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**Article:**

Richards, J. [orcid.org/0009-0004-9979-0715](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9979-0715) (2024) *Writing and Drawing "The Three Dresses" (Creative Practice as Research)*. *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 37 (2). pp. 303-309. ISSN 1521-4281

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Writing and Drawing "The Three Dresses" (Creative Practice  
as Research)

Jess Richards

Martels & Tales, Volume 37, Number 2, 2023, pp. 303-309 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press



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## Writing and Drawing “The Three Dresses” (Creative Practice as Research)

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In writing a triptych (which forms a short story when read sequentially) from the point of view of three dresses, I give voice to the substance of the fabric. Each dress speaks in turn, to tell the story of a persecuted young woman. There are several allusions to Cinderella tales (both ATU510A and ATU510B subtypes, see Uther). “In similarity, perceived resemblance is taken to reflect a deeper level identity” (Nemeroff and Rozin 4). In some Cinderella tales, a young woman wishes for a dress that resembles something as impossible as a “dress of gold or silver or of stars” (ATU 510B). In my triptych, the three dresses are made from snow, darkness, and mirrors.

In order to be able to embody the “character” of a dress made from snow and give it a narrative voice, I freeze a miniature china doll in a block of salted water and film the ice melting under hot water in a metal sink. I watch the film over and over again. The melting process takes the block of ice from solid white, to translucent silver, to smooth-surfaced curves as the doll’s painted face and whimsical dress emerges. Gradually, the ice disappears, revealing a damp china doll. At this point in the writing process, it becomes possible for me to imagine the voice of snow. To embody its slow, quiet, coldness. To give it agency as a character and to empathize with its desires.

The following extract is from the first section of my short story, “The Three Dresses”:

For now, I remain snow on a mountain, clumping together my own slow wishes:

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That winter at this height will last an eternity. That I'll lie here forever under these clouds which kiss my exposed surfaces. That I can remain soft, but with a core strong as ice. That more of me will fall and the more volume I have, the stronger I will become.

In some Cinderella tales (ATU510A) the dresses exist for a limited amount of time—at the stroke of midnight they revert to being rags. In “The Three Dresses,” due to the limitations of first-person point of view, each story within my triptych can only last as long as the dress is capable of telling it.

The plot of my story, “The Three Dresses,” refers to common elements of several Cinderella tales (Heiner) in recognizable ways: a young woman lives with her abusive stepmother and wears three dresses on three different nights. There are magical elements within the reveries and dreams of the Cinderella character and references to a kitchen fireside, a party or ball, bare feet, a prince, the need for escape. The main point of differentiation in the new text is in the agency of the dresses as speaking objects, and their ability to express the relationship between the seamstress who made them and the young woman. For Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin, “both similarity and contagion depend on a shared essence (“mana”), between the object and the representation in similarity, and between the source and the target in contagion”(4). The “sympathetic magic” in Nemeroff and Rozin’s terms between many Cinderella tales and my triptych version relies on similar elements and also contagion.

Folklorist Eli Yassif says “the true importance of intertextuality lies in its contribution to the complexity of the text” creating a “powerful effect of multiple layers and meanings” (57). Within my story dresses can be things of beauty, but beauty is also revealed as having limits—sometimes it is no more than a surface layer.

Because the three dresses are made of snow, darkness, and mirrors, while writing the story, I imagine the warp and weft of snow, ink threads so tightly woven they become darkness, and the thickness of a fabric capable of supporting the weight of several shattered mirrors. In this way, my stories “themselves function as shape-shifters, morphing into new versions of themselves as they are retold and as they migrate into other media” (Tatar 56).

I consider how to incorporate more layers, more iterations to the process of writing this story. Can I somehow bring the story off the page by using my hands to weave another layer, because a repeated text “is always inflected by the medium and body through which it is enunciated” (Edmond 135). I have recently been gifted a new fine-lined pen. Its lines are like thin threads of spidersilk. With the fine-lined pen, I transform the printed story

into a twenty-page drawing—or a “drawn story” (see figures 1, 2, and 3). For this visual/textual iteration of the story, every letter is linked to another letter with an ink thread. I choose words within the story to reveal, and draw threads pulling away from them. The strands in this visual and textual web stretch, about to break.

