

## Piratical Pleasures: Female Dominance and Children's Literature as Romance in ABC's *Once Upon a Time*

Sunnie Rothenburger

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**Abstract:** ABC's *Once Upon a Time* combines children's literature with popular romance in a way that opens up some of the conventions of the latter, depicting sadistic and dominating aspects of female desire. The protagonist, Emma Swan, is in many ways both child and adult; in her sexual attraction to Captain Hook she is subversively “queer” and a “lost girl,” less the inexperienced heroine of conventional romance than an aggressive princess who loves to tie up and torment her pirate. The series invites a re-consideration of childhood narratives' contributions to discourses of sexuality, and of how gender might be re-conceived when the demarcation between an individual's childhood and adulthood is troubled.[1]

**About the Author:** Sunnie Rothenburger is a manuscript editor and grant writing consultant in Kitchener, Ontario. She holds a PhD in English from Dalhousie University, and has taught literature and writing courses for the University of Guelph, Laurentian University, and Thompson Rivers University. Her published research includes analyses of the romance plot in both nineteenth-century and contemporary literature, as well as investigations into the gothic, children's culture, and representations of Canadian history.

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In an early episode of ABC's *Once Upon a Time*,[2] Snow White, Cinderella, and Red Riding Hood walk into a bar. Red is on the make, Cinderella is annoyed because her boyfriend has to work the late shift on Valentine's Day, and Snow is angst-ridden over her ongoing affair with a married Prince Charming and her one-night stand with Dr. Frankenstein.

As actor Robert Carlyle observes in his commentary on the scene, it seems like the set-up for a joke. However, it also demonstrates how the series places well-known fictional characters in a non-fictional world and thus deliberately intersects the perils and pleasures of adult eroticism with the idealized happy endings of tales for children. These contrasts

perhaps come across most clearly through the experiences of the protagonist, Emma Swan, the child of Snow White and Prince Charming. Early in the series, Emma must defeat the Evil Queen, who has cursed the inhabitants of the Enchanted Forest—the realm where fairy tale characters live—and trapped them in a small town in Maine, where for twenty-eight years they had no memory of their true identities and did not age. Emma, sent through a portal to our world as an infant, only learns of her true parentage when she is an adult. Towards the end of the first season, she fulfills her role as “the saviour” and breaks the curse. She must then learn both to be a daughter to the parents who gave her up and are in fact now her own age, and a mother to the son, Henry, that she gave up for adoption. Just as Emma is sorting through some of these conflicts, she meets Captain Hook, a version of J.M. Barrie’s pirate that exchanges the latter’s “blackavised” countenance and Charles II style for heavy eye liner and a calf-length leather jacket. He is a man who invokes both Emma’s lust and her need for physical and emotional control. As Emma struggles with the difficulties of past and present, *Once Upon a Time* moves between fantastic and realistic worlds, using well-known narratives for and about children to innovate within the conventions of the adult popular romance. In doing so, the show presents a queering of female heterosexuality, in that Emma’s narrative not only troubles the traditional timeline of love, marriage, and reproduction, but her desire for Hook also involves an unusual amount of aggression and even violence at times.

The show participates in the tradition of television serial drama, and this affects its position on romance, as I will touch on later, but my main interest in this article is the series’ provocative combination of literary genres. The pairing of children’s fiction and popular romance in *OuTa* makes sense in some ways, given that these two genres have shared origins: both are connected to early versions of fairy tales and to medieval romances. Indeed, the fairy tale, still often positioned as a genre for children, frequently ends with the heterosexual union of adults—the “happily ever after.” The fantasy sub-genre of the popular romance frequently involves the discovery of the supernatural, either in this world or by travel to another realm, which is a common motif in children’s literature. Accordingly, much of Emma’s story arc in *Once Upon a Time* focuses on her skepticism about both magic and love. In the pilot, Prince Charming’s highly romantic waking of Snow White in the Enchanted Forest contrasts with viewers’ introduction to Emma in Boston: she’s a bail bondsperson under cover trying to catch a perpetrator who ran out on his wife. Thus, from the beginning, *Once Upon a Time* offers an acknowledgement of the differences that can yawn between the narratives one might have been told as a child about love and marriage and the actual experience of many adults. This is no doubt a strategic move on the part of the show’s creators and writers. Sarah Frantz and Eric Selinger suggest in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction* that one of the pleasures of this genre can be its inclusion of cynicism alongside its depictions of love (1). Similarly, *Once Upon a Time* eventually explores the possibility of romance in *this* world for Emma, albeit a rather complicated version.

As I will show, the series presents Emma’s chances at love and the nature of her desire as profoundly influenced by her own childhood and how she characterizes and constructs it, a focus on the past that is enabled by the series’ key genres. *Once Upon a Time* seems to draw, at least indirectly, upon a history of interpretation that examines both children’s fiction and the romance through psychoanalysis, a methodology that emphasizes the formative experiences of childhood in relation to desire. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses*

of *Enchantment*, argues for the fairy tale as fundamental to the child's working through of psychological conflicts. Jacqueline Rose both reviews and revises the relationship between children's literature and psychoanalysis in *The Case of Peter Pan*, describing children's fiction as an anxious attempt on the part of adults to obfuscate the unstable nature of sexuality, identity, and language. In many narratives for children, Rose argues, childhood signifies a finite process, "at the end of which stands the cohered and rational consciousness of the adult mind" (13). Rose and Bettelheim are two of the giants in the field, but their work, and other interactions between psychoanalysis and children's literature, have, of course, been developed and explored by many, as in recent works by Karen Coats and Kenneth Kidd, and in the 2010 issue of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* devoted to Rose's text.

