

PART 2

THERE'S A
BIGGER PICTURE:
MYTHS AND MEANINGS

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'I'M A FAIRY? HOW FUCKING LAME!': *TRUE BLOOD* AS FAIRYTALE

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True Blood presents a world where, due to a Japanese company's invention of a synthetic blood substitute which can sustain them, vampires have finally emerged 'out of the coffin' and are seeking civil rights with 'living Americans'. Around this narrative of an emerging vampire population, various other supernatural creatures also appear – shape-shifters, werewolves (and were-other animals, but only werewolves can call themselves 'weres'), maenads, witches and fairies – collectively referred to as 'supes'. Each of these fantasy creatures has a connection with folklore, in one form or another. While Harris's novels and HBO's TV series mix and match their folklore to suit their own purposes, a phenomenon of popular culture appropriation long recognized within folklore studies, to analyse the use of folklore in the series requires some careful juggling of these folk ideas, not the least of which is that many of the folkloric creatures which populate *True Blood*'s storyworld come from different genres of 'oral prose narrative' (Bascom 1965) – namely myth, legend and folktale or *Märchen*¹ – and often the same creature may appear in different genres themselves.

***True Blood* and Folklore**

The vampire motif is directly linked to two specific folktales, neither of which is common within popular culture lore on the

vampire. 'The Princess in the Coffin' (also known as 'The Vampire Princess') (ATU 307)² is about a princess/young girl, born to childless parents, but cursed to die young. On her deathbed, the young princess demands that someone watch over her corpse for three consecutive nights before she can be properly at rest. The first two guards fail their task and are found dead the next morning. The third guard, who in some versions is a young village boy, hides from the princess's corpse on the first two nights and witnesses her emergence from her coffin searching for human blood. Before the final night, the young boy/guard seeks help or advice from a village elder who tells him what to do to break the curse. The third night, the boy hides as normal, but this time, when the princess is out of her coffin, he jumps *into* the coffin and refuses to relinquish her spot until she performs a prayer, or delays her until sunrise, when the curse is lifted (Uther 2004, I.189).

In 'The Corpse-Eater' (also known simply as 'The Vampire') (ATU 363), a young woman has a vision that she will marry a man with a particular physical attribute. When such a man appears in her village, they become betrothed. But on the long journey to the bridegroom's home, each night she watches in horror as her husband eats bodies dug up from the cemeteries they visit. The bridegroom inquires if she has seen what he gets up to each night, but the girl denies it vigorously. She continues to deny what she has seen, even when her bridegroom comes to her in the appearance of both her father and her brother. When he appears to her in the form of her mother, the young wife confesses everything she has seen, at which point she is eaten alive by the monster (Uther 2004, I.228).

While neither of these tales is particularly common in vampire popular culture, despite being great stories, it is 'The Corpse-Eater' that has some connection with *True Blood*. Sookie is largely ostracized in her hometown of Bon Temps, Louisiana, due to her telepathic abilities; some close friends and family know what she can do and are uneasy with her ability, while other locals just think her odd or even stupid. Sookie herself has largely foregone romantic company since, in the few times she

has dated local boys, she is deafened by their (usually sexual) thoughts. When Sookie meets the vampire Bill, as he is the first vampire she has met, she discovers that she cannot hear what he is thinking ('Strange Love', 1.1). The silence in her head when she is with Bill is bliss for the waitress. Seen in the light of 'The Corpse-Eater' folktale, Sookie has been waiting her entire life for the man with whom she can finally experience silence. While Bill may be the man of her dreams in this regard, he is still a vampire and Sookie probably should not watch while he eats. The television series and the folktale, however, differ in their respective heroine's fates.

True Blood as Fairytale

In 'I Smell a Rat' (3.10), Sookie's response to discovering that she is part-fairy is the quote which makes up a portion of this chapter's title: 'I'm a fairy!? How fucking lame!', voicing, perhaps, the audience's incredulity that their TV show may have just 'jumped the shark'. Despite Sookie's part-fairy nature only being introduced in the sixth book in the novel series, *Definitely Dead* (Harris 2006), this revelation is developed from season three of the TV series onwards. However, in many respects, *True Blood* has always been a 'fairytale' series.

