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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

"Thrice proven, thrice true":  
Female Bonding and the Feminist Legacy of  
Rumpelstiltskin's story

Author

Virginia Domínguez Arquillué

Supervisor

Maite Escudero Alías

FACULTY OF ARTS

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## ABSTRACT

This project deals with the evolution of the fairy tale “Rumpelstiltskin” from its first version written by the Grimm Brothers, to two of its feminist rewritings: Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Spinner” (1997) and Naomi Novik’s *Spinning Silver* (2018). This dissertation is devoted to the exploration of recurrent themes in the three versions under analysis, with a special emphasis on the importance of spinning among women as a subversive act of communication and female bonding, and on the symbolic meaning of number three. In the last section, my work traces the evolution of female bonding, with a special devotion to Novik’s work: from its absence in the original fairy tale, to its presence in Donoghue’s version and its subsequent transformation into betrayal and female rivalry. My analysis finally ends up with an exploration of female bonding in Novik’s text, which reflects some of the main concerns in current feminism debates on sorority and intersectionality.

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Este proyecto estudia la evolución del cuento “Rumpelstiltskin” desde su primera versión escrita por los hermanos Grimm, a dos de sus adaptaciones feministas: “The Tale of the Spinner” (1998) por Emma Donoghue, y *Spinning Silver* (2018) por Naomi Novik. Este trabajo se dedica a explorar los temas recurrentes en las tres versiones que se analizan: la importancia de hilar entre las mujeres como un acto subversivo de comunicación y afección femenina, así como el simbolismo del número tres. En concreto, este trabajo de fin de grado está dedicado al análisis del vínculo afectivo femenino, con especial atención al trabajo de Novik. Primero, el proyecto cuestiona la ausencia de afección femenina en el cuento original, siguiendo con un análisis de su presencia y consecuente transformación en traición femenina en la versión de Donoghue, para terminar con una exploración del texto de Novik, que se desarrolla en concordancia a los debates feministas actuales acerca de la sororidad y la interseccionalidad.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales have often been associated with women, although they were originally written down by male writers such as Charles Perrault or the Grimm Brothers, who later would admit that their stories were highly influenced by the female oral tradition (Warner 122-123). However, as Donald Haase claims, “awareness of the fairy tale as a primary site for asserting and subverting ideologies of gender is evident throughout the genre’s history” (vii). He further develops this idea, explaining how many women writers have experimented with this genre: since the *conteuses* in seventeenth and eighteenth France, who “identified the fairy tale as a genre with something to say about gender and sexuality, to Christina Rossetti, Louisa May Alcott or Emma Wolf” (vii, viii). Yet, “scholarly research explicitly devoted to feminist issues in fairy-tale studies began in earnest in 1970 and was propelled by the feminist movement’s second wave” (vii). Such a trend can be observed in the poems of Anne Sexton in *Transformations* (1971) or Carol Ann Duffy in *Standing Female Nude* (1985), as well as Angela Carter’s narrative *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) or in Emma Donoghue’s collection *Kissing the Witch* (1997). With a new wave of feminism arising in the twenty first century, women writers are once again focusing their interest on issues of gender, and although most of these works are mainly autobiographical—Virginie Despentes’ *King Kong Théorie* (2006), Caitlin Moran’s *How to Be a Woman* (2011), Rebecca Solnit’s *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014)—, we can still find fairy tales rewritings such as Naomi Novik’s *Uprooted* (2015), or, more recently, *Spinning Silver* (2018).

The main aim of this dissertation is to explore how female writers retell fairy tales. For this purpose, I have selected three versions of the same fairy tale: the original account of “Rumpelstiltskin”, written by the Grimm Brothers (*Grimm's Complete Fairy*

*Tales* 2015) and two of its retelling stories: “The Tale of the Spinner,” by Emma Donoghue (*Kissing the Witch* 1997) and *Spinning Silver* by Naomi Novik (2018). More specifically, I will analyse the evolution and development of female bonding in the above-mentioned texts, with a special devotion to Novik’s work in which she elaborates on sorority as an outstanding source of women’s emancipation and freedom. In order to pursue such an objective, I will first question the absence of female bonding in the original fairy tale by the Grimm Brothers. Then, I will analyse its presence in Emma Donoghue’s version, paying special attention to its development into betrayal and female rivalry. Finally, I will explore the ways in which Naomi Novik uses female bonding in her novel, along with other themes now discussed in twenty first century feminism, such as the intersectionality of religion, class, and beauty standards, while simultaneously tracing the significance of various symbols from the original tale that prove to be revealing for a close reading of the novel.

