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Know your enemy: Contradictory elements find synthesis in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*

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Abstract & Keywords

Susan Cokal's first novel for young adults, *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*, garnered reviews that discussed the roles of contradictory forces. While one review noted these contradictory forces were due to the novels use of fairy tale qualities along with the exploration of grim realities, the other noted that these aspects of create a thought provoking combination rather than a stark dichotomy. The development of an argument towards the novel's success depending upon a synthesis between the many forces that the novel expertly includes leads to an in-depth exploration of the nature of classic fairy tales, the influence of superstition, as well as the role of science and medicine in the sixteenth-century.

Keywords: review, opposing forces, synthesis, contradictory, combination, fairy tale, science

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Know Your Enemy: Contradictory Elements Find Synthesis in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*

When reviewers considered Susann Cokal's first novel for young readers, *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*, they found a novel characterized by contradiction. Sarah Hunter of *Booklist*, for example, notes the novel's use of "crooked fairy tales" to reinforce its "dark" tone and "the grim realities of the women who suffer terrible violence at the hands of brutal men." She also, however, describes the book as "poignant," full of "lyrical writing," and "compelling" (76). *Publishers Weekly's* review draws a similar conclusion. This review again focuses on the fairy tale qualities (this time calling them "[d]ark and bloody fairy tales") and warns readers that this young adult title must be kept for "mature readers," it also argues that the book's "brutality, eloquence, and scope are a breathtaking combination" (83). The important insight to be acknowledged from both reviews is that in this novel, typically opposing forces become cooperative and intertwined elements. But this point deserves to be taken further: the dovetailing of apparently contradictory elements is perhaps the defining strategy of the book, and that strategy runs both deeper and broader than the fairy tale elements and surprising combination of beautiful writing and ugly subject matter.

The Kingdom of Little Wounds is a fantasy novel telling the tale of political intrigue and crimes against women in a fictional sixteenth-century city called Skyggehavn. While the royal family struggles to maintain its power, commoners and courtiers alike hold religion and the fairytales of old in high reverence and exhibit curiosity and reluctance regarding scientific advancements which threaten to upset the balance of tradition. Illnesses of both mind and body trouble the royal family, and treatments based upon new ideas of medicine and steeped in a desire for the fantastic remedies of lore are the chosen form of healing. All the while, the mad Queen Isabel must produce a healthy heir to the throne; a dishonored seamstress, Ava Bingen,

must serve Count Nicholas Bullen, a rapist with a shifty agenda; and a mute nursemaid, Midi Sorte, records the history unfolding around her while attempting to hold on to what little freedoms she has left.

Although the reviewers always qualify the fairy tale qualities of the novel with words such as “crooked” and “dark,” which helps set up their contrast with the novel’s beautiful elements, dark tones are hardly uncommon for fairytales. Close analysis of the work of famous German fairytale collectors Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm reveals that fairytales encapsulate both beauty and darkness, and they rely upon a complementary relationship between the two in order to succeed. According to Jane Yolen, the Brothers Grimm’s first edition of their famous set of collected fairytales was published under the name *Children’s and Household Tales* in Germany in 1812. Throughout their lives, the Grimms continued to release new editions of *Children’s and Household Tales*, each with revisions and new stories. Specifically, the Brothers Grimm removed erotic elements from their collected fairytales and, “from the 1819 edition on, Wilhelm purposefully edited the stories to make them appropriate for children” (Yolen xix). The Brothers Grimm may have been concerned about appropriateness, specifically in the form of sexuality, but they did not eliminate the dark elements of their stories. Analysis of the traditional elements of the Brothers Grimm’s fairytales shows that darkness is not a surprising trait in a fairytale, as *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist* suggest.

A fine example of the Brothers Grimm’s note of the fairytale genre’s need for a balance of the elements of dark and light is evident in “Fitcher’s Bird.” In this story, a wizard captures one of three sisters by posing as a poor man and going door to door. Leaving her at his beautiful house with rooms that “shone with silver and gold” such that the sister “thought she had never seen such great splendor” (Grimm 46), the wizard gives her an egg to care for and a key for a