Whilst the folktale is a fictional genre, that does not preclude it discussing real issues facing the cultures which tell those tales. Eugen Weber noted that folktales 'can tell us a great deal about real conditions in the world of those who told and those who heard the tales' (Weber 1981, 96). Weber continues, suggesting that the human emotions of the folktale should be read as real emotions of the folk themselves. 'A careful reading of the [Grimm's] collection reveals a number of recurrent themes: hunger, poverty, death, danger, fear, chance ...' (Weber 1981, 96). This idea is taken further by Robert Darnton, noting that within folktales 'one finds elements of realism – not photographic accounts of life in the barnyard ... but a picture that corresponds to everything that social historians have been able to piece together from

the archives' (Darnton 1984, 38). Such an argument is not to suggest that the folktale should be considered another 'factual' genre; its roots are still well entrenched within the fictional, but like any literature, it comments upon contemporary issues. Angela Carter makes an identical observation when she notes, 'although the content of the fairy tale may record the real lives of the anonymous poor with sometimes uncomfortable fidelity – the poverty, the hunger, the shaky family relationships, the all-pervasive cruelty and also, sometimes, the good humour, the vigour, the straightforward consolations of a warm fire and a full belly – the form of the fairy tale is not usually constructed so as to invite the audience to share a sense of lived experience' (Carter 1990, xi). Carter notes quite specifically that television has replaced the oral storyteller for much of Western culture, but that rather than mourning a lost orality, television fictions need to be celebrated for continuing fairytale narration (Carter 1990, xxi).

True Blood announces its folktale fiction from the very beginning. In the pre-credit sequence of the first episode, 'Strange Love', we are introduced to two young people driving through rural Louisiana at night. The boy (simply listed in the credits as 'Frat Boy') sees that a local shop is selling Tru Blood and wants to stop and pick some up. The Grabbit Kwik clerk is dressed in stereotypically Goth style, with long, stringy black hair, inverted pentagram and cross hanging around his neck, and when he first speaks, his voice intones a Bela Lugosi-like Eastern European accent. When the Frat Boy and his girlfriend enter the store, the clerk is reclining watching Nan Flanagan, spokesperson for the American Vampire League on *Real Time with Bill Maher* (a genuine HBO series) speaking about civil rights for vampires, and it is here we first hear about the Japanese invention of synthetic blood which satisfies all vampire nutritional needs. While the cinematography and *mise-en-scène* of the sequence suggest our world – cheap convenience stores, strangely dressed clerks, watching TV (although how many convenience stores are hooked up with HBO?) – the existence of vampires is entirely contained on the television set in the

frame. In other words, the fantastic is doubly displaced from us – through the diegesis of *True Blood*'s opening sequence and through the diegetic television set's fictional episode of *Real Time*. The fantastic and the real collapse in the sequence's opening few minutes. Flanagan having announced that what all vampires want are the same rights as everyone else on *Real Time*, Frat Boy and his girl ask the clerk about *real* vampires in Louisiana. The clerk, in his Bela Lugosi accent, starts to frighten Frat Boy by suggesting that these questions are ignorant and offensive to vampires like him. During this exchange, the camera is in close-up on the clerk's profile, focusing on his crooked teeth. Just as the boy and his girlfriend are at their wit's end with fear, the clerk laughs, drops the fake accent and returns to his normal, Louisiana accent. While the clerk and Frat Boy have a laugh at this, a 'good ol' boy' in a baseball cap sporting the Confederate flag and wearing a shirt with an army fatigues design states he did not find this act funny at all. Frat Boy speaks insolently to the good ol' boy; in return, the good ol' boy challenges Frat Boy, and shows his fangs for the first time. Frat Boy and his girl run from the shop as the good ol' boy vamp turns on the clerk and warns him never to impersonate a vampire again.

Within this sequence, *True Blood* sets up its fictional world by having the storyworld (diegesis) displaced on a television screen; such a mechanism presupposes a folktale-like TV genre, rather than a legend-based one, due to the mediation of information within the frame. A legend-based TV narrative would take greater pains to establish that the diegetic world was *our* world (without the American Vampire League or Japanese synthetic blood). *True Blood* collapses the distance between our experienced world and the fictive world of the TV series by having a vampire take us by surprise from the relatively safe confines of popular culture by directly addressing and circumventing vampire stereotypes, including a Bela Lugosi accent. Speaking about folktales, not television shows, Darnton notes, 'Despite the occasional touches of fantasy ... the tales remain rooted in the real world' (Darnton 1984, 34). *True Blood* takes place, mostly, in Bon Temps, Louisiana, a small town in Renard Parish. While

Louisiana is divided up into parishes, Renard is not a real one; neither is Bon Temps a real town. Bon Temps, as even those with as rudimentary French as I will know, means good times, while Renard means fox, the traditional trickster figure in French folklore. *True Blood* announces its fiction in two ways: the fantasy element of Japanese synthetic blood which can nutritionally sustain the emerging vampire population, and the clues embedded in the series' setting – trickster figures and good times. Both of these signs signal the series' folktale framework, which, despite the realism of the cinematography and location footage, is set in an imagined Louisiana.