Psychoanalysis has also frequently served as the framework for studies of romance. In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski notes that romances have often been read through a Freudian lens as staging the heroine's maturation, although Modleski revises such readings to include the heroine's (and the reader's) desire for vengeance against men's cruelty (36-39). Jessica Benjamin argues that the heroes of popular romances embody the ideal mother as well as the father in providing both nurturing and excitement (*Bonds* 120), and Janice Radway posits that "the heroine's often expressed desire to be the hero's formally recognized wife in fact camouflages an equally insistent wish to be his child" (*Reading* 145). *Once Upon a Time*, arising out of two genres whose readings have been so frequently enmeshed with psychoanalysis, stresses the importance of children's relationships to adults, including to the adults that they will become and the desires they will possess. The "once upon a time" of the series' title refers to narratives *about* children as well as narratives *for* them; that is, to childhood itself as a narrative created after one's "maturation," however this might be defined.

If the romantic heroine is a child, though, (at least before the story's end), might she be a queer child? In *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley point out that in cultural narratives about the child, there is a simultaneous repression of sexuality to preserve childhood innocence and an assumption that heterosexuality is childhood's desired end (ix). Bruhm and Hurley add, though, that because children are figured as still learning, they are sometimes allowed to express with impunity desires that adults might deem "queer" in the broadest sense of the term (xiv; xviii-xix). Similarly, Gabrielle Owen draws on Rose's theories that the child is "impossible" in order to draw connections between the categories of "child" and "queer". Both, Owen argues, are in excess of perceived boundaries of gender and desire, outside "the normative sequence of heterosexual romance, marriage, and reproduction" (259). One might make a similar argument about heroines of romances: on their way to love, they frequently engage in non-normative behaviours—cross-dressing, for example, is a common motif.[3] More broadly, Modleski sees in the heroine's anger at the hero "as much a protest as an endorsement of the feminine condition" (49). Indeed, many critics have argued for the genre's feminist potential.[4]

If popular romances already contain at least the potential to queer aspects of heterosexuality, even while they might in the end reinforce heterosexuality itself, *Once Upon a Time* demonstrates how combining children's literature with aspects of popular romance might push this queering even further. The series, unfortunately, has provided little direct exploration of homoerotic desire—its storyline of Mulan's love for Aurora is cut

off almost as soon as it is begun. However, I read other aspects of the series as exemplifying wider definitions of “queer” as counter to conservative norms of sexuality. Calvin Thomas, in *Straight with a Twist*, draws on Judith Butler to suggest that, if heteronormativity depends upon its own reiterated ideals and its constant disavowal of what it deems queer, then “radical heterosexuality or self-conscious straightness” could work to point out the contingency of such constructions and challenge them (31). In Catherine A.F. McGillivray’s conversation with Thomas in the same anthology, she suggests that if “the quintessential heterosexual act is coitus for the sake of procreation,” then “anything that is not that would be a queering of heterosexual practice” (270). Alexander Doty uses a similarly broad definition in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, asserting that “queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories” (xvii). Indeed, as Doty points out, categories of gay or straight no longer function when the object of desire embodies an unclassifiable gender (xvi). It is through such perspectives that I locate the queer in *Once Upon a Time*, because the dynamic between Emma and Hook and its aspects of sexual sadism, as well as each character’s own unconventional expressions of gender throughout the series, move some way towards queering traditional sexualities and identities.

As I have suggested, this queering arises in part from the series’ representations of childhood. If children are expected and impelled by many adults to grow up into reproductive heterosexuality, as Katherine Bond Stockton suggests (13), then Emma’s narrative skews this timeline, and opens up space for Emma’s “sideways growth,” to employ Stockton’s term “to refer to something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive” (13). While a major focus for Stockton is “the proto-gay child,” her notion of sideways growth is nevertheless useful for considering Emma’s narrative. Emma is not just concerned with the past, but still in it, positioned as childlike by some definitions. The show’s structure moves back and forth, out of order, between Emma’s infancy, adulthood, and teenagehood; it thus underscores the present effects of past events and the way that the past is constructed in the present. As Rose insists, despite adult attempts to cordon it off as a separate time, “childhood persists” (12). The particulars of Emma’s story also trouble the traditional heterosexual timeline: she has a child when she is only eighteen, while unmarried and in jail, and she does not begin to actively parent Henry until ten years later, and then without any of the enthusiasm stereotypically imbued to new mothers. Similarly, Emma has to learn to become a daughter when she is twenty-eight, and must figure out how to depend on others after having already established her independence.

Moreover, Emma troubles the impetus towards reproductive heterosexuality by pursuing non-reproductive pleasures while resisting normative heterosexual romance and its gender roles. While I have described Emma as childlike, she is hardly the young, inexperienced heroine that Modleski finds in her examples and that persists in some romances today. Emma is an ex-con, a bail bond agent, and later a sheriff. She is also strong, smart, and somewhat sadistic. Indeed, Emma’s behaviour hints at or embodies a variety of practices and desires that might fall under the term BDSM, an acronym that encompasses bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism. The series avoids explicit depictions of sexuality (not surprising, given its primetime slot on network television), but Emma seems to relish exercising power over her love interest, literally as

well as figuratively restraining him, and causing him pain in a way that, at least some of the time, pleases him as well as her.

In part, Emma's characterization rises out of the show's engagement with some of those narratives for and about children that trouble heteronormativity and gender stereotypes. Generally speaking, Emma's characterization (and the characterization of many of the other women in the series) challenges the portrayal of naïve girls one sees in some of Charles Perrault's well-known fairy tales, or in early Disney films such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. It hearkens instead towards some of the more gruesome Red Riding Hood stories or the tales collected in the "Girls with Gumption" section of Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek's *Folk and Fairy Tales*. My focus here, though, will be on *Ouat*'s indirect use of psychoanalytic ideas about the child, and its revising of Barrie's Peter Pan narratives[5] in its portrayals of Emma and Hook. In the series, to be childlike can call up associations with innocence *and* aggression, asexuality *and* sexuality, a combination that revises some of romance's conventions and invites a reconsideration of the relationship between women, violence, and eroticism.

