife," the fairy agrees to wed on the condition that "you must never strike me with iron" (56). In selkie and swan maiden tales, the husband keeps her animal skin, a fundamental part of his wife's nature, locked away from her in an ongoing form of harm; she is trapped against her will in the limited role of human wife, and despite her professed love for husband and children, her instantaneous flight upon reclaiming the sealskin or cloak of feathers comes as no real surprise. The fairy bride tale type can be understood to caution against domestic violence, as well as more metaphorical forms of spousal abuse. In many versions, husbands who love their wives dearly violate the taboos by accident, which suggests that simply

having good intentions is not sufficient. The husband cannot prevent himself from violating the taboo if he does not truly know his wife well enough to understand what the taboo is.

In Dora's case, David's failure to treat her like a real human woman arguably leads to her death. To begin with, for David to attempt to "form Dora's mind" to suit his own is to do her a symbolic violence as great and as gruesome as Cinderella's stepsisters taking knives to their feet—as Agnes, Betsey, and Dora herself all try to warn him (585). When David attempts to school Dora in housewifery, she invokes fairy tale language to set him straight, protesting, "don't be a naughty Blue Beard! Don't be serious!" (536). Dora intuits that too much strictness from her husband will kill her, and thus reminds David of the story of Bluebeard, a serial-killing husband who marries one wife after another, murdering each one for what he considers unseemly behavior. "Bluebeard," one of Dickens's favorite fairy tales, had "a tenacious hold of Dickens's imagination" (Barzilai 506). The original Bluebeard of *David Copperfield* is Mr. Murdstone, who married David's hapless "Baby" of a mother, only to drive her to her death with his unfeeling harshness (12). Later in the novel, Murdstone marries again, another young woman only "just of age," apparently with every intention of repeating his performance (404). Having in his turn married a woman just like his mother, David must at all costs resist repeating his stepfather's cruel performance, and Dora is wise enough to sense it.

Dora is wise in other ways as well. Hager says, "she realizes long before David does … that [her] inability to be a proper companion is due to the quality of her education" (997). As Hager suggests, Dora becomes significantly more self-aware after she meets Agnes. When she tries to talk to David about her new awareness, asking if she might have been "more clever" (515) if she had known Agnes earlier, David replies patronizingly with "What nonsense!" (516). Hager makes clear the other way in which David, for all his good intentions, harms Dora: on the few occasions

when *she* tries to be serious (on her own terms), he is as unreceptive to it as she is when *he* tries to be serious (on his). After his first failed attempt to educate her, David takes upon himself "the toils and cares of our life, and had no partner in them," reassuring himself that this will make Dora "bright and cheerful in the old childish way" and "happy with her old trifles" (546). However, for all her despair over housekeeping and accounts, Dora is not made happy by the awareness that her husband is treating her as a "plaything" rather than as a partner (511). She watches him with "quiet attention" as he works late into the night, and resists when he tries to send her to bed (546). Her upbringing has been inadequate to the task that is before her, but she loves David and is not prepared to be permanently dismissed as hopeless. In her pathetic, yet significant offer to "hold the pens," as well as her renewed efforts at housekeeping that follow, Dora shows the potential to develop (546), but in David's mind it is nothing but "make-believe," and as long as he withholds his true feelings with her, so it is (547).

The older David is aware of his own faults in his treatment of Dora, as he admits when he says heavily, "If I did any wrong, as I may have done much, I did it in mistaken love, and in my want of wisdom. I write the exact truth. It would avail me nothing to extenuate it now" (545). In David's defense, the true fault may be in the inability of Victorian society to imagine a possible role for a real, human wife who has plentiful attractions and virtues, but none of them domestic. Like a swan maiden missing half her true self, Dora is stunted, and cannot rise to the position of an equal partner in marriage. David is merely acting the part of Victorian society by metaphorically withholding Dora's cloak of feathers. Hager argues that in her final few conversations with David, Dora gently reminds her husband of the wrong he has done her by failing to treat her as an equal. She explains that since they can never be true partners, it is better for her to go. David is deeply troubled by the implicit accusation, crying "Oh Dora, dearest, dearest, do not speak to me so. Every

word seems a reproach!" (645). So, killed by kindness rather than cruelty, Dora the fairy bride departs.