True Blood's fictional Louisiana stands in for a number of larger issues facing contemporary American culture; programmes on HBO, a premium cable network not included in the basic cable subscription, tend to appeal to a more urban, professional and better-educated sector of American society than any of the four American terrestrial networks available without a cable subscription. Despite *True Blood* depicting the lives of poor, white and black Southerners and wealthy, ancient vampires, it does not necessarily speak for those groups as much as it speaks for middle-class, educated, liberal America. Louisiana becomes a magical Never-land of Southern hospitality and homespun wisdom, while also reworking the cultural stereotypes of Southern racism, the Ku Klux Klan and right-wing Christianity. This is demonstrated in the series' opening credit sequence, specifically in the parody of the right-wing Christian slogan 'God hates fags', here transformed to 'God hates *fangs*'. Darnton noted that in French folktales, the peasantry would frequently outwit the landed gentry and/or their fictional surrogates (witches, ogres, etc.), frequently humiliating those who sought to oppress them (1984, 59). These tricksters of French folklore become residents of 'Trickster Parish' in *True Blood's* fantasy of a folktale-like Louisiana, where racism and homophobia are displaced onto narrow-minded, anti-vampire bigots, such as René Lenier or Reverend Steve Newlin. What makes *True Blood* more interesting than any of the other vampire-oriented television series in recent years (beyond the

sex and gore in the show) is what the series appears to say about racial and sexual integration. It is not a hard stretch to read the television series as Southern-born Ball's fantasy South where racial and sexual differences are displaced onto the living-impaired community, having just 'come out of the coffin'. Here the Liberal South speaking out for equal rights for the emerging vampire communities displaces discomfort and the risk of community censure for those who would speak out for equal rights for racial and sexual orientation groups. The opening sequence in 'Strange Love' also turns the tables on Southern stereotypes; not only does the Goth turn out to be human and the good ol' boy a vampire, but the vampire rightly objects to the mocking of his people with a crude stereotype. There is little 'monstrous' about these emerging monster communities; most are normal (supernatural) folk just trying to get by. The cultural commentary on American racism and homophobia makes *True Blood* a more potent popular culture text. While there are any number of true stories that could be told about racial and sexual tolerance in the South, either in dramatized or documentary form, displacing these issues into the realm of folktale fantasy recognizes the truth within the fiction. The potentially uncomfortable truths about persistent Southern racism and homophobia can be safely discussed within *True Blood's* fantasy context.

Big Evil Fairies

True Blood as a fairy tale, however, goes even further; the fairy in folktale narration appears to be a not-so-distant cousin of the popular culture vampire. 'Vampire lore' tends to be more legend than folktale; that is, oral traditions about vampires (with the exception of the relatively rare oral occurrences of ATU 307 and 363) tend to be based more on belief than fiction. The vampires of oral lore also have little in common with the *literary* vampire, at least as far back as Bram Stoker, if not all the way to Dr John Polidori. The popular culture vampire,

through films, novels, graphic novels, television series and sub-cultural trends (that is, Goth culture), owe their pedigree to the literary vampire more than the vampire of oral tradition (cf. Summers [1928] 2008 and [1929] 2001). However, a cursory glance at some of the motifs about fairies and Fairyland suggest that there may be a connection between the fairy of folktale narration and the vampire of literature. Glamour, after all, refers to both fairy magic (D1719.5) and to vampiric mesmerism in *True Blood*. Fairies are also known within folktale traditions to be malevolent (F360), monstrous (D49.3) and occasionally they mutilate humans (S160.3). Fairies are also taken as mistresses or lovers (F302) despite a taboo about marrying (C162.1.1) or even kissing one (C122). *True Blood's* vampires are prohibited from eating mortal food, which is also a fairy motif (C211.3.2). Those vampires, in the show, who wish to integrate into human society, 'mainstreaming' as they call it, have to leave the safer confines of the subterranean vampire communities, effectively leaving the Fairy Realm (F393). If I am correct in seeing a fairy-vampire connection, at least in *True Blood*, then many of the Thompson-identified fairy motifs can be replaced as vampire motifs. Vampires in the series can rejuvenate (D1882.2) and resuscitate (E121.8) mortals. Vampires, in 'turning' mortals into more vampires, are able to transform human beings into creatures like themselves (D683.7), through eating the food of the vampires (their blood [C211]). And one risks life and limb if one offends a vampire (C46 – a taboo by any other name). Vampires of popular culture are also known to carry people away to their lairs (F320), particularly women (R16.3). *True Blood's* fangbangers, mortals who willingly give themselves as sex-slaves to vampires, also have their parallel in fairy stories (F373).

