

# We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales!

## The Construction of the Feminist Fairy Tale: Female Agency over Role Reversal

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A child's first exposure to literature is often a fairy tale, frequently a derivative of one of the classics by the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault. While lack of mythology instruction in the early elementary curriculum and lack of mythology recall knowledge in adolescents is cause for concern, high school students do know basic Aesop fables and such well-known fairy tales as Cinderella.<sup>1</sup>



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Many states mandate the study of folktales, fairy tales, and fables in their curricula (for example, the statewide curricula of North Carolina, California, and Rhode Island emphasize this for third grade), preschools often include fairytales in their curricula, and public libraries use fairytales and folktales in preschool programs aimed at developing early literacy habits. These tales, many hundreds of years old and found in countless incarnations all over the world, are a basic part of the intricate layering of stories and influences that perpetuate and inform the cultural norms surrounding the world the child lives in.<sup>2</sup>

The cultural norms represented in fairy tales play a large part in the socialization processes of the child who reads them. Contained within these cultural norms are the shared beliefs about gender roles held by the child's society. The development of a gender identity is integral to a child's self-perception. According to Judith L. Meece, gender conceptions are important for understanding not only the self but also the behavior of others.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, they affect the way children are treated by peers and adults and influence future behavior expectations.<sup>4</sup> As children grow, they use information from their parents, peers, school, literature, and the media to form theories on how men and women are supposed to behave. Literature in general, and fairy tales in particular, gender children. The characters depicted in stories help children to determine what it means to be male or female as it applies to behavior, traits, or occupation within a child's culture.<sup>5</sup> In this capacity, fairy tales can be powerful cultural agents, telling the child who reads them how they should behave with regard to gender.

Fairy tales contain shared beliefs about gender roles held by a child's society; however, shared beliefs can and frequently do

take another form: the oversimplified gender role stereotype.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, United States researchers began to notice the frequency with which gender stereotypes occurred in children's books. They questioned how this repeated exposure to gender stereotypes might affect a child's development.

In response, a number of studies were conducted, many revealing similar patterns of male dominance and female subservience.<sup>7</sup> Researchers concluded that repeated exposure to the stereotyped images of gender was likely to have a detrimental effect on the development of a child's self-esteem as well as his perceptions of his own and others' abilities and potential.<sup>8</sup>

Fairy tales can be immensely influential in children's developing gender identity, so it is important to examine the messages that are being transmitted. It has long been recognized that the traditional European canon of fairy tales, those that have survived to the present day, are tales that reflect and reproduce the patriarchal values of the society that crafted them, and, as Marcia Lieberman explained, "Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales."<sup>9</sup>

These stories portray women as "weak, submissive, dependent, and self-sacrificing while men are powerful, active, and dominant."<sup>10</sup> Fairy tales define women as beautiful objects, powerless to alter the events in their lives, while fairy tale men are powerful agents of their own destiny. There are characters within these tales who defy these descriptions; however, their defiance comes with a price. Powerful women in fairy tales are generally ugly if not also evil.<sup>11</sup> The exception to this rule is the wise woman or fairy godmother; however, these powerful women are still separated from traditional fairy tale women in that they are not truly human.<sup>12</sup>

Traditional feminist criticism of the "classic" fairy tale texts rests on the fact that stories that reflect traditional patriarchal values survive, while those tales whose characters shed their archetypes and step outside the bounds of accepted behavior disappear into oblivion.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the fairy tales told and retold today are not necessarily representative of the genre. Rather, they are a direct result of the "skewed selection and silent revision of subversive texts."<sup>14</sup>

Within this socio-political and -historical perspective, early feminists (1950s and 1960s) examined the roles of women embedded in the folktales and fairy tales that have survived and found them to be "an unfortunate source of negative female stereotypes . . . [and] . . . one of the many socializing forces that discouraged females from realizing their full human potential."<sup>15</sup> Andrea Dworkin (1974) summarized this position:

