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**Happily Ever After:
Myth, Rape, and Romance in Magazine Coverage of the Mary Kay Letourneau Case**

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Abstract

Journalists rely on myth to explain events and reaffirm social ideals. This research analyzes coverage of Mary Kay Letourneau, a teacher who pled guilty to raping her 12-year-old student. Through textual analysis, we examined national magazine coverage from 1997 through 2005 to determine what narratives were used to explain a crime that reversed the traditional roles of criminal and victim. We found that journalists relied on rape misconceptions and myths of proper (hetero)sexual roles, including the Good Mother and Princess in romantic fairy tales, to tell the story. The construction of this narrative erased the crime, turning rape into romance and (re)establishing masculine hegemony.

Keywords: fairy tale, gender, myth, news, rape, romance

Introduction

After the discovery of an intimate relationship between a male teacher and a female student, the punishment is often swift and severe. Little discussion surrounds the issue, especially as far as news coverage is concerned. Often the story appears as little more than a news brief. Recently, however, a growing amount of attention has been paid to cases involving a female teacher and a male student. In the past five years, hundreds of such cases have made the news (“Bad bad teacher,” 2009; “The big list,” 2010). Despite the damaging effects these inappropriate—and often illegal—relationships can have on student victims in the long run, the numbers show no sign of declining (Erdely, 2009). Some distinct and disturbing differences are often visible in news stories covering inappropriate teacher/student relationships when the teacher is a woman. Consider this comment made during sentencing by Utah Third Judicial District Judge Mark Kouris while presiding over one of these teacher/student cases: “If this were a 29-year-old male and a 17-year-old female, I would be

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inclined to order some incarceration” (Hunt, 2006, para. 3). The 29-year-old female teacher in the case, however, received only probation and a fine.

News coverage of cases in which a woman rapes her underage student appears to reinforce dominant ideas of female sexual passivity and male sexual dominance. The current research examines one of the best-known teacher/student rape cases—that of Mary Kay Letourneau. That story began in 1997 after police arrested the 32-year-old elementary school teacher for statutory rape of her 12-year-old student, Vili Fualaau. Letourneau pled guilty to child rape and was sentenced to seven years in prison. Despite the court order, a relationship between Fualaau and Letourneau continued, culminating in marriage between the two in 2005. The case has generated moments of media frenzy, with both the news and entertainment industries offering details about the story’s developments. How these cultural industries have constructed narratives and portrayed the individuals involved offers a way to examine how journalists build stories by drawing upon and relying on societal myths (Lule, 2002). As Lule explained, myth has traditionally provided stories that help to make sense of our world. And in a situation as contradictory as a female teacher raping a male student and as complex as the Letourneau case, we argue, journalists relied on myth to make sense of what was, at the time, an unusual story. In doing so, journalists reconstructed a story about rape into one of romance. Thus, instead of a standard story of crime and punishment, the narrative reinforces gender and sexual roles, along with fortifying the hegemonic social order.

From the start, the Letourneau case offered journalists a complicated task because the story did not fit cultural rape narratives in which the male is typically the perpetrator of the crime. Letourneau taught in the small city of Des Moines, Washington, hardly a hotbed of criminal activity. Furthermore, Letourneau was a white, middle-class, small-framed, blonde wife, mother, and teacher—far from the societal picture of a rapist and more closely tied to the Western hegemonic vision of the idealized woman and mother. Using a textual analysis of magazine articles, we examined ways that journalists employed myths to tell the Letourneau story and, in doing so, (re)ordered gender relations and (re)established normative conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity, as well as of women’s and men’s sexual roles. We focused on the construction of this crime as a contemporary romantic fairy tale, one that neglects the seriousness of rape and instead focuses on a romantic love affair between a 12-year-old boy and a woman 21 years his senior—a relationship that resulted in the birth of two daughters, seven years of prison time, and a televised wedding.

News as Myth

The study of myth and modern mass media narratives began in the 1950s with a handful of diverse scholars and philosophers linking the storytelling nature of news and other forms of mass media to myth (Barthes, 1972; Carey, 1988; Eliade, 1960; McLuhan, 1959). News stories merge with myths to “offer sacred, societal narratives with shared values and beliefs, with lessons and themes, and with exemplary models that instruct and inform” and to reinforce the ideals and beliefs inherent in every culture (Lule, 2001, p. 18). In this sense, a myth is not unreality, a false belief, or an untrue tale (Barthes, 1972; Berkowitz, 2005, 2010; Franklin, 1993). To compare news and myth does not suggest that news regularly passes down untrue stories of doubtful origins. Myths serve as metanarratives that carry implicit fables and morals through easily identifiable characters and story

lines. The power of myth is evident in its saturation, as it is constantly adapted to encompass new scenarios so that even when news is unusual and unexpected, it becomes familiar to the audience (Berkowitz, 2010).