To begin with, I will briefly summarise the three versions and their main characteristics. The Grimm Brothers wrote the first version of the famous story of Rumpelstiltskin in 1812, a curious “little man” (Grimm 236) that offers his help to a young woman that needs to “spin straw into gold” (236). In this tale, of just three pages length, only one female character appears: that of the miller’s daughter who becomes Queen after Rumpelstiltskin’s aid. The miller’s daughter bids her necklace, “the ring on her finger” and her “first child” (236-237) to Rumpelstiltskin so that he helps her become Queen. The other characters are the King, her father, “a miller who was poor” (236), and a messenger who was sent by the Queen “over the country” (239) to try and discover the name of Rumpelstiltskin so that she could keep the baby with her. By contrast, in Donoghue’s retelling of Rumpelstiltskin tale, “The Tale of the Spinster” (1997), all the characters described are female: the mother, the daughter, and the

maiden, who echoes Rumpelstiltskin's figure. Here, the mother is portrayed as someone evil who is always demanding more and more of her daughter, so much so that the daughter claims at one point: "for all her talk, I knew she despised me" (Donoghue 118). Meanwhile, the daughter appears as someone hard-working, as "her face was no fortune, so elbow grease must be her dowry" (117). After her mother's death, she received "twice as many orders" to the point that "flax mounted higher than her head on every side, and sealed off the window" (120-121) so she was forced to find an assistant that would "spin her trouble away" (122). She finally finds a girl, whom she calls "Little Sister" (121) and who agrees "to stay until the room was empty of flax" (122). Whenever the room gets cleared, she offers more and more work to her sister for her to keep on spinning the wheel instead of going away "to the land of her birth" (121). Although at first they cultivate a relationship of sorority or female bonding—they share the house, the money, they call each other sister—the protagonist ends up behaving more like her dead mother than as a sister: she does not even care to ask her "Little Sister" name, implying that she sees her not as one of her own, but as a mere servant.

More significantly, in *Spinning Silver*, the last work published in 2018 by North-American writer Naomi Novik, she introduces the reader into an extensive fantasy novel based on the original short tale of Rumpelstiltskin, including an interesting array of new elements from a feminist stance. For a start, the character of Miryem, the main protagonist, encapsulates both the figure of the miller's daughter and the figure of Rumpelstiltskin himself. Whereas in the original tale the miller's daughter is not able to turn straw into gold and needs the help of Rumpelstiltskin, Miryem has the ability to transform anything she finds useful into gold coins—if only metaphorically at first. Miryem, then, embodies both the character in need of financial help due to the bad management of her father in the business of money lending, and the figure of



Rumpelstiltskin, transforming silver into gold. It is because of this ability that, as in the original tale, she attracts the attention of a king, a fairy creature of winter called the Stryk king. However, Novik's originality lies not only in the transformation of the main protagonist, but also in the presence of two new main female characters, Wanda and Irina, as well as of many different narrative voices, such as those of Wanda's brother Stepon or Irina's nurse Magretta. Henceforth, we do not only find a predominance of female voices, but also an exclusive perspective of the characters who are considered 'good' —or, at least, not so evil— whereas the evil characters —the Stryk king, the tsar and his fire demon, the other villagers, etc— are excluded from having a voice and the right to tell their story from their own point of view. Not coincidentally, endowing these characters with agency and voice can be identified with an increasing tendency in feminist rewritings of fairy tales that aim to offer a female perspective. In her essay "Tale Spinners: Submerged Voices in the Grimms' Fairy Tales", Bottigheimer explains that new generations feel the need to question older texts (141), mainly those in which stereotypical female images of submission and passivity stand alone. In the case of Donoghue and Novik's narratives, it seems evident that "the pattern of silenced and abandoned heroines who are in no position to seek collaborators" (Mendelson 121) is subverted through a new paradigm of active heroines.

## **2. SPINNING TALES AS A FEMALE BONDING ACTIVITY**

Since the 1970s in Germany, fairy tales have been demystified as "tools of socialization" with an important "male bias", especially the Grimms' *Kinderund Hausmärchen* (Haase 10). More interestingly, critics such as Marina Warner (1994) and Ruth Bottigheimer (1982) have insisted on the importance of female oral transmission when it comes to creating new stories with which to nourish the readers' minds and