locked room which she must never go in. Soon bored with her surroundings, the first sister decides to investigate the forbidden room. What she discovers is decidedly gruesome; “A great bloody basin stood in the middle of the room, and therein lay human beings, dead and hewn to pieces, and hard by was a block of wood, and a gleaming axe lay upon it” (Grimm 47). The first sister drops the egg into the blood, which serves as a sign of her disobedience to the wizard, who says, “Since thou hast gone into the room against my will... though shalt go back into it against thine own. Thy life is ended.” The story then continues by saying, “He threw her down, dragged her thither by her hair, cut her head off on the block, and hewed her in pieces so that her blood ran on the ground. Then he threw her in the basin with the rest” (Grimm 47). Returning for the second sister, the story continues in this pattern of exploring the beautiful house before discovering the bloody and gruesome forbidden room, until the third sister, a crafty young woman, outwits the wizard and pieces her dismembered sisters back together. This story perfectly exemplifies the classic fairytale qualities of a cohesive spectrum of beauty and darkness.

Furthermore, the work of Hans Christian Andersen, a Danish author famous for his unique retellings of classic folktales and for his original fairytales published from the 1820s to the 1870s, also demonstrates that darkness and beauty are actually regular and complementary elements of a classic fairytale. Diana Crone Frank and Jeffery Frank explore Andersen’s handling of the “morbid supernaturalism” of the German’s fairytales and state that he countered it with “wit and irony” (Frank 13). They argue that Andersen

had appropriated a traditional form but seemed simultaneously to invent a new one, one that accommodated itself to flights of fancy and humor, social satire, and literary revenge... ‘The Little Mermaid,’ one of Andersen’s most beautiful

stories, becomes not only progressively sadder and more chilling but steadily more religious as it considers mortality and eternity” (Frank 16).

In Andersen’s stories, then, not only is darkness present, but his fairytales make a point of combining the sad and the beautiful, just as Cokal would more than a century later. Exploration of the work of Andersen and understanding the combination of both light and dark in his stories gives further evidence toward the idea that *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* succeeds due to its ability to provide synthesis between typically opposing forces, such as eloquence and brutality, rather than to underscore discord between them.

Considering the work of Andersen also allows us to understand the serious importance of the coexistence of light and dark in fairytales. In “The Little Match Girl,” a young girl roams the streets on New Year’s Eve, attempting to sell matches so that she will not return home penniless and receive a beating from her father. Cold, and without the oversized slippers she began her night with, the little girl discovers warmth, beauty, and joy each time she strikes one of the matches she is supposed to sell. While she is met with magical scenes of roast goose, a beautiful Christmas tree, and even the apparition of her deceased grandmother, come morning, the girl “was dead, frozen to death on the last night of the old year...No one knew the beauty she had seen or in what glory she had gone with her old grandmother into the joy of the New Year” (Andersen 218). Although obviously quite different than the bloody forbidden room that the three sisters discovered in the Grimm fairytale, the same synthesis of beauty and morbidity is still quite apparent in Andersen’s writing. Andersen and the Grimms came from different cultural backgrounds, wrote in different periods, and took very different approaches to the publication of fairytales, but one can find in both the presence of dark tones that complement beauty.

Therefore, the reviewers' initial reaction to *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* is not wrong, but it fails fully to understand the fairytale qualities of Cokal's novel.

Although reviewers do notice the importance of complementary elements in the fairytale style of the book, brutal plot elements, and lush writing style, there are more elements of the book that may at first seem at odds but that in fact work together. As one of the major themes in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*, illnesses and their treatments and preventions seem unusually ghastly and even cruel considering their synthesis with lyrical prose. Queen Isabel and the royal children of Skyggehavn are plagued with an illness they call "*Morbus Lunediernus*...sent by God to scourge the royal innocents and test the nations" (Cokal 7), the king suffers from terrible indigestion that confines him to his close stool for hours on end, and the Italian Fire, a euphemism for syphilis, rages through the court. Furthermore, the devious Nicholas Bullen, an ambitious court member who not only attempts to control the kingdom but does much of it by taking advantage of women, believes that he will be protected from venereal disease thanks to the precious stones he has had sewn into his penis. Neither the *Publishers Weekly* or *Booklist* reviews consider the strange treatments in regards to their fairytale comparisons, but they are key to appreciating the symbiotic relationship of the beautiful and the grotesque that Cokal has created.