Two Brides Conflated

After she dies, David mourns Dora deeply for years. However, the fairy bride story is not quite complete. Dora lacks several of the key qualities that identify fairy wives, but Agnes possesses them all—industry, thrift, fertility, wisdom. Compared to Dora, however, Agnes has little of the "fairylike" about her; she is devoid of sexual appeal, frequently interpreted by critics as an indefensibly flat paragon of virtue. In "Soul-Mates: David Copperfield's Angelic Bigamy," Maia McAleavey argues that the "triadic" romantic situation of David, Dora, and Agnes "blurs the distinction between marrying more than one person at a time and marrying more than one person sequentially" (202). MacAleavey observes that the image of "Agnes pointing upward," David's repeated vision of Agnes (and the closing image of the novel), is not only an image of a virtuous Agnes gesturing towards heaven (737), but also an image of a grieving Agnes pointing upwards towards Dora's room, as she does when she comes downstairs to tell David of Dora's death (647). MacAleavey's essay is concerned with religious questions about second marriages, but her observations of how images of Dora and Agnes are perpetually intertwined, rather than set in opposition to one another, help solve the riddle of the false bride/true bride rivalry, as well as the strange implication of the fairy bride motif that Dora and Agnes are two halves of a whole. Together, they make up a whole fairy bride. In this sense, Agnes may not be Dora's successor so much as her continuation in another form, much as the fairy in "Fairy Wife" finds a way to maintain contact with her family even after she has returned to Fairyland, by speaking to them from a "floating island" in the middle of the fairy lake (57).

Moreover, Dora's death has helped David learn how to properly court and treat a fairy bride. He can do for Agnes something he never truly did for Dora—he puts her needs and interests before his own. Only when he puts selfishness aside in a wholehearted commitment to helping Agnes achieve her desires can the two of them come together. When David confesses his love to Agnes (having first received her tacit permission, in contrast to his importunate pursuit of Dora), and she reciprocates, at that moment his two wives are united in a single figure: David cries internally, "And O, Agnes, even out of thy true eyes, in that same time, the spirit of my child-wife looked upon me, saying it was well; and winning me, through thee, to tenderest recollections of the Blossom that had withered on the vine!" (725). After David and Agnes are married, Agnes admits that Dora's deathbed wish was "That only I would occupy this vacant place" (726). Together they weep for Dora, though they are "so happy" (726). Dora will never truly be gone, a truth they acknowledge by naming one of their daughters "Dora" (735).[5]

Conclusion

Dickens does not simply repeat fairy tale patterns; he completely re-envisions them. What begins as a false bride/true bride opposition between Dora and Agnes begins to collapse, particularly from the moment they meet and recognize in each other the important qualities that the other lacks. A reductive summary of the two motifs in the novel might assert that Dora's story is imbued with the tragedy and pathos of fairy bride stories, while Agnes achieves a fairy-tale ending by winning through as the true bride. Yet Dickens's transformations of both motifs destabilize the potential for a true fairy-tale happily-ever-after. Like the floating island compromise in "Fairy Wife," there is something not entirely satisfactory, even untidy, about the

[5] The illustrator, Phiz (Hablôt Knight Browne), also intuits the importance of Dora's continued presence, depicting her life-size portrait on the wall of David and Agnes's home (728).

novel's final arrangement, with the portrait of poor Dora forever hanging over the head of an inhumanly perfect woman whose greatest flaw is that she has no flaws. A less reductive summary might suggest that the false bride/true bride opposition makes us acutely aware of both Dora's and Agnes's deficiencies—Dora's incompetence, Agnes's lack of sexual charms—and that while the fairy bride pattern attempts to reconcile the two sets of virtues in a single figure, it is limited by the tale type's own inherent limitation: the most idyllic "fairy marriage" must finally end in separation and grief. In this sense, Agnes and David's wedding is a true "fairy-tale wedding," with all that the loaded phrase implies, encompassing both grief and bliss.

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