The words I chose to draw attention to are transcribed below. Though these words (within the first iteration of this story) belonged to the narrating dresses, in this twenty-page “Drawn Story” iteration they form a condensed narrative that describes the emotional changes within the persecuted young woman:

One young woman dreams deliberate numbness. Her lungs  
rising, remain soft, fall and send all prayers upwards, transform-  
ing warp and weft as breath.  
She may never return to her thinning body, or her home, the  
kitchen.  
By the fireside, she dreams.  
Darkness summoned through the eye of a needle stretches,  
unthreading light.  
For revenge she won't ever love again.  
Her arms cast no shadows, she can't yet touch her desires:  
she is dreaming up ghosts.  
She pinches at her fingers, trying to change herself.  
Her body is some collection of tricks.  
A puzzle.  
A toy.  
Her holes consume her, but her own darkness expands around  
her and inside the chambers of her heart  
she covers her shrieks.  
She's fragments, becoming a whole thing.  
And now she believes in stars and ash, bruise and door.  
The young woman reaches for trouble in gloved hands.  
She wants hooks and cold knives,  
sharp silver lips,  
a cracked heart to fill with Doubles of herself  
in a hungry embrace.

The “Drawn Story” version of “The Three Dresses” has the illusion of a tactile surface, as the threads appear as if they could have been woven or sewn. The visual metaphor of interwoven threads mirrors the intertextual process of

retelling folkloric texts, and the threads simultaneously connect the characters within the story: the persecuted heroine, the three narrating dresses, and the seamstress.

Due to combining artistic and fiction writing processes in an embodied creative practice, “The Three Dresses” exists as several iterations—as a twenty-page drawing, as a sixty-page layered palimpsest that has been shown in art galleries, and as a short story in textual form.

The dresses as speaking objects provide an alternative way to experience the persecuted heroine theme of many Cinderella stories. As the reader, we embody the dresses due to the first-person perspective. Due to the immediacy of present tense, we are wrapped around the heroine’s body. We clothe her in our warping-wefting layers. We contain her secret thoughts and desires.

We hide her bruises beneath a layer of beauty.

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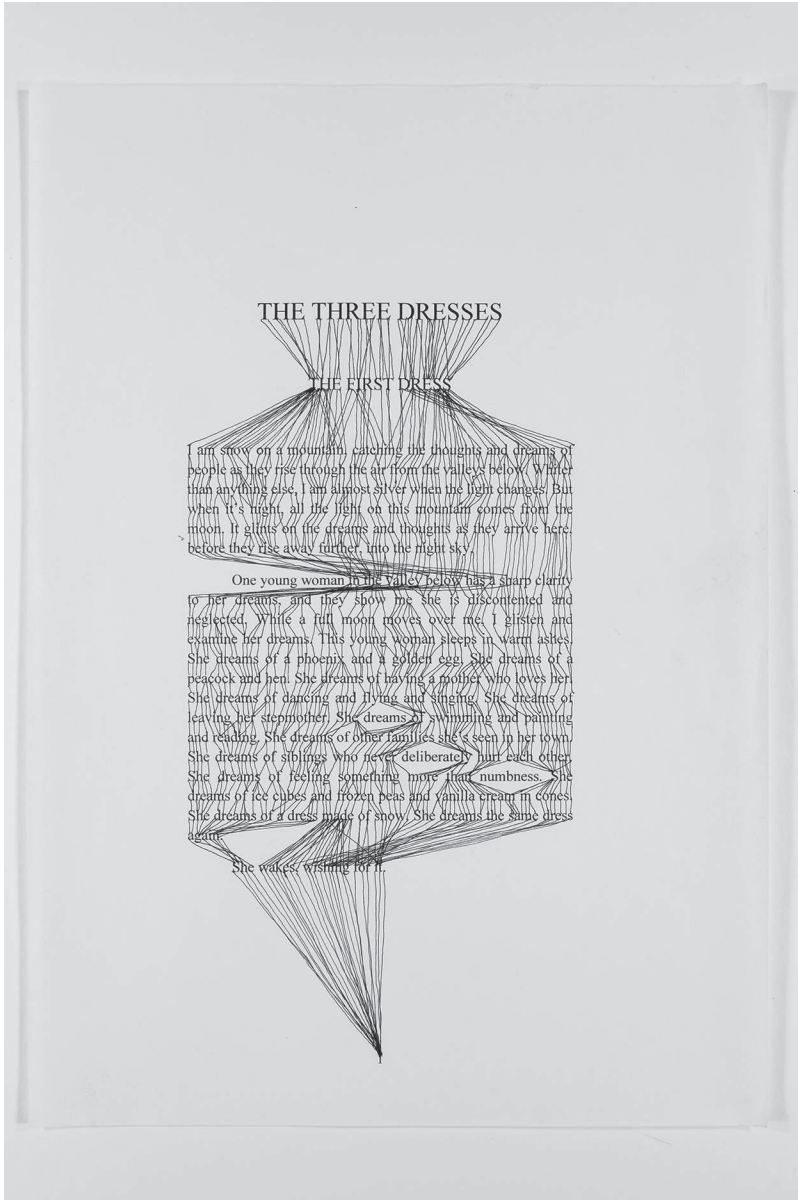