## I. The Romance and Female Sadism

The most significant way that we see Emma's heterosexual "queerness" is through her interactions with Captain Hook. While he has not been her sole love interest on the show, he is the only one, so far, not to have been killed off, and he seems to have spent more time by her side than anyone else. In some ways, their pairing is typical of romance: the beautiful, blonde princess and the roguish but handsome pirate. Hook exemplifies the hero that Modleski describes: attractive and cruel, seductive and violent—often simultaneously. He spends much of his time in his early episodes making innuendos towards almost all of the female characters—including Emma's mother, step-grandmother, and step- great-grandmother—while pursuing his plans for revenge and monetary gain. His speech mocks courtly love, pronouncing "milady" and "as you wish" with ironic condescension ("Tallahassee"; "Good Form"), and he describes himself as a "dashing rapsallion" and "devilishly handsome," arrogantly invoking the prose style of some romantic fiction ("Snow Drifts"; "No Place Like Home"). Moreover, he clearly takes particular pleasure in baiting Emma. During a swordfight with her, he pins her on her back and tells her she should just give up, advising her suggestively, "when I jab you with my 'sword,' you'll feel it" ("Queen of Hearts").

In Modleski's analysis, the powerful hero is eventually brought to his knees and made to suffer through his intense love for the heroine, payback for his early demeaning treatment of her (37). Similarly, Hook experiences a change of heart at the end of the second season and helps Emma save her son. He later professes his love for her, although she refuses to speak her own feelings until much later in the series. What is unusual about their interactions, though, is the way Hook is made to *physically* suffer. When they first meet, Emma ties him to a tree, rightly suspicious that he is lying about who he is. She handcuffs him on three other occasions, twice knocks him unconscious, and locks him in a storage closet. Moreover, after their first kiss she demands that he not follow her as she walks away, and orders him to get firewood instead ("Good Form"). She responds to their

second kiss (when she's under an amnesia spell) by kneeling him in the groin ("Going Home").

In some ways, the series justifies Emma's violence through the fact that Hook is initially a threat to Emma's family and friends: he is so intent on gaining his revenge on Rumplestiltskin for murdering Milah, Hook's lover, that he will manipulate or hurt anyone who gets in his way. Emma's treatment of him, then, seems at times less sadistic than ethical: that is, the show draws on traditional notions of women's desire to protect children and community in order to validate Emma's acts of violence. It is a pattern that Dawn Heinecken notices is common in programs about female action heroes, such as *La Femme Nikita* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

However, *Once Upon a Time* also suggests the *pleasure* women might experience in overcoming resistance, in bringing a man literally, as well as figuratively, to his knees. Emma is reticent to verbally express sexual and romantic desire, but an important aspect of her relationship with Hook from the beginning is his ability to identify the eroticism of her aggressive reactions—indeed, to deliberately invite them. He seems to describe correctly Emma's acts of bondage and brutality as erotic, but even without his explicit "reading" of the situation, both characters' body language points to a mutual attraction and enjoyment of Hook's physical vulnerability. In "In the Name of the Brother," Hook wakes up in the hospital, having been hit by a car after shooting and injuring Belle. Hook's hand is cuffed to the bedrail and Emma is looking down at him. When he suggests that Emma is turned on by his restraint, Emma answers with a smile. Later in the same scene, when she says, "You have all sorts of sore places I can make you hurt," Hook grins, and Emma punches his torso before returning his smile. He flinches in pain and answers her question about Cora's whereabouts, but then goes on to remind her with a glance towards his groin that, while his ribs are broken, "everything else is still intact." Admittedly, there are aspects of the scene that point to Emma's genuine annoyance with Hook's criminal behavior, not just her pleasure in tormenting him, but the violent physicality of their sexuality and Emma's dominance over him is developed elsewhere in the series. Their first kiss takes place at Hook's verbal invitation, but it is Emma who suddenly grabs his collar and aggressively yanks him towards her. Even once their relationship is more established, as in the fourth season finale, we see her push him backwards onto her bed and pin his wrists to the mattress while she kisses him. Modleski's revenge fantasy becomes carnal, shifting the emphasis from revenge to sexual pleasure, with the heroine indulging in, rather than abdicating, her aggression and pride in the name of eroticism. Thus, the show engages with female heterosexual sadism, a fantasy that Carol Siegel terms "The Final Feminist Taboo".

Although much early criticism on popular romance reads the heroine as implicitly submissive—a characterization perhaps underscored recently by the success of E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*—some critics have emphasized those moments in popular romance texts that explore a woman's direct joy in domination. Carol Thurston, writing in 1987, argues that romances of the time include more scenes where power between the hero and heroine is balanced, or even where the heroine is the sexual aggressor (144-45). More recently, Frantz argues that romances demonstrate an attempt by women to claim patriarchal power for themselves: when the author provides the hero's point of view, readers can witness the hero's education in the importance and authority of women ("Expressing" 23). Such a process appears to pre-date e-books and paperback romances by quite a bit: in *Male Masochism*, Siegel argues that nineteenth-century female authors

appropriated courtly love's narrative of the male humbled in love in order to emphasize female power and depict the education of the hero at the heroine's hands (12-13), so that in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Darcy can tell Elizabeth, "By you, I was properly humbled" (qtd. Siegel 116). However, *Once Upon a Time* moves further than these critics' example texts: Emma's desire is not only to maintain her own independence or have a relationship where she is an equal partner, but to control and master Hook. She claims a power that is muscular, physically subduing and restraining the hero alongside her emotional and mental maneuvers to dominate.

Obviously, the series is not the first depiction of a dominant, violent woman in popular culture, but many such women are in fact objectified as male masochistic fantasy, as Heineken (28, 38) and Siegel (*Male* 11) both point out. As a television serial, *Once Upon a Time* might be viewed as drawing on that genre's potential for active female *subjects* instead. The appeal and potentially subversive nature of the controlling, sexually desiring woman in serial dramas has been analyzed by both Modleski and John Fiske. However, while dominant women such as Kate Roberts on *Days of Our Lives* or Alexis Carrington on *Dynasty* manipulate men and seize control over events, such women are, by definition, villains. This does not necessarily compromise their potential to destabilize gender ideologies—Fiske points out that viewers envy such characters' power over men (188) and Modleski observes that the villains suffer no more than the heroes do (90). Such characters, though, have more in common with Regina on *OuAT* than with Emma. Regina curses a whole realm because she is mad at her stepdaughter, and she magically controls the Huntsman to keep him as her sex slave. This is less unexpected than having Emma—the series' heroine and the woman who is often described as the "product of true love"—enjoy sadistic play with an attractive leather-clad hero who wants to be tortured.