souls. As Bottigheimer points out, these fairy-tales “assumed to have originated in or to have passed through in many cases the *Spinnstube*, for it was there that women gathered in the evening and told tales to keep themselves and their company awake as they spun” (143). This idea of women spinning different fabrics may work here as a metaphor that echoes the creation of stories woven by their voices and female hands, only knowledgeable to them. The act of spinning mirrors their agency in the creation and transmission of stories. Storytelling, then, in these tales, is more than ever a part of women’s tradition, although fairy and folk tales were mainly penned down by men. In this sense, Jack Zipes’s research on different versions of the Grimms’ tales demonstrated their “editing and appropriation of the oral tradition as part of a much larger social history of the fairy tale” (Haase 10). Even so, Haase discusses that women have managed to use the genre of fairy tales to raise “questions of gender” and design different voices from those written down by men in order to defy what he defines as “the male’s attempt to control female power” (16). In fact, as Xiuxia remarks “the twentieth century saw a boom in the novels of female development by women writers” (4). Similarly, Haase claims that, since Karen E. Rowe’s publication of “Feminism and Fairy Tales” (1979), “both feminism and the study of fairy tales have emerged as growth industries and have become institutionalized” (xiii) and that “Rowe’s claim for the fairy tale as a female art initiated lines of feminist inquiry that would require significant rewriting of the genre’s history” (16-18).

Additionally, Haase stresses the importance of Rowe’s definition of women “not only as storytellers but also represented as the spinners of tales” (16). In fact, as has been mentioned before, these tales were orally transmitted by women, but Bottigheimer pays special attention to the fact that this transmission was carried out in many cases through “the *Spinnstube*” (143), thus establishing an important link between women,

spinning and storytelling as an act of bonding and solidarity. This is something that Rowe also elaborates on, forging a relationship not only between the tale spinners themselves, but also with “a sisterhood of readers” (Haase 16), since these spinners created “a coded text in which the female voice, despite the attempt by men to control it, not only continues to speak but also speaks a secret, subversive language” (16-18). Haase then proceeds to define chronologically women writers: from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century as “spinners of tales” (Rowe 1986), to the 19<sup>th</sup> century female novelists “retailers” of classic fairy-tale narratives they inherited (Huang 1990). Finally, in the late twentieth century, feminist writers were conceived of, not as mere spinners of tales or retailers but, more vigorously, as “thieves of language involved in a conscious feminist project of mythic proportion” (Haase 22).

Considering the ideas exposed above, it is not a coincidence, in my opinion, that both Donoghue’s and Novik’s retellings include the words “spinner” and “spinning” in their titles— “The Tale of the Spinner” and *Spinning Silver*. In the case of Donoghue’s text, this may be more intentional than in Novik’s, due to the fact that *Kissing the Witch* was first published in 1997, soon after the period of “the advent of feminist fairy-tale criticism in 1970” (Haase 22), when the notion of female bonding stroke a chord<sup>1</sup>. In spite of *Spinning Silver*’s recent publication in 2018, the word “spinning” may also be related to the role of storytelling. After all, the very first sentence in the novel is about how “the real story isn’t half as pretty as the one you’ve heard” (1). And more significantly, we are currently living in the era of sorority, where female bonding and

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<sup>1</sup> As a result of the achievements of the second wave of feminism, the late 1980s and 1990s were decisive decades for the development and consolidation of female bonding in the realms of literature and film. Some examples of the sorority boom can be illustrated by works such as Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1985), Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1987), released in cinema in 1991, and films like *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *Boys on the Side* (1995).

camaraderie are more visible than ever, partly due to the influence of social media networks which, very much resembling the old oral tradition, weave written messages and icons for the sake of their own reproduction and sharing.

Focusing on *Spinning Silver*'s main protagonist Miryem and her first utterance, the story of Rumpelstiltskin is actually about “getting out of paying your debts” (Novik 1). This affirmation hides another one which is even more fierce: “you have to be cruel to be a good moneylender” (11). Although Miryem “was ready to be as merciless with her neighbours as they'd been with her father” (11), she ends up feeling sorry for the miller's daughter of the story once she is forced to marry the Staryk king, because, “who would really like it, after all, to be married to a king who'd as cheerfully have cut off your head if you didn't spin his straw into gold?” (99). Yet, as Novik asserts in a recent interview, her intention was to portray a female character who is “allowed to be selfishly angry” because she considers that “it's really important for women to fight against the idea that they're not allowed to want things for themselves” (Jackson 2018). As women, being entitled to want and to wish has been traditionally erased from fairy tales and it is not a coincidence that Novik's depiction of female characters aims at deconstructing such stereotypes.