Pointing out these similarities and parallels between literary and popular culture vampire lore and traditional oral folktales about fairies is not to argue that Charlaine Harris or Alan Ball intentionally adapted fairylore to vampires, but rather suggests an evolutionary process whereby some vampire and fairy *beliefs* (and their associated narratives – that is legends) enter into

the intentionally fictive realm of the folktale. The differences between Thompson's vampire motifs and the popular culture vampire are striking: where did the popular vampire come from, if not from the belief traditions or the oral folktales? The same nineteenth-century literary traditions that gave birth to vampire fiction were also reworking folktales for middle-class children's entertainment (Zipes 1997, 15–38; see also Purkiss). If these so-called 'fairy tales' were being appropriately sanitized, what does one do with those stories and motifs of malevolent, violent and frightening fairy-folk? The suggestion that the folktale fairy became the popular culture vampire is not so far-fetched: Juliette Wood has noted that Goth culture has adopted both the vampire and the 'dark fairy' 'as part of their identifying mythology' (Wood 2006, 280), thereby, at least for the Goth subculture, seeing both forms as in some way connected. Wood, citing Carole Silver, further notes the similarities between fairies and vampires in that since neither are 'subject to the alterations of time, they convey an idea of permanence, and by extension, a nostalgia for the stability of past, or a permanent state of ... awakened sexuality' (Wood 2006, 282). I suggest what happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that these fairy motifs became popular culture vampire motifs; that vampires are, in their genetic make-up, big evil fairies.

I am not alone in seeing a fairy-vampire connection. Diane Purkiss, in *Fairies and Fairy Stories*, also sees this relationship, although she takes it further than I am prepared to do. The first connection Purkiss identifies is the bloodthirstiness of earlier fairy traditions. In the Child ballad (37c),³ 'Thomas the Rhymer', Thomas enters Fairyland by wading through rivers knee-high in blood. The ballad informs us that all blood shed on Earth ends up flowing through Fairyland (Purkiss 2007, 74). For Purkiss, this connection between blood and water is proto-vampiric; the fairies have a deep passion and need for human blood. Picking up on a later Irish tradition, the glamour and beauty of Fairyland is often revealed to be an illusion; the anointing of a human's eyes with a special fairy-balm reveals

the beauty of Fairyland to be a dark 'charnel-house' (Purkiss 2007, 326). Fairyland, therefore, is dual-natured: firstly, it is a marvellous idyll, but when that magic has worn off, it is revealed to be a slaughter-house, the opposite of what it appeared to be. In 'She's Not There' (4.1), Sookie has been taken to a beautiful Fairyland, where everyone appears to be in a blissful state eating luminescent fruit. She refuses to eat the fruit and Fairyland is revealed to be a monstrous place and the fairies themselves to be hideous creatures.⁴

A similar duality can be identified with the vampires in *True Blood*. Much of the local vampire population in the series is involved, in some way, with the vampire nightclub Fangtasia. At Fangtasia, human tourists are able to drink and carouse with actual vampires, the chosen few being granted the privilege of feeding their hosts before buying the requisite T-shirt and getting back on the tour bus. The Fangtasia experience is one of controlled danger, hedonism and sexuality, but it is all very safe for the tourists. Sookie says to Bill, on her first time at the club, that Fangtasia is 'what a vampire bar would look like if it was a ride at Disneyworld'. However, at the beginning of season two, the basement of Fangtasia is shown to be a darkly lit torture chamber, where humans who displease the vampires are detained indefinitely. The duality of Fangtasia embodies the duality of the vampire: sexy and glamorous, but also monstrous and bloodthirsty. Such dual nature is, if we trust Purkiss, a direct inheritance from the earlier fairy tradition. Purkiss, among others, sees fairies, like vampires, as part of a revenant tradition; ghosts who return to punish those who still have unfinished business on Earth. Purkiss notes, 'what is crucial is that both fairies and vampires are living dead, dead who do and must interact with the living' (Purkiss 2007, 350). The evidence for such a conclusion is the connection to the past these traditions – fairies, ghosts, vampires – seem to suggest (Purkiss 2007, 145). Both the vampire and the fairy are guides to the past, and, in part, like ghosts too, this element connects the three supernatural creatures. Purkiss notes fairies, vampires and revenants are direct connections with history: 'he [the