Lule (2001, 2005) outlines seven myth archetypes that often appear in the news: the myth of the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the other world, and the flood. Some argue that the list is too restrictive (Coman, 2005). Lule (2001) acknowledges that these seven myths are by no means exhaustive and urges researchers to look for others. Lule (1995a) published an essay about mythology gleaned from a magazine cover, but the myth he discussed was more of a narrative about captivity than an archetype, and he only examined an image from a single cover. Aside from this lone essay, no other researchers have studied myth in magazines, which is surprising given the unique storytelling format that news magazines provide (Hart, Smith-Howell, & Llewellyn, 1991).

Apart from Lule's critical examination of the role of race in mythology (Lule, 1995b, 2001, 2002), he largely ignores hegemonic concerns, such as gender roles in mythology. Other scholars have begun to critically analyze where and when myths are invoked and reinforced, which can depend on cultural distance (Nossek & Berkowitz, 2006), collective memory (Berkowitz, 2010), and cultural influence (Bird, 2005). Lule (2001) often neglects such cultural influences (Bird, 2005; Coman, 2005), even though it is this cultural meaning that allows myths to carry with them embedded themes and values that shape our understanding of people, places, and events. One such theme is that of traditional gender roles.

Gender myths

Among Lule's (2001) identified seven archetypes, it is the Good Mother that is the most relevant for this study. Embodied in the coverage of Mother Teresa, Lule (2001) explains that the Good Mother is maternal and is a nurturer who embodies goodness and "represents kindness, gentleness, selflessness, and compassion" (p. 106). While Bird (2005) accurately points out that a universalist approach of broad myths could oversimplify, here the ideas behind the Good Mother archetype embody some of the traditional roles reinforced by the dominant hegemonic, male-centric society (Chodorow, 1978). In Western ideological constructions of the Good Mother, she is also a white woman and wife whose life revolves around the domestic sphere, illustrating how racist and patriarchal perspectives contribute to this idealized archetype (Collins, 1994; Rothman 1994).

While myths narrate stories of cultural origins and supernatural acts, they also provide examples for humans to emulate (Eliade, 1963; Lule, 2001). Through the mythicization of key classic fairy tales, these recognizable stories pervade our lives and fundamentally reinforce how we perceive the world (Davis, 2005; Eliade, 1963; Zipes, 1994, 2006a, 2006b). Zipes (1994) explains that fairy tales as myths have "extraordinary power in our daily lives" (p. 16) and are ideologically and culturally coded, making them "codified, authoritative, and canonical" (p. 4). In particular, we place emphasis on the romantic fairy tale, often seen in the United States, though not restricted to an American concept of the fairy tale (Zipes, 1994). U.S. entertainment media, especially Disney, have demonstrated how the repetition of a traditional fairy tale through a cultural lens transforms the perceived meaning of the story, particularly along the hegemonic ideals of romance (Zipes, 1994, 2006a, 2006b).

Androcentric perspectives can also reside in contemporary romantic fairy tales. Myths and fairy tales span global history. While some similarities are shared with fairy tales (the journey always finishes with a happy conclusion), these stories are richly diverse and have a wide array of characters, messages, and interpretations (Eliade, 1963; Zipes, 1994, 2006a). Particularly in the public consciousness of the Western world, however, romantic fairy tales can elevate passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as women's fundamental virtues. Feminist scholars have critiqued this form of storytelling for the role it plays in reinforcing women's proper cultural role as one of motherhood and domesticity. Rowe (1979) explains: "In short, fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies but powerful transmitters of romantic myths, which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our 'real' sexual functions with a patriarchy" (p. 239).

A gender-specific role similar in nature to that of the Good Mother is the Princess, which we submit as an additional archetype to Lule's (2001) seven.¹ We turn to the function of the Princess in fairy tales (a type of myth) that structures romance narratives and constructs women and men's proper gender and sexual roles. In traditional fairy tales, such as Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, and Sleeping Beauty, the Princess faces obstacles, but these are surmountable, and in the end, true love and marriage prevail, resulting in the maintenance of normative patriarchal gender roles (Kolbenschlag, 1979; Rowe, 1979; Waelti-Walters, 1982). Obviously, the Disney-fied versions of these romantic fairy tales are different from the original versions. In the Grimms' version, instead of falling off a cliff, the evil queen must dance at Snow White's wedding in red-hot iron shoes (Zipes, 1994). Other elements of the contemporary romantic fairy tale include the Princesses suffer but triumph over time; the Princesses are rewarded for their "patient servitude or dreamy waiting" (Zipes, 1994, p. 275); the story has a nuptial climax; and the Princesses regain wealth and social position with the marriage (Bottigheimer, 1987; Dowling, 1981; Rowe, 1979; Zipes, 2006a). Rowe (1979) explains: "Festive nuptials signify the heroine's conformity to the socially dictated roles of wife and mother and signal her assimilation into the community" (p. 250). Particularly in modern-day fairy tales, women can redeem themselves from bad behavior with the love of a man, as in the movie *Pretty Woman*, in which a prostitute becomes an acceptable woman after her client falls in love with her (Kelley, 1994). While newer, more innovative, and radical versions of these types of cautionary tales can turn patriarchal stories into a more empowering narrative for the heroine, the stories do not conform to the original fairy tales, and the altered versions are therefore forgotten (Zipes, 1994).