In addition to the portrayal of strong women, Novik's story is also about her father's family, reflecting twenty-first century feminist debates about intersectionality, a term defined by Kirk and Okazawa-Rey as “an integrative perspective that emphasizes the intersection of several attributes, for example, gender, race, class, and nation” (qtd. in Crosby 5). In the case of Novik, she combines the axes of gender, religion, and class, focusing on how “her father's family were Lithuanian Jews who had to escape persecution —not just from the Nazis, but from their own neighbors” (Jackson 2018). In this respect, it is also relevant to signal that Novik's novel “takes place in a deliberately

unrealistic world — in a fairy tale world” as a way of “getting in touch with her own memory of what she thought her family history was” (Jackson 2018). By telling the story of her father’s family and setting it within the framework of Rumpelstiltskin story, Novik can easily introduce the issue of the Jewish community and anti-Semitism, because “their [Jewish’s and/or Miryem’s family] success makes them a target” (Jackson 2018). In other words, using a main character —Miryem— that is defined by her religious beliefs and her incredible ability with money, would not have had any sense in another story: while the original miller’s daughter in the Grimms’ story is wanted for her presumed talent and the wealth it implies for the king, Miryem and her family are rejected even after she gains her ability with coins by the rest of the villagers, who depict her as “merciless” (11); and even by Irina when they first met, who thinks of her as “only a servant” (114) due to her Jewish origin. However, as Novik explains, “the sense of being under siege” (Jackson 2018) is also present for the characters of Wanda and Irina, bringing into the fore the question of “how do you protect yourself from the forces who are much larger than you?” (Jackson 2018). Importantly enough, Novik’s response lies in creating and expanding female networks of thought and feeling; in “reaching out to people around you and by making connections beyond the barriers” (Jackson 2018) that can foster other ways of being and living in this world. Furthermore, by drawing connections and solidarity within and among women coming from different backgrounds, the novel defies traditional patriarchal obstacles such as father authority, forced marriage, and female poverty, among others. Such rebellious female positions are also conveyed in these narratives by displaying a set of symbolic elements, which contribute to disrupting the binary gender oppositions that name the female as the inferior and weak sex with respect to males. Thus, the next section is devoted to exploring the symbolic meaning of number three, as it significantly pervades

the three texts under analysis while simultaneously highlighting traditional connotations related to male dominance and perfection.

### **3. “THRICE PROVEN, THRICE TRUE”**

Number three has been a symbolic number all throughout history. As Vincent F. Hopper explains, “legends, myths, folk tales of all nations abound in 3 wishes, 3 tries, 3 suitors” (5) probably due to its application to divinities or “godlike attributes”, the most famous one being The Holy Trinity in Christian religion (Gates 314), also known as “the triad of the family; male, female, and child” (Hopper 6), but also present in other different religions and mythologies like Egyptian or Hinduism (Hopper 6; Gates 314). Similarly, number three has also been used to divide time into “beginning, middle, and end” or into “birth, life, and death” (7), an idea that Jung also explores (Gates 314). Hopper concludes, then, that number three includes ““all” (beginning, middle, end), three is best (superlative), and three is holy (triads of gods)” (11), also known as “the first real number” by Pythagoreans (35). Jung develops more in depth the idea of number three as The Trinity, but he questions why is it male-centred, when “the Trinity of Father, Mother, and Holy Child seems a richer and more basic idea than Father, Son and Holy Ghost (Spiritus), all masculine” (Gates 316). In my opinion, this may have to do with the previous statements of number three being a ‘superlative’ and ‘perfect’ number: we live in a patriarchal society, and thus, our symbols, especially those that are the basis for our beliefs, are associated with the leading gender of men, envisioned, like number three, as “masculine, finite, and godlike” (Hopper 42).

As for Rumpelstiltskin’s story, this number is mentioned many times, both in the original tale written by the Grimm Brothers and in the two retellings under analysis. My intention in what follows is to demonstrate how the symbolism of number three, usually associated with perfection and men’s superiority, is defied in the subsequent retellings.