Emma might seem to share more with a character like Buffy Summers in Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *OuAT* seems to owe much to *Buffy*, especially in its warrior woman protagonist and the conflation of fantasy and real worlds, [6] but in *Buffy* BDSM is villainized, even though Buffy is not. As Siegel observes, Buffy views her BDSM relationship with Spike as monstrous, a response to the pain of her death and subsequent resurrection, and she eventually ends it ("Female" 58-62). *OuAT* also leans towards pathologizing, but it complicates this process, as I will show later. Emma could instead be viewed as having more in common with the dominant heroines of some BDSM romance novels, such as those that Frantz discusses in her essay on Joey W. Hill's fiction, but these novels are part of a somewhat specialized and sexually explicit, although no less important, genre. What is especially interesting about *Once Upon a Time* is that aspects of BDSM are hinted at in a production based on narratives for children, airing on Disney-owned ABC, which is widely watched.[7]

Siegel notices that the aggressive and violent aspects of sexuality are often still considered taboo for women. She laments, "I remain deeply disappointed that we [feminists] continue to pathologize certain sexualities, and specifically that female domination of men undertaken for mutual sexual pleasure, rather than to make money or get revenge, still remains outside the pale of feminism" ("Female" 57). Similarly, Clare Whatling points out that "[h]egemonic feminist thought has tended to theorize violence as the prerogative of men and as the abuse of women," which "closes off important avenues of exploration" (420-21). She goes on to cite Marion Bower, who indicates that some feminists are perhaps more comfortable with the "illusion of innocence" rather than with more

complex views of women and violence (qtd. 421). Whatling's analysis goes some way towards explaining why there is relatively little written on female sadism in relation to men—in popular romance criticism and elsewhere—compared to the extensive theorizing about female masochism (as subversive or not), male sadism, and male masochism: for some feminists, violence may feel like a patriarchal move.

In *Once Upon a Time*, though, one can see more complex explorations of female sadism and domination and the method and effects of representations of this kind of pleasure for women. In the series, the popular romance hero's emotional suffering grows into a more explicit masochism at the hands of a sadistic heroine, a move furthered in part by the series' engagement with Freudian narratives about the child and its rewriting of Barrie's Peter Pan narratives.

## II. Parents, Pirates, and *Peter Pan*

If *Once Upon a Time* constructs Emma as figuratively stalled in time, then perhaps her violent sexuality arises from the series' interactions with constructions of a more aggressive childhood, of the kind that Caitlin Fisher notices in her essay on her own pre-adolescent girlhood: "the girls are smarter and bigger and choose gangs and friends first and grab boys and kiss them and keep them corralled for the whole of recess. [...] we press our girl bodies against them and our tongues into them" (60-61). While feminism may have often glossed over adult female violence, the same is true, Fisher notes, of girl violence and its consequences. One of the things, then, that makes Emma and Hook's relationship intriguing is that it introduces another possibility into the gender dynamics of J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan texts. Emma is neither Wendy nor Peter: we know how lost boys and "good" girls respond to Hook, but to ask what a "lost girl" might do with Hook is to open up a new set of possibilities for thinking about gender as well as the representations of the interactions between adults and children.

At the same time, Emma's brutal treatment of the man who arouses her is very much rooted in Barrie's narratives. Barrie's Hook, traditionally portrayed in stage productions by the same actor who portrays Mr. Darling, is often read through psychoanalytic theory as a father figure—a selfish and oppressive embodiment of adulthood, with whom Pan, the spirit of childhood, does battle, effectively enacting the Darling children's own latent resentment of their father (Tucker 359-61). In *Once Upon a Time*, while Hook is physically younger than Barrie's version, something of the "bad daddy" persists. In the third season, he is allied at times with Emma's father; in fact, the relationships parallel each other—Hook begins to gain Emma's trust as he gains Charming's, and Emma and Hook kiss for the first time after Hook has saved Charming's life ("Good Form"). The slippage between lover and parent is facilitated by the fact that, due to the Queen's curse and Hook's time in Neverland, Emma's father is in appearance about the same age as Emma and Hook.

Interestingly, Hook might also be read as a mother figure. Barrie's original conception was to have the actor portraying Mrs. Darling play Hook, and one of the early draft titles for the play was *The Boy Who Hated Mothers* (Birkin viii).[8] In *Once Upon a Time*, one can see Hook embodying the pattern Benjamin and Radway notice in popular romance of the hero representing the mother, although in this case he is not idealized as

such, at least not at first. Hook's condescending treatment of Emma has something annoyingly parental about it: in "Tallahassee," when she gives him her wrist so he can snap on a magical cuff, he pats her approvingly and says, "That's a good girl." Moreover, his bandaging of her injured hand and his using his hook to push her hair off her face in the same episode blurs the line between seduction and nurturance.

Thus, instead of Pan engaging the parents through Hook, Emma does. There is evidence that her treatment of Hook results from her anger at Snow and Charming, even as she also sees in them the family she has always wanted. *Once Upon a Time* revises the passive aggression that Modleski sees in the romance, drawing on a more extreme version of the Freudian child. Stockton notices, "From wanting the mother to have its child, to wanting to have its father's baby, to wanting to kill its rival lover, the Freudian child (the child penned by Freud) looks remarkably, threateningly precocious: sexual and aggressive" (26). The Freudian child, so deeply associated in literary criticism with fairy tales and Barrie's work, appears to have influenced Emma's characterization in her need to restrain and hurt Hook. In "Lost Girl," Emma, at Pan's manipulation, must state who she really is. She struggles with the question, but the answer comes when she labels herself an orphan and narrates her childhood as marked by neglect. In Neverland, she states that she feels as though she is still that same "lost little girl." Although her parents sent her away in order to save her, Emma is nevertheless wounded, like Barrie's Pan, by her parents' abandonment. She resists depending on them, and even overtly blames them for the events that led to Henry's kidnapping and Neil's death, and for the faith and optimism that she feels has gotten them nowhere ("The Heart of the Truest Believer").