Another myth relevant to the examination of how journalists might use traditional stories to guide them in making sense of the Letourneau story resides in the ways that gender roles, particularly those related to sexual behavior, are culturally understood and prescribed. Numerous studies in psychology indicate the prevalence of myths about how males and females behave, based on socially constructed dichotomies that separate gender into masculine and feminine traits. Within Western cultural constructions of masculinity, one must be aggressive and dominant (Nathanson &

¹ While we construct a particular positional reading of the Princess in fairy tales, we acknowledge the multiple possibilities in reading a text. For a reconsidered feminist perspective of fairy tales, see Donald Haas (ed.), *Fairy tales and feminism: New approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004). We also acknowledge that this reading is further complicated by the complexity and number of global myths. For this analysis, we are viewing the concept of the Princess through a Western lens.

Young, 2001). Tremblay and Turcott (2005) explain that the prevailing stereotype of hegemonic masculinity is for men to be “strong, stoical, in control of the situation, active, aggressive, and powerful” (p. 133). Of particular interest in this study are stereotypical ways in which gender is constructed in normative heterosexual relationships, as hegemonic masculinity involves establishing a heterosexual identity (Renold, 2003). We have already attended to women’s prescriptive roles in Western culture, which reinforce their place in the home as a good mother and wife. In terms of (hetero)sexuality, women are typically defined in relation to men (Forbes, 1996). This results in dichotomous constructions of gender characteristics in which women are passive and submissive while men are aggressive; women are followers while men take control; women are weak while men are powerful.

Finally, prevailing social myths indicate that victims are women, particularly the victims of rape. To be a man and a victim is to strip the man of his masculinity, as the victim role takes away hegemonic understandings of his gender position. A “real man” in this simplified, dichotomous construction of gender roles cannot both be a victim of rape and possess the attributes necessary to maintain his masculinity—strength, control, aggression, and power (Hopper, 2005; Tremblay & Turcott, 2005). The current research analyzes how journalists relied on these various gender-specific myths to make sense of circumstances that were confusing. In doing so, it seeks to show how journalists turned the rape story of Letourneau into a romance that in the end (re)established the victim’s masculinity and (re)inforced masculine hegemony.

Rape misconceptions

A number of “myths” (hereafter “misconceptions”)² about rape have been compiled (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Pagelow, 1981; Russell, 1984), leading to inaccurate portrayals and understandings of both the victim and the assailant. Bohmer and Parrot (1993) explain that these misconceptions allow us to believe that a “real rape” is one in which a victim is raped by a stranger who jumps out of the bushes with a weapon. In this idealized version, the victim fights back, is beaten and bruised, reports the event to the police, and has medical evidence collected immediately. In the minds of many people, a rape victim has never had sex with the assailant before, is preferably a virgin, was not intoxicated, was not wearing seductive clothing, and has a good reputation (Turnage, 2009). Themes such as the pathology of rape (motivated by universal inevitabilities that are biological, sociological, or cultural in nature), responsibility of the victim, and the Otherness of the assailant are consistently repeated in news coverage of sexual assaults (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Turnage, 2009), but they are complicated in the Letourneau case because here the commonly understood gender roles in a rape case are reversed.

Research Questions

Considering previous research that has shown how journalists rely on myth (including fairy tales) to tell stories (Berkowitz, 2010; Bird, 2005; Lule, 2001), we asked the following research questions: Is Mary Kay Letourneau portrayed in relation to the archetypal myth of the Good Mother and of the Princess in romantic fairy tales? In magazines, are Letourneau and her victim

² The term “myth” implies an archetypal structure that can be related to a larger society, whereas here it is used in a smaller, case-specific sense more appropriately described as a “misconception.”

constructed to fit hegemonic, dichotomous understandings of male and female (hetero)sexual roles? Finally, is the crime covered in light of misconceptions about rape, its perpetrators, and victims?

Methodology

To capture the ways in which both news and entertainment publications covered the Mary Kay Letourneau story, two weekly magazines—*Time* and *People*—were selected for analysis. During the time the story was being covered, *Time* was the most widely circulated weekly newsmagazine, with more than 4.1 million subscriptions.³ *People* also had strong circulation figures, with more than 3.3 million subscriptions—twice as many as *Entertainment Weekly*. Along with nationwide reach, magazines offer a unique type of coverage that is “typically more sober than televised news and yet more colorful than newspaper reporting,” meaning that it should “best capture the unique blend of the human and the institutional” (Hart, Smith-Howell, & Llewellyn, 1991, p. 8). These magazines also were the only ones to offer any substantial coverage of the Letourneau case. For the sample, the term “Letourneau” was used to search in *Time* and *People* archives between February 1997 (when she was first arrested) and May 2005 (when Letourneau and Fualaau were married). In all, a total of thirteen magazine articles were analyzed—five articles in *Time* and eight articles in *People*. The lengths averaged 1,800 words apiece, allowing for a deep reading of the texts.