If the illnesses are grotesque, their remedies are frequently just as bad: desperate for help, the characters try blood broth, viper's milk, a paste called "guciac," theriac, and even mercury. While the original court physician's mercury treatment was actually poisoning the children and making their disease worse, he cited the wisdom of Paracelsus, famous Renaissance physician and astrologer, and said that "any substance can be either cure or poison...it is only a matter of determining the dose" (Cokal 70), a perfect example of the relationship between the

beauty of a discovered cure and the darkness of a slow death by poison. Mercury appears again in Queen Isabel's memories of a fountain of mercury at a party, "a beautiful, trembling thing, reflecting each face with a giddy accuracy...it made their faces every more beautiful, their minds ever more dreamy" (Cokal 77). Despite the apparent beauty and medicinal qualities of the mercury, Queen Isabel quickly understands the deadly nature of the poisonous matter when a baroness leans too far over the mirror-like surface and topples in, to her death. Inclusion of disease and treatments that reflect advancements in the field of medicine, which so cleverly demonstrate both beauty and gruesomeness, serve as an important and successful element of *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*.

Furthermore, Cokal's explorations of several scientific advancements provide an interesting and complementary combination with the fantastic elements of the novel. In Skyggehaven, a city where people are not only deeply religious, but where trolls reside and people still believe in the existence of witches and mermaids, strange occurrences are met with both scientific interest and whimsical fantasy. Soon after Princess Sophia's death, a large "witch hollow" opens up in the castle courtyard. Described as a hole through which one can see the earth's inside, Midi Sorte says that "it suck at bricks and anything we throw, swallow them and pull them into it stomach" (sic, Cokal 116). While a historian says that the hole is simply a place where the earth caved in to reveal sand and water, which is a normal occurrence due to the city's structure being built on "islands of warm-water springs and floating yellow stone" (Cokal 47), people spread rumors about its dark meaning and fantastical powers. Soon enough the hole is seen as a portal to the dead and to the devil, especially after it breaks its habit of sucking down items and instead seems to spit up a finger that may have belonged to the dead Princess Sophia.(Cokal 193) While identification of the hole as a natural occurrence could take place

thanks to understandings of science and history, stories that bestow the hole with fairytale like qualities shroud its origins and purpose with mystery and intrigue, exemplifying yet another instance of a combination of opposing forces.

An additional detail in the course of the novel, one just as steeped in a mix of fantasy and realism, is the occurrence of Tycho Brahe's supernova in 1572. Despite serious advancement in the field of astronomy thanks to higher-powered telescopes, many, including King Christian in the novel, still find interest in predicting the future by way of studying the movements of the stars. Although special telescopes allow King Christian to view the moon in a way that he can study the individual craters, there is a remaining level of fantastical interest in the moon, the stars, and the supernova. Many in the novel view the new star as a sign related to the Lunedie family, yet it is undecided whether it is a good omen or a bad one. Although the *Booklist* review of *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* does identify the occurrence of the hole in the earth and the new star as "disturbing portents" (*Booklist*), it fails to delve into the literary effect of their presence alongside the superstitious interpretations that are made based on these phenomena that the novel presents as scientific. Despite the novel's presentations of the typically oppositional relationship between fairytales and scientific advancements, the novel's success functions upon its ability to turn their relationship into one that is impossible to be considered mutually exclusive.

Some investigation of the role of superstition in science in Europe during the sixteenth century reveals the distinctly blurred lines and symbiotic relationship between the two modes of thought. In Euan Cameron's *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750*, he identifies serious implications of disease in medieval and early modern life. Cameron states that:

First and foremost, people feared sickness and disease. Obvious as this may seem, it is striking how little discussion of physical illness occupies the superstition writers. On the whole it is assumed that people fall sick, children especially, and that most of their illnesses are of physical nature rather than supernatural origin... There existed, however, a second class of illnesses which appeared also to have been feared in a fairly distinct way. These were the illnesses that supposedly had been inflicted by hostile sorcery. (32)

While Cameron shows that there was an understanding among pre-modern physicians and theological observers of the distinction between the two classes of illnesses, he also sets the stage for the discussion of the issue of handling supposedly sorcery-related illnesses. Cameron also discusses aspects of popular healing spells and the type of empirical medicine practiced. Additionally, Cameron explains that the “healing rituals involved the use of herbs, although the use of such herbs might depend on particular circumstances as to their gathering or harvesting” (56). This evidence suggests the early relationship between the medicinal properties of herbs, rationally observed and recorded, as well as the equally important superstitious implications of the time of their collection. Overall, Cameron’s investigation of the cooperative relationship between superstition and medicine is evident in those same key elements in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*.