Also like Barrie's Pan, Emma rebels against "growing up" as defined by conventional heterosexuality. Emma moves towards parenthood, taking responsibility for Henry, but she actively resists normative romance as a threat to her independence. In "Good Form," after she describes feeling hopeless as a child, Hook tries to tell her that he understands the feeling, having been through a similar experience himself. She tells him to quit trying to "bond" with her because she is not "in the mood." Similarly, in the finale of the third season, she breaks out of Regina's prison without Hook's help and tells him, "the only one who saves me, is me." Unlike Barrie's Pan, who is simply clueless about what Tiger Lily, Tinkerbell, and Wendy want from him (Barrie 162), Emma *knows* heterosexuality and has been hurt by it before, when she was sent to prison by Henry's father, Neil. The fact that Neil, like Emma's parents, was acting for her own good only further points to Emma's lack of control over her early life. Set against Snow and Charming's idealized story of true love, Emma's interactions with Hook manifest a struggle to maintain power, a response to a past—a past that persists—in which Emma felt/feels helpless and rejected.

In this way, the series engages with some of the discourse surrounding BDSM as having the potential to heal. As Dossie Easton explains of BDSM, "We get to rewrite the script, which also means we get to rewrite the ending. These scripts often start out looking like trauma and end up somewhere else, in sex, in love, in comfort, in orgasm" (224). Similarly, Emma's exertion of power over Hook seems to be presented as her own rewriting of her status as helpless child. For example, the series emphasizes the potential perils of love and sexuality for Emma in "The Jolly Roger" when Hook is cursed by Zelena: if he kisses Emma again, it will sap her burgeoning magical powers. When Emma finds out, she is angry at Hook for not telling her sooner, for making a decision about Henry without consulting her, and for trying to convince her to stay in Storybrooke rather than going back

to New York. Her independence threatened, Emma taunts the wicked witch in Hook's presence: "try enchanting the lips of someone I'll actually kiss" ("Kansas"). Moments later, when Zelena tries to drown Hook, Emma uses CPR to revive him. In a scene that borders on necrophilia, she leans over his beautiful unconscious body and presses her mouth against his lips. The dynamic between Hook and Emma, with Emma maintaining physical as well as emotional control—here because he could not be more passive, given his unconscious state—allows her a kind of "safe" erotic move by mitigating vulnerability, reversing the neglect she felt as a child. The scene also revises conventional romance: she, rather than he, is the emotionally distant, physically powerful figure who appears disdainful, but who really loves and risks everything to rescue the romantic partner.

This inversion of gender roles is partly enabled by the characterization of Hook, with its connections to Barrie's pirate specifically and the literary pirate more generally. The reputation of the pirate for being counter-cultural opens up space for Hook in *Once Upon a Time* to be a different kind of romantic hero than convention might dictate, one embodying the variety of dynamics that can exist between men and women. The literary pirate, as Hans Turley discusses in *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*, is a figure whose placement outside the law is often used to hint at transgression in relation to gender and sexuality (2-3). From the time of Byron's *The Corsair* and, later, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, the pirate has been a common figure in popular romance[9] and children's literature, perhaps because the pirate's life beyond conventional morality and law gives him an escapist appeal for readers who may feel they are on the outskirts of power.

Hook's outside status socially has its corollary in his "queer" expression of gender and masochistic sexuality, characteristics that perhaps make him attracted and attractive to Emma, easing the expression of her own unconventional sexuality. Deborah Lutz argues that part of the literary pirate's appeal is his inscrutability, what she calls the "buried treasure" of his inner life (34), his performance of "a kind of seductive striptease of subjectivity" (33) for the one woman he chooses to love. Lutz's phrasing here, despite her arguments elsewhere about the pirate's masculinity and sadism, suggests that the pirate's female lover penetrates his initial resistance to her scrutiny. In the same way, Emma refuses to fall for Hook's innuendo and bravado and he eventually responds by addressing her more honestly, revealing the traumas of his own past and attempting to understand hers. Hook makes the complicating of masculinity even more explicit than that of the conventional romantic pirate in that he challenges what MacGillivray identifies as "one of the cornerstones—if not the very foundation—for current constructions of masculinity in our culture": that of physical penetrability (Thomas and MacGillivray 263). During Emma and Hook's swordfight, Emma lands on her back with her weapon sticking straight up into the air; he leans over her and slides the curved hollow of his hook down her blade ("Queen of Hearts"). While he speaks of penetrating her, as I pointed out earlier, the visuals in fact suggest an inversion of sexual imagery, with him being penetrated by or enveloping her instead. This imagery is made literal in season four, when Rumpelstiltskin magically removes Hook's heart in order to control him, and Emma must return it to his chest. Waiting for her to do it, Hook tells her, "Just be gentle," and then grunts in pain and surprise as she rapidly plunges her fist into his body. The eroticism of the scene is amplified by him kissing her with fervor immediately after the penetration.

Such troubling of the traditional masculine-feminine imagery might owe something to Barrie's specific rewriting of the romantic pirate, as I already hinted at in relation to

Hook as a mother figure. In *Peter and Wendy*, Captain Hook embodies a non-normative gender: “in his dark nature there was a touch of the feminine, as in all the great pirates” (147-8). Marjorie Garber notices, “the stage pirates of *Peter Pan*, or at least the ornately got-up Captain Hook, could be seen as verging on the edge of drag” (180-81), and Jill P. May argues, “Hook’s ruthlessness is softened because he is afraid of his own blood, imitates the fancy costumes of Charles II, and is so concerned with having ‘good form’” (73). Indeed, Hook’s preoccupation with good form leads to fits of self-torment, described as “a claw within him sharper than the iron one” (Barrie 189). Similar to Barrie’s pirate, *OuAT*’s Hook attires himself in plunging v-neck blouses and ample jewelry, the only male on the show to do so, and is sometimes the object of other characters’ jokes for his heavy eye make-up. He torments himself as well—in his case over the death of Milah—dedicating his life to revenge and twice asking Rumplestiltskin to kill him so that he can be with her again (“The Outsider”; “In the Name of the Brother”). However, Hook also seeks a different kind of pain. When Charming interrogates him about Cora’s whereabouts in “Tiny,” Hook suggests, with a lascivious glance at Snow, “have your lovely wife torture it out of me, which I promise would be fun for both of us.”