Given the type of research questions being asked and the sample size of this research, a textual analysis is the most appropriate methodology in order to avoid the decontextualization of meaning (Jensen, 2002) and allow researchers to recognize and investigate patterns (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Of particular interest was the narrative stream that emerged from the stories published in the two magazines. Storytelling, particularly in news, can affect how people perceive events (Fisher, 1985; Kitch, 2002; Vincent, Crow, & Davis, 1989). Like myth, narrative “gives meaning to individual news events by placing them within a broader temporal and cultural structure and therefore making them seem logical” (Kitch, 2002, p. 296).

To recognize these narrative streams, the aforementioned literature review suggested focusing on rape and mythical archetypes. First, misconceptions of rape were used as a framework for determining how rape was constructed in these articles. The articles were then studied to examine the Good Mother archetype (nurturing, goodness, and willingness to sacrifice) or the Princess archetype as structured in romantic fairy tales (passive, dependent, self-sacrificing, rewarded for patient servitude, and a marriage/nuptial climax). Finally, the articles were searched for instances in which myths existed about female and male sexual roles (females as passive, submissive, and weak, and males as strong, stoical, in control, active, aggressive, and powerful). The goal was to determine how gender was constructed in the rape case of Mary Kay Letourneau, as well as if and how myths were relied on to tell the story and maintain a masculine hegemonic order. Frameworks and myths were documented through multiple readings by each author, and these findings were then analyzed using the aforementioned themes.

³ Magazine subscription figures come from the 2004 *Magazine and Newsletter Directory*, New York: R.R. Bowker LLC. Circulation sizes are larger than numbers quoted here because of sales in stores and on newsstands.

Analysis and Discussion

Initially, coverage of the Letourneau case is wrought with conflicting story lines. The topic, after all, defies many preconceived news narratives that contradicted each another. News coverage of rape has traditionally been one fraught with erroneous, ideologically charged assumptions (Benedict, 1992; Turnage, 2009), but here the genders are reversed. The Good Mother is traditionally a mother and wife who is white. Yet Letourneau's crime would suggest someone who does not embody goodness, especially given that she was charged with harming the very children of whom she was so protective. Thus, the Princess archetype became how the story was understood—as a matter of the heart instead of the letter of the law. This fairy tale narrative cast the victim as the hero and an outlying character (Letourneau's husband) as the villain, leaving the rapist to take her role as the patient, helpless Princess.

In this coverage the magazines reinforced the misconception that rape is not damaging. Early in *People's* first article was an interview with a school social worker who stated that the children at the school “were ‘confused and sad to lose their beloved teacher’” (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 52). However, no one seemed to think anything was wrong. A “crisis intervention team” consisting of two social workers and two psychologists was on call, but “the school’s 500 students seem to have moved on,” explained the school spokesman, adding “Kids are resilient” (p. 52). Before Letourneau had been arrested for rape (when no one knew the two were seeing each other), a *Time* story explained how police found a parked van with the two inside. Despite finding out Fualaau was 13 and the two were sexually involved, the cops did not press charges (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998). This statement works as a rhetorical device to show that this encounter with police should not be perceived as a serious problem. After all, if it were a serious problem, the two would have been arrested the first time they were caught together. These examples illustrate how the crime is downplayed culturally, but the use of these quotes and this type of information without an alternative voice questioning this misconception of rape show how journalists reinforce the rape myth.

Pathology of rape

The misconception that rape is pathological was also reflected in the coverage. The initial explanation for Letourneau's actions seemed to lie in psychology. Letourneau's father was a philosophy instructor at Santa Ana College in California who turned to politics. A hard-line conservative, he served a term in Congress. His downfall came in 1982, when it was revealed that he had fathered two children with one of his students. In *People* attorney Gloria Allred is quoted as saying, “I’m not excusing what Mary Kay did, and I’m not a psychiatrist, but I can understand how she could have crossed the line the same way her father did” (Hewitt, Benet, Dodd, Bernstein, Leonard, & Reno, 1998, p. 46). Of course, her father's student attended college, while Mary Kay's went to elementary school. Without an alternative voice to counter these types of notions, journalists reify their validity.

Allred might not have been a psychiatrist, but others were, and they weighed in. When Letourneau was initially released on parole, one of the stipulations for sentencing was that she had to take medication “for bipolar disorder, which causes dramatic mood swings and erratic behavior” (“Fatal attraction,” 1998, p. 176). Her ex-husband, Steve, is quoted in *People* as saying, “there are

lots of professionals who think she's ill" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 48). Her therapist also believed she had bipolar disorder, which is described as "an illness with a raft of possible symptoms, from irritability to hypersexuality," according to a *Time* story (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 62). In another *Time* piece, inappropriately titled "Mad about the boy," it was explained that "without diagnosis and medication, the sufferer risks becoming manic, delusional and attracted to risk" (Edwards & Willwerth, 1998, p. 103).