This is carried out by Donoghue and Novik in an attempt to disrupt the apparent perfection of men's dominancy in fairy tales with the emergence of a new spinning of female narratives, that although not always perfect, results in a more realistic representation of characters. In the Grimms' version, this number attests to the times the miller's daughter is asked by the King to "spin straw into gold" (Grimms 236) and therefore, the number of times the Queen-to-be makes a deal with "the manikin" (236): first, she offers him a necklace; second, a ring; and finally, having ran out of material possessions, she promises him her "first child" (237). Moreover, as soon as the creature starts spinning, the narration repeats the action three times: "The little man [...] seated himself in front of the wheel, and "whirr, whirr, whirr," three turns, and the reel was full" (237). When a year later she has given birth, the creature appears to reclaim "what she promised", the baby, but takes pity on her and offers her "three days' time to find out his name" (237). Curiously enough, the first night, the Queen "began with Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar" (239), the Three Wise Men. And when she finally discovers the pixie's name, she plays with the creature at first by saying that his name is Conrad, or maybe Henry, before saying his name, Rumpelstiltskin, in the third attempt (239). From all of these references to number three, it can be inferred that although the Grimms' version of this tale does not identify number three with superiority, it does not associate it either with feminine presence, since the Queen is the only woman present in the whole text, whereas we can find four men: her father, the King, Rumpelstiltskin, and the messenger. Nonetheless, it can be said that three is used to signal the important moments —how many times the Queen is forced to spin, to bargain with Rumpelstiltskin, and the number of nights she is offered by the creature—, that is, it suggests the effort towards perfection, finally achieved in the transformation of the

miller's daughter into Queen, remaining with her baby with no more complications involved.

In Donoghue's version, the first time number three is mentioned refers to "the smashing of the third milk jug" done by the protagonist's mother, who, after that, "resigned herself to sitting all day at the window" (Donoghue 119). Once the mother has died, her spirit is mentioned three times: "whenever I grew drowsy over the wheel, [...] my mother's ghostly croak startled my ear. Whenever I wanted to shut the door and hide away, my mother's foot wedged it open. Whenever I tried to refuse an order, my mother's hand closed around my throat" (120). Nonetheless, this number starts to gain real importance with the appearance of the assistant, who "be she flat-footed from treading, strung-lipped from licking, swollen-thumbed from pressing the thread" — a clear allusion to another Grimms' fairy tale about spinners, "The Three Spinners". By contrast, the assistant is actually described with three different attributes: "small like a robin and slow in the head; sentences seemed too much for her" (121). Very much like in the original fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, the assistant has to spin the flax "until the room was empty" three times (122-124). And whenever the protagonist makes a deal with her, she offers her three things: the first time, "cloth or plate or coin?" (122); the second, "dresses or bracelets or milky pearls?" (122); and the third time, "half her house, half her fortune, the ring off her finger?" (124). However, the helper always asks for one thing that her superior has not mentioned: to eat from the same plate and drink from the cup (122), to "sleep in bed" (122), and in the end, for a "firstborn in her arms" (124). Also remarkable is the fact that every time the so-called "Little Sister" has to start spinning a new load, she does something with one of the body parts that was first mentioned as a possible description of her. First, "she stood on one foot" (121); second, "she chewed her lip" (122); and third, "she bit her thumb" (123). Regarding the



protagonist of Donoghue's tale, she mentions three ways in which work helped her: to keep her "sane and bright-eyed; [...] from dwelling on the past; [...] from remembering that she was a woman" (125). Lastly, she ponders on three possible situations that would make her miserable once again: "bringing me who knew how many hardworking days, who knew which desires, which regrets" (127). Therefore, Donoghue achieves this tradition of female disruption into the fairy tale genre by describing her characters as imperfect: a mother described as a monster that causes psychological distress to her daughter, a careless daughter that mistreats her "Little Sister" after offering her material fortune, and a servant described by her ugliness. Although this approach changes the focus on perfection, it is important to note that the way in which these three women are portrayed as imperfect does not contribute in its whole to the aspect of female bonding.

Finally, in Novik's retelling *Spinning Silver*, number three plays an important role: it is a number associated to the family, to death, to money and greed, and to magic. For a start, number three defines families in terms of three: Miryem's family is composed by herself, her mother and her father —although her grandparents and her cousin-in-law have important roles, they appear transitorily; the principal members of Wanda's family are herself and her two brothers Sergey and Stepon—their mother appears briefly as the personification of a white tree, and their father acts as an obstacle rather than as a member of the family; and Irina is always accompanied by her nurse Magretta and her father, the duke Erdivilas. Yet, the most significant triad of the novel is constituted by the three main female protagonists: Miryem, Wanda, and Irina, along with their three main enemies, all men: the Saryk king, Wanda's father, and Mirnatus (possessed by the devil Chernobog), respectively. Nonetheless, the first instance of number three being mentioned occurs on page 5, when Miryem and her mother are visiting Miryem's grandparents, and her grandmother feeds her vigorously "three times

a day” because she knows that Miryem’s father does not manage money correctly, always returning home “empty-handed” (Novik 7). Therefore, the first explicit reference to number three signals the importance of money, family and the possibility of death, for soon after, Miryem’s mother is “too tired from coughing to get out of bed at all” (8).