In fact, *OuAT*’s Hook seems to be constantly victimized, whether he wants it or not, and not just by Emma. Rumplestiltskin chops Hook’s hand off (“The Crocodile”) and later rips out his heart in order to magically control him (“Smash the Mirror, Part 1”); Cora restrains him against a wall and threatens to kill him with his own hook (“Into the Deep”); Tinkerbell and Ariel each hold a knife to his throat (“Going Home”; “The Jolly Roger”); Tamara gags and binds him in the back of a van (“Lacey”); and Zelena has him kidnapped and stuffed in the trunk of a car, then taunts him about his “pretty lips” and tosses a red rose on top of his bound body (“A Curious Thing”).<sup>[10]</sup> Hook even punches his own younger self in the face for kissing Emma when he and Emma travel back in time (“Snow Drifts”), and in the winter finale of the fifth season, he convinces Emma to plunge a sword into him as the only way to break a spell that has brought all the “dark ones” from the past to Storybrooke. Hook’s physical punishment often seems disproportionate to the amount he dishes out, as well as to that received by the hero of conventional romance and characters such as Charming or Neil. Some of these incidents border on comedy, mimicking the humour in Barrie’s texts of Hook’s suffering at Pan’s hands, but they possess a deeper significance, too. Jenny Alexander notices that male vulnerability is often contained in sci-fi and fantasy in certain ways, “located in ‘nerdy’ male characters” or “reserved for times of extreme danger” (129). In much slash fan fiction based in these genres, she argues, this is challenged: the wounded male body is set up as the object of desire. Something similar happens in *Once Upon a Time*, perhaps because the series, like fan fiction, queers dominant genres. Hook is an attractive character, and certainly capable of “masculine” heroics, but he is also frequently made physically vulnerable, and this contributes to, rather than works against, his status as a potential object of desire for both Emma and viewers.

### III. Hook and I? Childish Adults, Sexuality, Identity

Of course, the rewriting of Captain Hook is only one aspect of the show’s engagement with children’s literature to explore themes usually aimed at adult audiences. The series generally is part of a larger pattern in contemporary culture of an almost

obsessive adult interest in the narratives of childhood and an interrogation as well as repetition of some of these narratives' gender roles and character types.[11] *Once Upon a Time* emphasizes and pushes further the sexuality and violence of many of the characters of fairy tales and children's literature: Little Red Riding Hood is the wolf, who accidentally killed her first boyfriend and now seems to have multiple lovers; Regina's wickedness has its roots in her teenage love for a stable boy, who was murdered by Regina's own mother; and the love between Snow and Charming begins when she steals from him, and he pursues her and ensnares her in a net. The emphasis on power differentials in such dynamics and plots is underlined by the costumes on the series—a lot of tight black leather and knee high boots—which certainly evoke the dress of some forms of BDSM role play. In fact, the fairy tale and other kinds of children's fiction appear to be fertile ground for BDSM fantasy, given the former's frequent depiction of power structures—queen and servant, adult and child, jailer and prisoner, human and animal, princess and pirate, and so on—a fact that has been explored explicitly by Anne Rice in *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty* and Nancy Madore in *Enchanted: Erotic Bedtime Stories for Women*, among others. As Whatling argues, BDSM "is likely to play into, as well as out of, the dominant structures of the society in which it is practised" (418). *Once Upon a Time*, in a similar move, repeats and revises the narratives of well-known children's fiction, making, as we have seen, the defeat of Captain Hook by Pan and the Lost Boys into the Captain's erotic submission to a "lost girl."

I am curious about adults' motivations in investigating children's literature, and their desire to highlight or recover such literature's erotic potential. Ann Barr Snitow, in an essay on popular romance fiction as pornography, quotes Harlequin's director of publishing, who advises romance authors, "The fantasy must have the same appeal that all of us discovered when we were first exposed to fairy tales as children" (qtd. 252). Is Rose correct, then, in thinking that narratives for children never really belonged to childhood, and that they have always been marked by the adult's construction and invasion of the child's world? Who "exposes" children to fairy tales except adults? In light of Rose's argument, it is perhaps significant that Emma and Hook kiss for the first time while they are in Neverland—Barrie's world of child's play, itself a satirical representation of the adult world, becomes the world of adult "play," where past pain and current eroticism are sadomasochistically explored, a different kind of mirror of the "real" world. The adult creates children's literature and then reclaims it for adulthood, bringing the process full circle.

Psychoanalysis has examined at length the roots of erotic feeling in infancy, perhaps encouraging adults to "return" to narratives from their childhoods to explore sexuality and aggression, especially since, as Kenneth Kidd postulates in *Freud in Oz*, children's literature has influenced psychoanalysis as much as it has been influenced by it. At the same time, as I detailed earlier, the series portrays Emma's desire for mastery as a response to her childhood passivity and suffering: her feeling at times that she is still "a lost little girl." Thus, her aggression and sexuality is dependent upon the helplessness and innocence of her impoverished childhood.[12] Is it possible to read Emma as childlike, though, without pathologizing the child as traumatized, and thus potentially pathologizing BDSM in the process as only a response to trauma? Is it possible to read Emma without idealizing the child as either innocent or as accessing some euphoric sexual, aggressive desire? And is "child," as separate from "adult," a useful category at all, if, as Rose and Stockton notice, it is an identity created only after the fact?