Our intention is not to argue or question Letourneau's illness but to point out that by describing her illness as having these side effects, the problem becomes one of uncontrollable hypersexual and biological urges, causing her to take risks and thus relieving her of the blame of raping a minor. Journalists have used sickness (alleged or otherwise) to explain maternal violence (Barnett, 2006). Using a similar technique here, the narrative reinforces the notion of the embedded, pathological mystique of why some people commit rape. Combined with the dismissal of the issue as a noncrisis, the misconceptions of rape were reinforced in both *Time* and *People* stories. The pathological component of Letourneau's bipolar disorder, however, was accompanied by another dominant theme: love.

Rather than a bipolar disorder, the key to understanding Letourneau's actions "may lie in the meanderings of her heart," according to a *Time* article (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 60). A friend of Letourneau's speculated that Fualaau and Letourneau would be married when she was released from prison because they "want to be together" and "are drawn together like magnets" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 48). In a different *People* article, the two are described as "lovers bound together in a perplexing romance" (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 67). In another *People* article, readers are told the relationship "seemed natural," but "what didn't seem natural was that there was a law forbidding such a thing" (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 52). An article in *Time* also explains that Letourneau had "found the man of her dreams...but he was 13" (Edwards, 1998, p. 103). Fualaau is even quoted in a *People* story titled "Family man" as saying, "I want Mary to be with me and the kids...they say I'm a victim, but I'm not. I'm more a victim without her" (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 67).

Even after Letourneau was caught violating a court order preventing her from seeing Fualaau, she was adamant about her love. She fought with her counselor, arguing that she did not have to defend her love. The counselor was surprised because in 15 years of counseling 400 patients, he "had never seen a sex offender in his care return to prison for committing another sex offense" (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 63). Letourneau said she saw Fualaau as her "kindred spirit" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 47). A journalist in *Time* wrote that the "tale" of Letourneau and Fualaau was imbued "with a certain screwball Romeo-and-Juliet poignancy," containing "an interesting humanity in the tale, an aberrance with something almost sweet about it" (Morrow, 1998, p. 64). The journalists who penned these stories reaffirm without much question this notion of love between Letourneau and her student. These same types of comments, particularly the sweetness of their love, are hard to imagine in a story about a 32-year-old male teacher who fathered a child with his 12-year-old female student.

As the story unfolded, the reason behind the rape transitioned from bipolar disorder to love. It became less about Letourneau as a person and more about her as a woman. The idea of bipolar as a pathological reason for rape, combined with the reluctance to identify this rape as harmful,

supported the misconceptions of rape. With the addition of the concept of love, however, gendered roles moved to the forefront of the narrative to embody the fairy tale notions of what love means. Once love was introduced into the narrative, the victim was no longer Fualaau, and the villain was no longer Letourneau. The demonstrated pattern of news coverage of sex crimes was challenged, and through this evolution the story line was adapted as well.

Good Mother evolution

Early articles relied heavily on the myth of the Good Mother. Letourneau was described as “a caring devoted mother” who “took her kids to church and imbued them early with a sense of right and wrong” (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 53). She was “devoted to her four children” and brought those qualities to school, where she was an “exceptionally gifted teacher” (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 47). Also describing her as a “superteacher,” journalists wrote that Letourneau would often “haul her own kids to her classroom after dinner so she could chat and play as she finished special projects” (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 63). When she had Fualaau as a student in the second grade (before she was attracted to him), she “bought him art supplies, took him to museums and encouraged him to develop his talent for poetry” (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 47).

A key feature of the Good Mother myth is self-sacrifice, and Letourneau’s portrayal within the text embodied that characteristic. While waiting for sentencing, she was forced to sleep in front of her house in a car. She was “not allowed to be in the same house as children—even her own” (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 46). In discussing her prison sentence, it was pointed out that she “has already paid dearly for her transgressions: She has been separated from the children to whom she was so devoted” (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 53). However, like the traditional outlook on rape, the archetype of the Good Mother is challenged. By downplaying legal ramifications and emphasizing that the Letourneau-Fualaau case was about love, journalists transformed the boy into a man, and the archetype transformed and adapted along with him. The story may have been grounded in the archetype of the Good Mother, but it soon became inadequate and grew into the archetype of the Princess as passivity and dependency gained prominence.

Disappearance of age

One interesting way in which the love story gained ground in the narrative was in the way journalists removed age in discussions of the pairs’ time together. The two became teenagers drawn together (like Romeo and Juliet) in forbidden love. Together they saw the movie *Titanic*, which “made their spirits take flight and their libidos surge....[Fualaau] even sketched Mary in the nude, à la Jack and Rose,” according to a *Time* story (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 61). In a *People* article the legal ramifications of sex with a minor were downplayed as sex occurred when “one thing led to another” (Jerome et al., 2004, p. 55). Even when the two were caught after being ordered by the court never to see each other again, the description in *Time* was closer to teen lovers caught after curfew rather than a rapist and her victim evading the police. The car was described as having “its parking lights aglow and its windows steamed” as Letourneau sat inside “with her illicit young lover, kissing and talking” (Edwards & Willwerth, 1998, p. 103). In a *People* story the same scene is described: When police attempted to peer through the “steamed-up windows” of the car, “sitting frozen in the flashlight’s beam” were Letourneau and Fualaau (“Fatal attraction,” 1998, p. 176).