Going further, by establishing symbiotic relationship between the themes of superstition and science to the role of alchemy in the early modern era and the sixteenth century, the connection from historical evidence to the treatment of science and medicine in Cokal’s writing further demonstrates her development of a symbiotic relationship between supposedly

oppositional ideas. In *Darke Hieroglyphics: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, Stanton J. Linden explores the treatment of the topic of alchemy in literature.

Linden identifies alchemists as referring to themselves as “physicians, restoring health to diseased, ‘leprous’ base metals,” and he goes on to say that “the link between alchemy and medicine was close in the writings of alchemists, surgeons, apothecaries, and poet-physicians like Henry Vaughn” (11). Linden’s description of alchemists identifying as doctors curing diseased metals certainly resonates with the plot of *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*, and his recognition of the link between alchemy and medicine in the writings of the time is key.

Furthermore, Linden explains the role of the four elements, earth, air, water, and fire, their opposing qualities, and their positions in the universe as “the foundation of medieval and Renaissance physics, metaphysics, medicine, and psychology” (17). Although to us, such rationalizations might seem closer to magic or superstition, the contemporary focus on the elements as giving a scientific foundation further blurs the lines between fantasy and realism, which points toward their closely linked relationship in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*.

Additionally, Linden points out that “natural magic and alchemy were often linked together. Like the magus, the alchemist saw himself as one who, although operating within the traditional worldview, was able to alter and manipulate the normal course of nature through highly specialized knowledge and experience” (20). Perhaps most useful of all, Linden identifies the fact that “increasingly, seventeenth-century alchemy came to be employed more in the formulation of chemical medicines than in the transmutation of metals” (243). This evidence is particularly influential, as it more closely relates the same relationship of magic and science in alchemy to that of the medicinal style that is present in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*.

Ultimately, Linden’s exploration of the elements of alchemy in the early modern period further

supports the idea that magic and science were interwoven in the real sixteenth-century, which means that Cokal's fictional sixteenth-century is not only more effective artistically, but more successfully imagined because it combines the two.

Even more to the point, the treatment of venereal diseases in the early modern period was simultaneously reliant upon science and superstition. An essay by Jon Arrizabalaga, "Medical Responses to the 'French Disease' in Europe at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century," gives a useful background of the history of syphilis, its societal implications, and its medical treatments. Arrizabalaga begins his essay by identifying that:

Latin Galenism, the medical system then dominant among university practitioners who covered the health demands of social elites, was characterized by plural, open, and equivocal views about disease causality. This meant that physicians initially related the French Disease to a range of various kinds of causes (divine punishment, corrupt air, harmful star constellations, and bad life regime, among others), which could be at work either collectively or separately (33).

This acknowledgement provides a strong connection to the treatment of disease in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*. Furthermore, Arrizabalaga discusses speculation as to the role of astronomy as the cause of sexually transmitted diseases in the sixteenth century. His essay states that healers of the day assumed that "astrology played an important role in linking the disease to the sex organs. Some contemporary university practitioners explained that the French Disease located itself in different parts of the body as a result of the influence of peculiar celestial phenomena, such as planetary conjunctions or oppositions, zodiac projections, and lunar eclipses" (Arrizabalaga 42). This bit of evidence relates directly to the habits and methods of the doctors' attempted study and

treatment of the various illnesses of the Lunedie family in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*. By considering the historical evidence of the actual treatment of a sexually transmitted disease and its combined emphasis on science and superstition, we may see that Cokal's portrayal of science and medicine in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* is historically accurate in that it maintains the cooperative balance between the two.

The success of Cokal's novel, both aesthetically and historically, depends upon its ability to make these forces work in synthesis rather than allowing them to become simple dichotomies. Consideration of the fairytale genre, by way of investigation of literary classics by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, reveals that fairytales are, by nature, both light and dark, and while the reviewers are right to read Cokal's novel in the fairytale tradition, they might be forgetting that a novel in that tradition will often bring together and function upon a cooperation of light and dark. Furthermore, with examples lying both in the treatments of various illnesses and in the occurrence of natural environmental factors such as sinkholes and supernovas, I view the novel as presenting a noteworthy alliance between magic and science, two more evidently contradictory forces. Additionally, evidence from several writings, which detail the history of the bond between science and fantasy, allows a foundation of historical accuracy for the basis of Cokal's presentation of medicine and the treatment of disease in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*. When reviewers cite the dark and sometimes unsettling content of the book, they seem to cite it as an individual property of the novel, when it is actually a multifaceted and deeply rooted element. In *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*, Cokal entwines various elements that seem to be at odds with each other, and the cooperation between those elements, which runs much deeper than is immediately obvious, is exactly the reason for its success.