These are difficult questions. However, to begin to answer them, at least in this context, one might look further at how Emma and Hook demonstrate the constructed nature of the binaries of adult/child, victim/violator, sadist/masochist or dominant/submissive, and man/woman, and perform the kind of troubling of gender and sexual categories that Doty identifies as queer. While I have argued that Emma and Hook sometimes reverse the expected power positions, their portrayals are also more complex than this, pointing instead to an erotic relationship which avoids neither pain nor pleasure, and encompasses Emma's selves across time; in fact, Hook and Emma present a negotiation between two wills rather than a negation of one to the other. This more nuanced relationship beneath the surface of things is apparent in Hook's cheekiness: his very pleasure in her attempts to subdue him points to his ability to find agency in restraint, and although Emma repeatedly puts him in handcuffs, he has little trouble slipping out of them when he wants to. I would not suggest, though, that Hook, as is sometimes said of the submissive partner in BDSM, is the one "really" in control. As Kaja Silverman argues, the male masochist, like other masculine subjectivities which engage with the "feminine," does not simply reverse the male/female subject positions, but threatens to undo binary logic altogether. In "saying 'no' to power" and in embracing "castration, alterity, and specularity," aspects of identity usually associated with the feminine, the male masochist signals "the collapse of that system of fortification whereby sexual difference is secured" (Silverman 3). Similarly, what is most interesting about Hook and Emma is the tension between them, the struggle for power that is never fully resolved because it is never fully, never finally located in just one person, in just one gender.

This is developed from the time of their first meeting, when Hook places on Emma and himself magical wrist cuffs that will allow them to climb a protected beanstalk, placing mutual restraint (and transgression) at the centre of their interaction ("Tallahassee"). In addition, Emma's initial ignoring of Hook's attempts to seduce her, in this episode and elsewhere, points to her own *self*-restraint, a forestalling of intercourse that might contain its own masochistic pleasure for her. Moreover, at the top of the beanstalk Emma slices her hand, and when Hook binds it for her, Emma notices Hook's memorial tattoo for Milah on his forearm. The narrative then switches to a flashback of Emma's relationship with and betrayal by Neil. Thus, the physical injuries on hands and arms link Emma and Hook in terms of past emotional suffering. This adds depth to their interaction, as here pain comes to encompass identification as much as it is part of domination or pleasure elsewhere. Alexander notices something similar with the wounded men in the fan fiction she studies: "While the fetishised vulnerable male body is put under duress, it is not engaged with as a piece of meat to be debased, as [the Marquis] de Sade's female bodies frequently are" (129). Hook is a potential object of desire in part because of his wounds, as I have already argued, but the amount of time devoted to his backstory in the series also creates the possibility that viewers, alongside Emma, might identify with him too.

Emma and Hook's interaction differs from that of other sadomasochistic pairings in the series in this mutuality. Regina literally steals the Huntsman's heart, stripping him of his free will; and Zelena keeps Rumplestiltskin locked in a cage in her storm cellar and engages in what can only be termed "knife play" with the magical dagger that controls him. I do not doubt the potential eroticism of such non-consensual scenarios for viewers, but, as I indicated earlier, Regina partakes in the tradition of the villainess, as does Zelena. Their dominance is presented as part of their immorality, and through them the series criticizes

the subsumption of another human being to one's will. Similarly, when Emma and Hook come under the curse of the dark one in the fifth season, their intense need to control others' fates (Emma in trying to save Hook's life at any cost; Hook in his need for revenge) is presented as part of their moral darkness, and their ability to vanquish the dark ones depends upon them giving up these obsessions. Hook and Emma's other interactions, in contrast, portray a woman as a desiring subject, as well as acknowledging that the partner is more than just an object.

Benjamin asserts, "We cannot say that sadomasochistic fantasy is inimical to or outside the erotic, for where do we find sexuality that is free of the fantasy of power and surrender?" (*Like Subjects* 205). While Benjamin's focus in *Bonds of Love* is on deconstructing the cultural association between women and masochism, her arguments for the possibility of a more balanced relationship between men and women resonate in this discussion of female sadism and related practices. In eroticism, as in the earliest relationships between child and caregivers, Benjamin argues, the self struggles between a desire for independence and a necessary reliance on others. She writes, "In the experience we call 'subject of desire,' the subject casts out the line of identification as well as reeling in the other at the end of the hook" (*Like Subjects* 59). Ideally, this creates a tension that is never resolved, where one is always influencing the other *and* being influenced by him/her; relationships do not need to deteriorate into the demeaning of one to the other, the master/slave dynamic Benjamin sees as persisting in many contemporary narratives ("Looking Backward" 12).

If we think about Hook's hook again, it reveals these tensions between self and other, dependence and independence. Katherine Rowe notices that the hand in literature is often a symbol of one's agency, the medium through which the inner self acts upon the outer world (6). What she calls the "dead hand"—the disembodied or ghostly hand—points to a suspicion about the integrity and power of the self (2). She mentions Barrie's Hook in relation to this issue, although she does not discuss him in any detail (2). In both *Once Upon a Time* and *Peter Pan*, though, the hook is at once a symbol of loss (of flesh, of control), and of power, an "iron claw" that becomes a terrifying weapon. In *Once Upon a Time*, the hook also symbolizes the loss of Milah, as well as Hook's fierce determination to gain vengeance upon the demon who killed her and took his hand in the process. When the hook becomes his new name, transforming Killian Jones into Captain Hook, it signifies the reshaping of his very self. Thus, the hook represents an act wrought upon the self without permission, but also the self's ability to incorporate otherness and survive. Given the series' emphasis on the shaping power of early experiences and the struggles to connect with lover, child, or parent, such issues about selfhood reverberate beyond Hook to all the characters in *OuTaT*: the debilitation and strength that derives from past experience, the pain and pleasure of interaction with an other. The hand, like the child we say we once were, is a ghost that haunts us, the other that is also ourselves.