Fualaau's age was constantly shifting. Numerous articles updated his age for each article. He "turned 14 in June" (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 52). He was "now 14" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 45) or "now 15" (Notorious, 1999, p. 27). He was even referred to as being 15, having sex with Letourneau at 14, and being almost 13 at the time of their first encounter—all in the same article (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998). The crime was only rarely described as sex with a 12-year-old. More often, it was "sex with a 13-year-old student" ("Bad education," 2004, p. 114) or with an "underage former student" ("Notorious," 1999, p. 27). Sometimes, the onus was on the reader to figure out the age. The first sexual encounter occurred "just before his 13th birthday" (Jerome et al., 2004, p. 55) or "a few days before his 13th birthday" (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 68). The difference between a 12-year-old and a 13-year-old is significant simply because it reconstructs the rape victim as a teenager, and, arguably, teens having "sex" is a bit more comprehensible than children having "sex."

Another way journalists erased Fualaau's age and, in doing so, reordered normative gender and sex roles was in descriptions of him. Elaboration on physical attributes was rare (at the time, he was a minor), but when he was described, Fualaau was characterized as physically looking older and larger. He was described as a "burly pupil" in *Time* (Stein, 1997, p. 137) and "a rather big teen" with an appeal that was "more Leonardo DiCaprio than Ben Affleck" in *Time* (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 61).

The result of these journalistic accounts was that while reminding readers of Fualaau's actual age, the text insisted he was older. One of Letourneau's neighbors described the pictures he drew as "very insightful," saying "the poetry he wrote wasn't anything you'd expect from a 12-year-old" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 47). This became a common theme. Fualaau's mother described him as "an old soul in a young body" (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 61). Letourneau helped get him "scholarships for Saturday classes at a local community college" (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 52). He is even described by one of Letourneau's friends as being "very good" with their daughter Audrey, explaining that "he often stands over her and rubs her back at night, trying to get her to fall asleep" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 48). Fualaau was "a slender, sensitive, artistic youth who looked and acted older than his years" and who was "sexually mature," according to *Time* (Edwards & Willwerth, 1998, p. 103). Letourneau noticed his "artistic talent" and "sexual precocity," readers learn from *People* (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 68). In sixth grade, "while classmates were writing poems that described themselves as lovers of 'girls, baseball, ice cream...and MTV,'" Fualaau was writing that "he was a 'lover of giving, faith, trust...who likes to wear masks over his soul. He was just 12,'" another *Time* story explains (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 61). *Time* and *People* both mention his age as 12, but much more often when referring to his talents and not in conjunction with the actual rape.

As his age disappeared, Fualaau was transformed from a child into an older man—an attractive man who conveyed a deep understanding of compassion, culture, and Letourneau herself. Every fairy tale needs a hero, and once he emerged, Letourneau became the Princess, the damsel in distress, with Fualaau riding to her rescue.

The Prince

Initially, with Letourneau's motives split between a bipolar disorder and love, the only background story line that mattered was that of her father. However, with the adoption of love as the driving force behind why the rape was committed, the story became a fairy tale. Trauma in her personal life moved into the spotlight. Early in the narrative, her husband, Steve, was portrayed as an injured husband and father attempting to comprehend what had happened. The news left him "kind of speechless," and he described the experience as similar to "taking a picture of our family from the wall and throwing it on the ground" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 45). After Letourneau was caught seeing Fualaau following the court order forbidding her to do so, Steve was "very upset" because he and Letourneau were "working on putting their lives back together" ("Fatal attraction," 1998, p. 176).

That soon changed. With the disappearance of the bipolar narrative and the establishment (and stubbornness) of the fairy tale narrative, gender roles surrounding love prevailed, and Letourneau became the victim in need of rescuing. Steve was transformed into a verbally and physically abusive, racist, boring husband. After learning his wife was pregnant with Fualaau's child, Steve was "enraged" and "ranted about 'that n----- baby' in front of their children" (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 63). Her marriage was described as being "troubled" (Edwards & Willwerth, 1998, p. 103), "unraveling" (Jerome et al., 2004, p. 56), and "unhappy" (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1997, p. 68). Rhetorically, Steve was even demoted from a "cargo loading specialist" (Alexander & Dodd, 1997, p. 52) and "airline cargo specialist" (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 68) to a "baggage handler" (Jerome et al., 2004, p. 56). Letourneau told police that her husband "punched her in the stomach," and while talking to him after he came home drunk one night, Steve "pulled away in the car quickly, allegedly knocking her hard to the ground" while she was eight months pregnant with Fualaau's child (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 63).