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Cora Jaeger

Reflective Essay

Kirmser Undergraduate Research Award

Selecting and refining your topic:

In the spring of 2014 I took Literature for Adolescents, ENGL 545, with Dr. Joe Sutliff Sanders. I had to choose a Michael L. Printz medalist or honor book that had been published no more than three years ago that was not a part of our class readings. To make the best decision, I looked at reviews in review journals to decide which book sounded the most interesting. By using Academic Onefile, I searched specific publications for reviews of quality. Furthermore, I limited my search by using the titles of specific journals and by looking for reviews of multiple books that met the requirements of the assignment until I had identified a single book that captured my interest. These researching techniques were new to me, but I found that they were exceedingly helpful in selecting a book for the assignment. The book I chose was *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* by Susann Cokall.

My process of focusing on a topic included reading the book and considering its themes. Next, I compared these themes to that of the key points of the reviews that had led me to the book, and I decided on my paper's topic. While a review from *Booklist* discussed the book's discord between its fairytale-esque aspects and its unsettling grimness, *Publishers Weekly* noted the combination of these two forces along with others such as eloquence and scope. I decided to construct my paper around the idea that one of the reviews was wrong and that the other review was right but that it had not gone far enough in its argument. *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*

does not function upon a dichotomy between two forces, but as a synthesis between many forces that typically work against each other.

Research strategies:

I focused my research on the importance of harmony between forces. During the process of utilizing Hale Library's catalogue, I organized and kept track of my research by logging key search words, titles that I had explored or thought may have promise, where these resources were located, and what I needed in order to best utilize them. My first step was to collect resources on classic fairytales. Next, I needed resources that explored the role that science and magic have played in literature. I soon realized that my efforts were better focused elsewhere due to the nature of my argument. Instead, I modified my strategy and turned my research towards the varieties of science and medicine that were exercised in the sixteenth-century setting of *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*. The resource that significantly informed my project, one that set the scene for my argument, was Euan Cameron's *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750*. During my perusal of Scopus, one of the library's many databases, I discovered an abstract over Cameron's book. After exploring the abstract, I was certain that this book was something I truly needed for my paper. A quick search in the catalogue informed me that the book was not in Hale's possession. Fortunately, I was able to get my hands this key resource by using Hale's Inter- Library Loan services.

Library research tools:

While searching for resources that would best suit my argument, I met with my professor. As I developed the topic of my paper, my professor prompted my research efforts by suggesting ways in which I could combine key words in the catalogue to result in new information.

Furthermore, I discovered that I could find other resources to further educate myself on the history of science and medicine in the sixteenth-century by utilizing the bibliographies of the initial resources I chose to assist in building my argument. Additionally, I investigated outside discussions on *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* via perusal of message boards on published reviews and on social media site postings. These outside discussions, ones that were not a part of academia, helped me to focus my research and argument in a way that would benefit the average reader. One of these included a “Sunday Book Review” located on the *New York Times* website, and another on the *School Library Journal* website. These outside discussions were located using a variety of search engines.

Finding information:

Although I was somewhat discouraged after failing to locate sources discussing the role of science and magic in literature, I had great success in finding sources that focused on the many varieties of science and medicine in the sixteenth-century. With a Hale Library map in hand and scribbled down call numbers from key-word searches in the catalogue, I located sources in the stacks. I then browsed the titles around the titles that the catalogue took me to. Surprisingly, this simple technique and change in my researching habit proved to be most effective. While I could see that these books were relevant to my argument, I realized I really needed them to build my own basic understanding of topics such as alchemy and the historical period to understand their role in *The Kingdom of Little Wounds*. Additionally, while I was in the stacks, I used the “Ask a Librarian” chat feature for assistance in locating a title so that I would not have to leave the stacks and lose my place. What titles I could not find in Hale itself, I found through Inter Library Loan services. These newly developed research techniques caused me to use critical thinking skills and allowed me to develop stronger library research processes.

Evaluating information:

In order to narrow down which resources I wanted to use, I considered the publication dates of the books, if they included any sort of introductory material that could benefit my research, and the credentials of the authors or translators. If the resources matched these expectations, I considered them trustworthy sources. For each of these types of research tools, I looked into resources that were either published recently or were written by authors who were experts in their area.

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