Fig. 1. A Drawn Story (page 1 of 20) Jess Richards. (Ink and short story on paper).  
Photo credit: Jessica Chubb

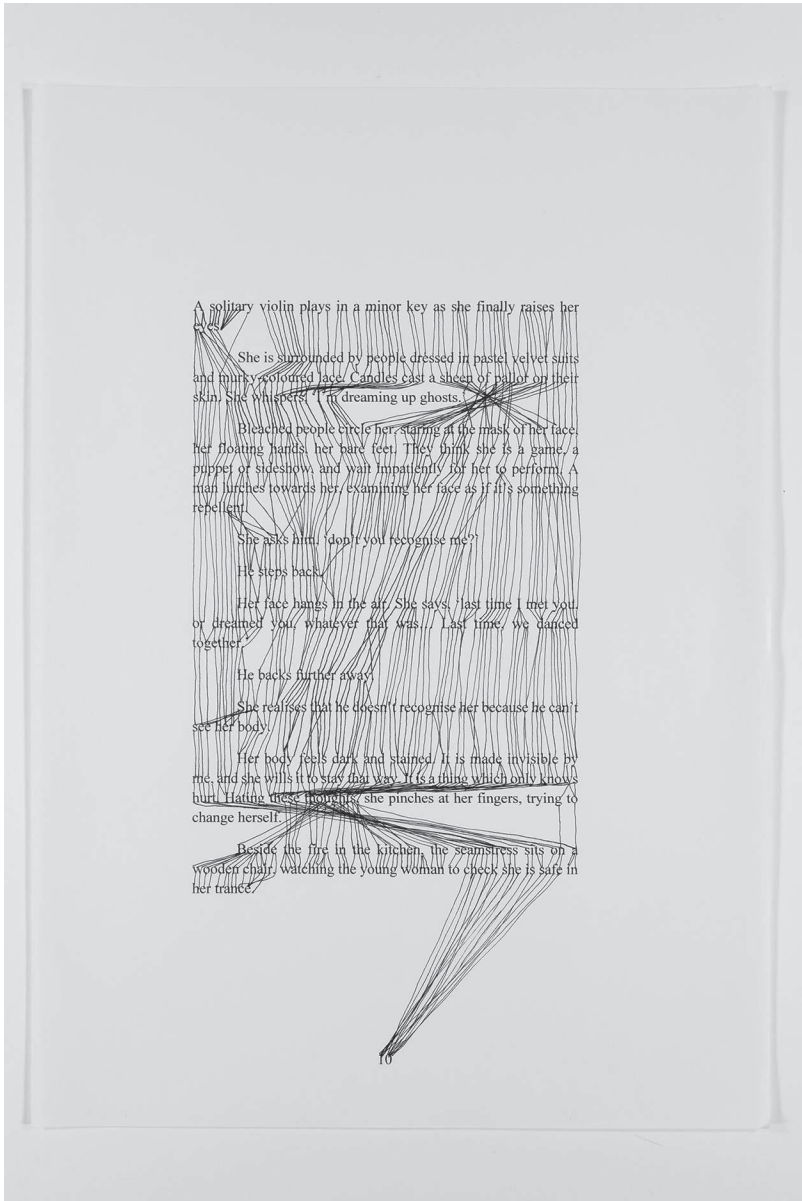


Fig. 2. A Drawn Story (page 10 of 20) Jess Richards. (Ink