This connection of number three with death and money is reiterated by the bargains Miryem performs with the Saryk king. After her first successful bargain, Miryem asks for more time, to which the winter creature responds: “Three days you may have, this time, before I come to have my own back again [...] Thrice, mortal maiden [...] Thrice you shall turn silver to gold for me, or be changed to ice yourself” (78). Under this threat, Miryem accomplishes to turn silver into gold, and it is important to note which quantities she is required to transform: first, “six small silver coins” (56), but later, Miryem needs “to give back sixty” (81), and she assumes that the third time there would be “six hundred pieces” (84) although these are described as “silver enough to make a crown to hold the moon and stars” (105). Although these sums do not include number three, number six is equally regarded as a perfect number “because it is made up of its parts [...]. Its sixth part then is 1, its third part 2, and its half part 3. But 1, 2, and 3 added together make the same number 6” (Dean 509). In fact, it is because of this that its “imperfection as female” due to being “the female marriage number” is overlooked (Hopper 43). In other words, three, six and their derivatives in Novik’s novel point to various important themes of the text: money and marriage being the most relevant ones, but also magic and the subversive introduction of female imperfection within the fairy tale genre.

Therefore, Miryem’s bargains epitomize an important connection between the duality of the masculine and the feminine, for “archetypes need bridges in order to reach consciousness” (Gates 313). Accordingly, she acts as the bridge between both when she

finally marries the Saryk king, representing both female imperfection with her actions of turning silver into gold with these particular quantities, and conventional masculinity with her merciless manner of acting. But this imperfection not only intrudes the narrative of fairy tales, it also interferes the Saryk kingdom, which acts as an extension of the genre. Once she is crowned Saryk queen, she bargains her marriage bed rights for questions to the Saryk king. In particular, she demands for five questions (154)—the other number regarded as a marriage number that is associated to “nature, embracing all living things” (Hopper 43), but the Saryk ends up allowing three questions per night. Likewise, when Miryem asks the Saryk king for permission to attend her cousin Basia’s wedding, it is important to note that she does not only bargain to transform “three storerooms of silver [...] each larger than the last”; but also that Basia “will be married in three day’s time” (Novik 220). Thus, three is once again associated to the notion of marriage, magic and money. Finally, when she accomplishes the task set by the Saryk king—transforming the silver in the three storerooms into gold—she does so by emptying the third one instead of transforming its contents, that is, she was “challenged beyond the bounds of what could be done, and found a path to make it true” (274). In other words, Miryem defies once more the Saryk king, and with him, the male dominance over fairy tales.

As regards Wanda, the mentioning of number three all throughout her narrative is predominantly related to death. The first occurrence of number three in her storyline follows Wanda’s mother death “three days later” (15) after her father manages to obtain some medicine once he has bargained with the town’s moneylender —Miryem’s father. Wanda’s story flourishes by becoming Miryem’s servant, in order to pay off the six kopeks her father borrowed (20). Hence, six once again acts as a bridge, this time connecting two of the three female protagonists, for Wanda regards her servitude as a

gift granted by the spirit of her dead mother (18-19) rather than as a punishment for her father's actions. However, her path shifts dramatically when one night, coming back from Miryem's house, she encounters her father and her neighbour Kajus having "a big jug of krupnik on the table and *three* cups" (128, emphasis added): Wanda discovers that this reunion has been assembled to arrange her marriage with Kajus' son Lukas in exchange of "one jug of krupnik a week" (129). Nonetheless, she categorically refuses, knowing that Kajus wants to take advantage of her work at Miryem's house now that "Miryem was gone" and Miryem's fathers "could not fight Kajus. They could not fight anybody" (129). Furious by his daughter's refusal, Wanda's father decides to attack her, an event that ends with Sergey —Wanda's brother— pulling "the poker away and swung it and hit *him* with it" (132), and thus, with Wanda's astonishing declaration: "Da still didn't move or say anything, and that was how we knew he was dead" (133). Therefore, Wanda's relation to number three, although associated to death, is one that leads to her freedom, a fact reinforced by the letter from the tsar and the tsarina that she receives after the great battle with the Saryk king:

And they are furthermore granted by Our will permission to go into the Great Forest and therein take freehold wherever they so choose, in any untenanted property, and there claim from Our hand title to whatever land they can put into crops, or enclose for herding, in *three years' time*, and they shall have it for themselves and their heirs. (384, emphasis added)