Amid the verbal and physical abuse, Letourneau suffered a series of emotional setbacks. She found out that her father had terminal cancer, leaving her "devastated...paralyzed" and feeling like "she lost the man of her life" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 47). She also suffered a miscarriage and severe depression (Edwards & Willwerth, 1998). As Letourneau was suffering through an unhappy and dangerous marriage with a slew of recent personal tragedies, Fualaau emerged as the love of her life, an artist and prince coming to rescue her from a loveless existence—a "jailbreak out of the gulag of troubled suburban marriage," a *Time* story explained (Morrow, 1998, p. 64).

Fualaau's masculinity is also rescued as the narrative progresses. The rape story becomes an account of Fualaau initiating sex with a woman who could no longer deny her love for him (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998). This structuring positions Fualaau in a dominant role, as assertive and in charge, and constructs Letourneau as weak. With this narrative, dichotomous (hetero)sexual roles are solidified, and Fualaau regains his masculinity.

Patiently waiting

Waiting for the hero is essential to the Princess narrative. From Andromeda chained to the rocks to Rapunzel in the tower, the princess in the fairy tale is often reduced to waiting for her

prince to rescue her. In the process she is marginalized, deprived of independence, and reduced to a prize for the hero, who traditionally must overcome some obstacle in order to reach the princess and live happily ever after. Letourneau is described in a similar fashion. As Letourneau's husband began to be described in more derogatory terms, the narrative implied that Letourneau was staying with him and her family even though conditions were less than ideal. The real waiting, however, came with her prison sentence.

While Fualaau has also been portrayed as waiting, he is shown to have more options than Letourneau. As a teen, his life continued as he returned to school (Alexander & Dodd, 1997) and began thinking about college as writers acknowledged that "seven years is an eternity for a teenager to wait for a girl" (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 64). In one article Fualaau even says, "I wouldn't say I'm waiting" before elaborating: "I have to stay focused on how to live my life. I have to find my way" (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 68). As for Letourneau, she served six months before being released, after which she was caught having sex with Fualaau. An "angry judge... immediately ordered Letourneau back to prison to finish her sentence," and the possibility of additional charges threatened "to keep her behind bars even longer" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 48). Even though she had the opportunity to lower her sentence by arguing that Fualaau raped her "since she was vulnerable and didn't have the will to resist his come-ons," she "avoided putting any legal burdens on her young lover" (Cloud, Rainert, & Sachs, 1998, p. 64). She would serve the prison sentence even though "she doesn't believe she did anything wrong" (Hewitt et al., 1998, p. 48).

Happy ending

As is traditional in fairy tales, the story of Letourneau and Fualaau culminates with a wedding—and with this development, reminders of child rape nearly disappear. This celebration of marriage, Rowe (1979) and others argue, results in the maintenance of normative patriarchal gender roles. *People* highlighted this final detail of the saga, while *Time* for the first time veered away from coverage similar to the entertainment magazine. The descriptions of the wedding in *People* conjure images of fairy tale weddings presented in various forms, including "dressed in white, she glided down the aisle" and "there wasn't a dry eye in the house" (Jerome et al., 2005, p. 63). In constructing the happy ending, journalists highlighted Letourneau's "patient servitude," which in this case was served in prison. This same *People* article reads: "Letourneau waited seven years behind bars to marry the boy-turned-man of her dreams" (Jerome et al., 2005, p. 62).

What likely seems a final turn in the story for journalists justifies the narrative turn from a rape into a romantic love affair in which the couple is expected to live happily ever after. This example from *People* could come straight out of a fairy tale:

Their wedding is still weeks away, but friends say Mary Kay Letourneau, 43, and her onetime student Vili Fualaau, 21, already look like a pair of honeymooners. Fualaau, who proposed in a song beneath Mary Kay's window last fall, recently carried his bride-to-be over the threshold of the small cottage they rent overlooking Washington's Puget Sound, where the bed is an inflatable mattress in front of the fireplace. "They're acting like newlyweds." ("They're ready," 2005, p. 66)

The crime has been erased as the myth of the Princess has overcome the social stigma of what actually happened. Through Letourneau's patience and allowing herself to be rescued by a victim-turned-prince, Letourneau's status is restored, and a story that challenged preconceived notions of rape and gender roles reverted to a fairy tale narrative reifying hegemonic structures.

Conclusion

The child rape story of Mary Kay Letourneau is admittedly one of unusual circumstances. It then functions as an exemplar for illustrating ways that journalists rely on myth to tell inconceivable stories, those that in Lule's (2002) words "cannot be explained" (p. 276). As the circumstances of the Letourneau story unfolded, journalists working at both a news and an entertainment magazine rearticulated the narrative, transforming it from a rape committed by a teacher against a child to one of romance. Letourneau transformed from a pathological rapist in need of help to a Good Mother and eventually a patiently waiting, self-sacrificing Princess who is eventually rewarded for her love with ceremonial nuptials. Rather than an aggressor who raped a child 20 years her junior, she becomes passive and weak in relation to a male aggressor. The young boy went from a child victim to an old soul in a teenager's body, an assertive sexual being who controlled the situation. In the end, with Letourneau's rape case, journalists reconstructed reality into a romantic paradigm. Fualaau regained his masculinity, the couple married, and gender order was maintained. Journalists transformed real life into a fairy tale and, in doing so, constructed and reinforced cultural norms based on patriarchal hegemony.