and short story on paper). Photo credit: Jessica Chubb



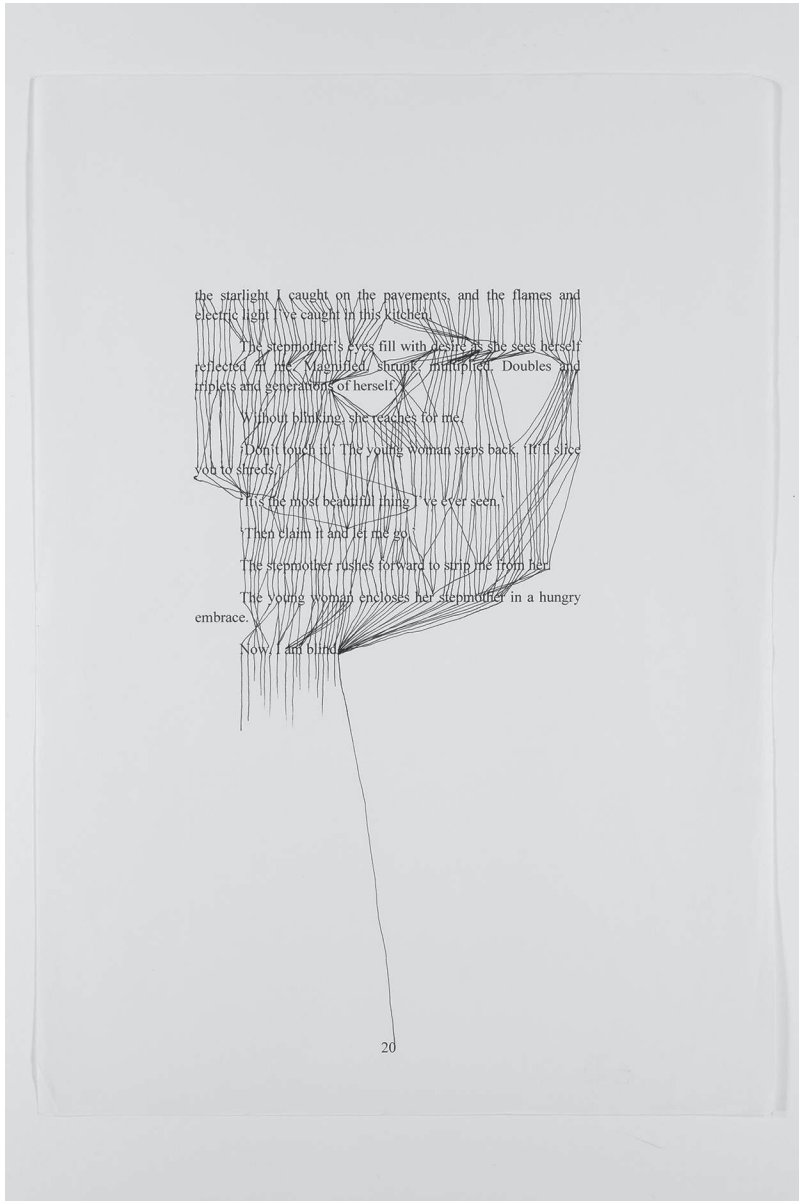


Fig. 3. A Drawn Story (page 20 of 20) Jess Richards. (Ink and short story on paper). Photo credit: Jessica Chubb