Finally, having defined what number three means for Miryem and Wanda, I will now move on to discussing its meaning in relation to Irina: marriage and magic. Being the daughter of a duke, her main aim in life is to be married and so improve her father's wealth, but Irina's father is always unsatisfied, for Irina has not "become more beautiful, more witty, more charming" (69) and thus, it is difficult to arrange her

marriage, regarded for Irina as the “only escape from a life spent between narrow walls” (69). However, when Miryem bargains with the duke the three objects made out of Saryk silver—the ring, the necklace and the crown—, Irina’s marriage with the tsar Mirnatus becomes imminent under her father’s plan: the first night she “would only wear the ring, tomorrow add the necklace, and the third night the crown” (114). Nonetheless, the tsar, who “was young and handsome and cruel” (69) and also “a sorcerer” like her mother (114), evades the duke’s plans, and seeing that “there is indeed something most unusual” (125) in Irina’s person, he prefers to arrange everything quickly, so that they “were married the morning of the third day of his visit”, with Irina carrying all three magical objects—although Irina remarks that “he would have taken me with nothing at all, but my father was a little thrown off by the ease of his own victory” (135). Once married and alone in one of the rooms in Mirnatus’ castle, Irina looks at herself in the mirror and sees her reflection as she did once in her house: “a queen in a dark forest made of ice”, wondering if she could “run away into the white world in the mirror” (113). This time, Irina crosses the mirror into the Saryk kingdom, only returning to Mirnatus’ castle to verify if she can cross it with one or more of the objects missing:

I took the crown off and put it carefully down on the floor. [...] When I touched the glass, I felt as though I were pushing through heavy curtains, but when I leaned hard into it, at last my hands dipped through, even with only necklace and ring. So the ring and the necklace together were enough. Then I took off the necklace, and tried once more. But this time, my hands stopped at the glass, though I still saw the snow, and felt the cold seeping into the world all round my fingers. [...] I tried them all, and none of them would let me through alone; I needed two together to cross over. (144)

This passage then raises the question of the importance of the three objects, but as Irina has Saryk blood (214), it could be deduced that she only needs the ring and the necklace because her own body is the third object needed to pass through the mirror. This possibility of women crossing mirrors suggests that Novik's text aligns itself with the assumption that when female characters trespass the threshold, that is, the social, psychological and physical confines imposed on to them by patriarchal society, then, there is a sense in which they can achieve and "undertake an independent quest for identity" (Cronan qtd. in Haase 23).

#### **4. A QUEST FOR SORORITY**

According to Gilbert and Gubar, "the mirror was the patriarchal tale itself" (qtd. in Haase 23), and therefore, crossing it is not only a quest for identity, but also one more instance of female presence intruding the world of fairy tales, previously regarded as male and perfect. Additionally, Ronnie Scharfman states that "women's literature uses images of the mirror and reflection to signify female bonding" (qtd. in Xiuxia 16). Thus, Irina crossing the mirror towards the Saryk kingdom establishes a connection with the other two women of the story. Irina first meets Miryem when the latter brings the crown, and when their "eyes met: we didn't speak, but for a moment I felt her a sister, our lives in the hands of others" (108). However, they do not become allies until Miryem sees Irina in the Saryk kingdom "with the familiar crown of silver on her head, the crown that had brought me my own" (210). Irina then explains how she can cross the mirror and tries to take Miryem with her, but it seems that she has been erased from the mortal world by the Saryk king, and thus, they plan to bring him to the other side and kill both the Saryk king and the Chernobog, the demon that rules over Mirnatius (215). On the other hand, Irina's relation of sorority with Wanda is developed through

the letter she commands the tsar Mirnatius to write, in which they grant Wanda and her family “pardoned of any and all crimes of which they stand accused” (384).

Meanwhile, Miryem establishes different relationships of female bonding in various degrees all throughout the narrative, as when she gives a Jewish name, Rebekah, to the daughter of one of her Staryk servants, so that a Staryk man loses his “right to demand my hand [Flek, the servant] in return” (321). Nonetheless, it can be said that the most important relationship of female bonding in Novik’s novel is portrayed by Miryem and Wanda’s bond. In their relationship we can observe a development, departing from the original Rumpelstiltskin story: in the Grimms there was no other female character apart from the Queen; in Donoghue’s version, the servant called “Little Sister” seems to stray away after the mistreatment of the protagonist; but in Novik’s story, Wanda becomes one more of Miryem’s family as the story progresses. As has already been mentioned, Wanda regards her work at Miryem’s house not as a punishment for her father’s debt, but as a gift, for she avoids being sold as a wife and thus “make a row of dead babies and die” (18) like her mother. Moreover, the more time she spends in Miryem’s house, the more she learns. Although at first she thinks that Miryem only sees her “as a horse or an ox, something dull and silent and strong” (26), during the summer Wanda is taught “how to write the numbers with a pen” and “how to *make* them, one new number growing out of two, and how to take one number away from another also” (44). Additionally, Wanda also knows how to read thanks to Miryem’s aid (384). Nonetheless, despite everything she has learned, Wanda stills feels insecure, especially when Miryem’s family and Wanda’s family reach together Miryem’s grandfather’s house. Wanda thinks that she is not wanted there, not only in the sense that she cannot fill Miryem’s place now that she is in the Staryk kingdom, but also because there are servants in the house and thus, “there wasn’t even room here for