Here is a story that challenged many preconceived notions of rape and hegemonic gender roles, and yet ultimately it reinforced those beliefs by explaining to readers that this was not an actual case of rape but rather a case of true love. This construction is problematic on a number of levels. It strengthens ideologically constructed understandings of gender that empower masculinity while constructing women as the weaker sex. It seems almost inconceivable that even in a child rape story (where the victim is 12 years old), the female rapist can be (re)structured to be the weak, submissive, passive actor in the situation. We posit that a male in Letourneau's position would never be structured in this manner. Not only does this construction have serious consequences for boys who are sexually abused, as they are expected to hide their suffering "like a man," but it also delegitimizes women's real agency in terms of their sexuality. If women are void of power in their position as rapist, when can women actually possess sexual power? We argue that this construction ensures that women never have sexual power, ultimately supporting hegemonic masculinity and women's subordinate social positioning.

By reinforcing myths about women's lack of sexual power, the story tells readers that sex crimes committed by women against children are not a problem in need of societal attention. This notion results in child victims who are not viewed as such and may not receive the support they need. That Fualaau was 12 years old should not be forgotten or dismissed. Imagine a 12-year-old girl in Fualaau's position and Letourneau as a man. Would anyone care that the girl loved her teacher and had been the aggressor in the first sexual encounter? Would anyone believe that girl could really make such important decisions about her life at such a young age? We believe the answer would be "no" in both cases. Further, would a journalist ever describe a 12-year-old female victim as "more Jennifer Aniston than Angelina Jolie"? Yet Fualaau is described in terms of a comparison to

Leonardo DiCaprio instead of Ben Affleck. What if a male teacher, after being arrested for child rape, described noticing the sexual precocity and sexual maturity of the young girl? We do not believe journalists in that case would (re)articulate the story as a romantic fairy tale. That is because the mythological structuring of this case is essentially tied to (hetero)sexual gender roles and hegemonic masculinity.

This study is not without limitations. The sample size, though comprehensive, is admittedly small, especially when compared with analyses of news outlets on a daily rather than weekly schedule. The nature of the story itself also limited the research into other areas, such as race. That Fualaau was Samoan and Letourneau was white seemed like a subject for rich analysis, but preliminary analysis soon showed this to be impossible. Fualaau was often mentioned but rarely expounded upon as journalists treaded a fine ethical line. His name was nationally known, which muddled the normal newsroom procedure of excluding the names of minors in cases of sexual assault. A 1998 article in *People* specifically stated that “his name has not been published because of his age” (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998, p. 67), but seven months later *People* prominently featured Fualaau (including a large photo), even though he had just turned 15 (Frankel, Nolan, & Hardy, 1998). Even then he was still in his early teens, and so writers were undoubtedly reluctant to offer any descriptions of a child, no matter how original the situation. As a result, the omnipresent issue of race can only be gleaned from what was written about Letourneau, though that in itself speaks to the lack of voice that people of color are so often given in the news. Lastly, a comparison of stories where a male teacher sexually assaulted a female student would have been ideal to compare and contrast, but none were found in magazine samples. Those articles found in newspapers were often nothing more than news briefs announcing the crime, the perpetrator’s name, and (often) the jail sentence.

In pointing to the ways in which journalists turned a rape story into a romantic fairy tale, we hope to draw attention to the inadequate ways in which cultural industries, particularly journalism, often deal with rape and gender issues. The public deserves a fair consideration of these crimes, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator and victim. The saga of Mary Kay Letourneau should have been covered as a rape case with more attention paid to this crime in particular and to child and male rape in general. The stories we examined would benefit from more focus on rape specialists and child psychologists who could acknowledge the damaging effects of this type of crime.

Finally, it is worth noting that the journalists’ narratives of the Letourneau child rape and the ensuing encounters between Fualaau and Letourneau are complex and contradictory and that the articles are not monolithic in their presentation of the story. We are not arguing that journalists do not offer the facts of the case. What we argue is that the manner in which the story unfolds, the overarching narrative, offers readers a familiar fairy tale about love and romance, drawing attention away from the seriousness of child rape. Perhaps most important, this research demonstrates how the ideologies embedded in myths can have profound effects.

Further research is needed into how rape myths, gender archetypes, romantic fairy tales, and dichotomous constructions of (hetero)sexuality influence journalistic coverage of stories about rape, particularly the rape of students by their teachers. Our belief is that these cases are treated differently in the media when the child rapist is a woman rather than a man. Testing this assumption through both quantitative and additional qualitative methods would verify whether our belief is

true. A better understanding of the shortcomings in how journalists treat rape as it relates to gender issues will aid in identifying solutions to the problematic coverage. After all, male and female child rapists should be treated the same. When they are not, cultural narratives are both revealed and reinforced.

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