One might argue that the series presents both a sense of anxiety about such "ghosts," and a fascination with them and their effects. The villains are frequently concerned with stopping or reversing time: Regina's curse essentially freezes everyone in time; Zelena tries to reverse time so she can kill Snow White's mother and thus change her own destiny; and Peter Pan is in fact an adult, a father who gave up his own son so that he could return to his pre-adult body and live in Neverland. Pan also magically forces a body-switch between he and Henry, a literal manifestation, perhaps, of the "molestation" Rose

writes about in relation to adults' creation of literature for children: she sees, especially in Barrie's Peter Pan narratives, an anxiety on the part of the adult creator about crossing the psychic barrier between adult and child as categories of identity (70). Evincing a similar anxiety, *OuTa* suggests that one must "deal" with one's childhood issues, but the goal is to be a better adult, in order to protect, rather than displace, the actual child, an idea emphasized when Regina, Snow, Charming, Emma, Hook, Neil, and Rumplestiltskin put aside past conflicts with each other in order to save Henry from Pan.

The finale of the third season is particularly revealing about the dangers of and fascination with compromising the boundaries between past and present experience and identity. In "No Place Like Home," Emma and Hook travel back in time and, through an accident, Emma almost prevents her parents' meeting and thus her own existence. The incident points, perhaps, to the danger of "returning" too intensely to one's origins, of focusing too much on the past. However, as Emma and Hook work to make things right, Emma witnesses her parents falling in love, as well as Snow's near-death. Pained by her parents' inability to recognize her (because they have not yet conceived her), she comes to recognize them, to understand how she has hurt them with her aloofness and criticism. This changes her relationship with them in the present, allowing her to add to her childhood story of neglect an awareness of how loved she was without knowing it.

Significantly, Emma's new sense of home and self changes her interactions with Hook. At the end of the episode, Emma kisses Hook while Rumplestiltskin recites his wedding vows in a voiceover: "I was an enemy of love. Love had only brought me pain. My walls were up, but you broke them down." For the first time, Emma and Hook's kiss is not immediately preceded or followed by an act of aggression. One might read this as an expression of a more conventional heterosexuality, especially given the series' indications in the same episode of the importance of "moving past" childhood's concerns in order to be a loving adult. However, the reference to broken walls continues to emphasize destruction and pain as a means of connection, even though here these are emotional rather than physical. Later episodes in the series return to the unconventionally violent dynamic between Emma and Hook, as in the winter finale of the fifth season, when Hook offers to take Emma's place and die to save Storybrooke from the dark ones. His voluntary death at Emma's hands, and Emma's subsequent determination to drag Hook back from the underworld by magically splitting her heart with him, continue to point to love as an experience of both self-shattering and domination, of disruption rather than resolution.

Perhaps, then, rather than growing "up," Emma will grow "sideways." Because of the format of the television serial, Emma's potentially heteronormative "happy ending" and complete "maturation" are indefinitely deferred. As Fiske and Feuer each notice, the serial format, despite its frequent focus on romantic relationships, often also contains a critique of marriage and romantic convention, because there is never a "happily ever after" (180-81,14); moments of happiness are brief, soon interrupted by new conflicts and troubles. Despite *Once Upon a Time's* title, its narrative structure moves back and forth between past and present, with "new" histories of the characters revealed in each episode to complicate or speak to the present. Thus, in the show, the past depends upon the future rather than merely the other way around, and the characters spend much time looking for and theorizing about their happy endings, without ever finally finding them. It may be that, when *Once Upon a Time* eventually runs its course, Emma's exploration of her childhood might only reinforce the adult-child binary and move her into a "coherent and rational"

identity. In the meantime, though, the interplay between Emma and Hook gives us, not a presexual Pan, but a “lost girl,” who moves towards vulnerability while still relishing power, and whose representation invites viewers to think again on the potential queerness of children’s literature within the romance.

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[1] Parts of this paper were presented at the conference for the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, in May 2014.

[2] The capitalization of “upon” in the title here follows the practice of the network in references to the series.

[3] Lisa Fletcher asserts, “from Shakespeare to Georgette Heyer to Jo Beverley, the cross-dresser is an archetypally romantic figure” (81).

[4] See, for example, Frantz (“Expressing”), Coddington, and Radway (“Work”).

[5] I follow Rose in acknowledging the multiple versions of the story of Peter Pan (6), although any quotations refer to *Peter and Wendy*.

[6] Buffy, the beautiful blonde “chosen one,” enters into a sexually sadistic relationship with Spike, a vampire who wears a calf-length black leather jacket and who has previously been her foe. The parallels to Emma and Hook may owe something to the fact that Jane Espenson, one of *Ouat*’s writers, was co-executive producer for *Buffy*.

[7] *Ouat*’s season three and four finales, for example, were each the top rated program of the day (Ng; Bibel), and each season as a whole ranked in the top twenty in the Nielsen ratings for adults 18-49 (Kondoloy; de Moraes).

[8] While it is not my intent here to add to the many Freudian readings of Barrie’s work, one could easily interpret Hook as a phallic mother, the hook the fetish that denies but is a constant reminder of the mother’s castration. Hook makes a joke about its potential as phallus in “The Name of the Brother” when he lewdly suggests that he could replace his hook with “another attachment” that Emma might prefer.

[9] As Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan observe, “Back at the peak of pirate romance fever [in the 1970s and 80s], you couldn’t swing a saber without smacking some delicious young ingénue who’d been vilely kidnapped by a harsh-faced yet beautiful seafaring rogue who was really the misunderstood son of a filthy-rich nobleman” (107).

[10] There is a joke among fans of the series of a potential romantic relationship between Hook and the floor, since he spends so much time lying on it (see the posting by “toothfairy” on *ONCE* podcast).

[11] There are far too many examples of adult texts based on children’s narratives for me to cite them all, but here are a few: Rupert Sanders’ film *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Universal, 2012); Catherine Hardwicke’s film *Red Riding Hood* (Warner Bros., 2011); various stories by Angela Carter; the *Syfy* miniseries *Neverland* (2011); various romance novels by Eloisa James and Kay Hooper; and the pornographic graphic novel *Lost Girls* by Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie (Marietta: Top Shelf, 2006).

[12] Stockton notices that this kind of characterization is often present in portrayals of children who are not both white and middle class: “As odd as it may seem, suffering certain kinds of abuse from which they need protection and to which they don’t consent, working-class children or children of color may come to seem more innocent” (33).

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