me to carry things and bring things” (307). However, Miryem’s mother, Panova Mandelstam, reassures Wanda that she is welcomed within the family and that she would not have to “kept the wolf away” anymore because she and her brothers are safe now (308). This statement is reinforced when the Saryk king is imprisoned during Basia’s wedding:

We looked at Miryem’s family, and they looked at us, and we all got up and Panov Mandelstam put his arm around Sergey’s back, and I put my arm around Panova Mandelstam’s, and we were a circle all together, the six of us: we were a family, and we had kept the wolf away again; for another day we had kept the wolf away. (382-383)

However, Miryem’s conception of family develops at a slower pace. When she decides to free the Saryk king and help him destroy Chernobog, the fire demon, she believes that her father and mother would be safe because they are with Wanda, Sergey and Stepon, but she does not envision them as a single unit (442). Instead, Miryem needs to complete her quest for identity returning to the Saryk kingdom and by defying the fire demon, and it is in her return to the mortal world, after six months in the Saryk kingdom, that she regards Wanda, Sergey and Stepon as part of her family: “my parents, my sister, and my brothers” (464).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this dissertation, it is now possible to state that Novik’s retelling of ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ represents a progression in the history of fairy tales retellings and female spinning of tales by including in such an intricate thread themes that are relevant for feminist discussion. Not only does Novik develop the issue of female bonding with her three female protagonists, she also



portrays them as imperfectly perfect, for they collaborate with one another even though they sometimes doubt about each other's actions. Whereas Donoghue's imperfect protagonists end up as rivals, Novik's characters portray different accounts of female bonding relationships: "mother-daughter relationships, bonds with other female relatives (mainly sisterly bonding), and friendship between women" (Xiuxia 16). As Felski claims, "the recognition of the other woman serves a symbolic function as an affirmation of self, of gendered identity" (qtd in Xiuxia 22). In other words, Wanda's development relies on Miryem and Miryem's mother support; Irina's strength needs of Miryem's aid; and Miryem's freedom is achieved thanks to her alliance with Irina and Wanda. As Xiuxia explains, this could not be possible if their main role in life would have been only as wives or mothers, for those roles "make them depend on men and care about others' interests" and thus "neglect their own interests and cannot exercise control over their own lives" (26). Moreover, Xiuxia notes that "female bonding is jeopardized by the hybrid society in terms of class and racial stratification" because female protagonists "experience displacement and feel split between two worlds" thus leading to a sense of unbelonging and a failed quest for identity (58). This can be seen in Donoghue's "Tale of the Spinner", in which the protagonist and "Little Sister" cannot bond completely because the sister is subjugated to the protagonist by her class position as a 'maid'. Meanwhile, in Novik's text, Wanda becomes an equal to Miryem, for she is granted knowledge by Miryem and the property of lands by Irina. Therefore, Novik's text accomplishes an important lesson for readers: "for women to fight against the idea that they're not allowed to want things for themselves" (Jackson 2018).

Novik's text thus presents an outstanding narrative in which women are allowed to raise their voices instead of satisfying themselves with the imposed patriarchal model. While Miryem intrudes emphatically this model to change it from within thanks

to her ability with money, Wanda and Irina follow her in a more subtle way that progressively becomes more and more enthusiastic: Wanda learns how to read and write, and helps to kill her own father, who represents her main obstacle to achieve freedom from the patriarchal constraints, whereas Irina embraces her ugliness and becomes a powerful tsarina with the power of her words as a source of power not only to banish the demon Chernobog but also to help her own people in her new reign. The three women succeed, therefore, in becoming new models of women: they intrude the male world and abandon the female characteristics that were imposed upon them as constraining features; but they do not adopt the negative characteristics of patriarchal power. Instead, they become a hybrid of both feminine and masculine, perfect and imperfect characteristics that, reported in a fantasy novel, will surely leave an important message on younger generations coming in contact with feminist debates on beauty standards, sexual independence, social mobility, and justice for harassment among others: that women must raise their voices to achieve their freedom.

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