There are two definitions of woman [in fairy tales]. There is the good woman. She is a victim. There is the bad woman. She must be destroyed. The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified. . . . [the ending of these tales] tells us that happiness

for a woman is to be passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep. . . . It tells us that the happy ending is when we are ended, when we live without our lives, or not at all.<sup>16</sup>

These feminists "saw women as artificially separated from and wrongly considered unequal to men."<sup>17</sup>

During the late 1970s and 1980s, feminism evolved into the feeling that "women were naturally separate from men and rightly superior," and rewritten folktales and fairy tales claiming to be "feminist" often simply reversed the normal gender stereotypes (for example, Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*, 1980).<sup>18</sup> Feminist writers also published collections of folktales with strong heroines, such as Alison Lurie's *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* (1980) and Ethel Johnston Phelps' *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from Around the World* (1981).<sup>19</sup> While these collections often paired the strong, clever woman with a stupid or inept man (touting women's superiority over men), they also began to transition feminist criticism toward the exploration of the cultural diversity and breadth of women in folktales and the recovery of the "collective female voice" in these tales.<sup>20</sup>

Kay Stone characterizes this third wave of feminism as the view of "both women and men as naturally separate but potentially equal—if men shape up."<sup>21</sup> Feminist children's fairy tales seem to lag several years behind the changing conceptions of feminism.

Jane Yolen lamented in her 1977 article, *America's Cinderella*, "The magic of the old tales has been falsified, the true meaning lost, perhaps forever."<sup>22</sup> And given what is known about canonical fairy tale literature, it is very tempting to agree with her and mourn the loss of the true fairy tale.

However, "contamination," a term folklorists use to explain foreign influence on pure narrative tradition, can have an enriching process on the fairy tale. Author Jack Zipes, of *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, discusses the possibility that the contamination of fairy tales "can lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right."<sup>23</sup>

Though the European canon (Grimm or Perrault) are thought of as "original" fairy tales, "There is no genuine or authentic version of a fairy tale."<sup>24</sup> In fact, tales are constantly being reworked and adapted to reveal new facets of a culture or the creativity of an author or storyteller.<sup>25</sup> Re-vision, a term whose groundwork is laid in feminist postculturalist thought, indicates an author's decision about which original elements to retain and which to refute when creating his new vision of the text.<sup>26</sup> "Feminist rewriters of fairy tales have reworked the conventions of the genre so as to encode discourses that contradict or challenge patriarchal ideologies that are increasingly viewed as anachronistic in today's society."<sup>27</sup> Re-visions are one form of contamination.<sup>28</sup>

Many feminists consider it fitting that women are now reclaiming fairy tales, given fairy tales' oral tradition and the historical connection between women and child rearing. However, it

would be unfortunate for women to revise these fairy tales with the sole intention of disrupting the binary gender construction.<sup>29</sup> The simple reversal of gender roles does not result in a feminist fairy tale, but rather a fractured fairy tale.

Fractured fairy tales challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies only at the story level of the text. These changes rely on a straightforward reversal of gender roles and the substitution of strong female characters for more passive female characters.<sup>30</sup>

Children are not fooled by these false heroines. A 1989 study focusing on children's responses to Elizabeth, the protagonist in Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess*, found that many of the children in the study were unable to view Elizabeth as a genuine hero.<sup>31</sup> *The Paper Bag Princess* is an example of a feminist tale that complies with the traditional form of a fairy tale but possesses obvious reversals of traditional gender roles. In this case, Princess Elizabeth rescues Prince Ronald from a dragon and then decides not to marry him. Children in the study felt that Elizabeth ought to have "cleaned herself up and married the prince."<sup>32</sup> Similar studies found similar results, with the sentiment being that while children admired strong female protagonists, these were not the characters they wished to emulate.

It would seem, then, that in order to truly re-vision a fairy tale, thereby creating a work that is artistically new and rings true to a child, feminist authors must cease attempting to simply reverse gender roles. Rather, they must re-vision the entire work and create something from the ground up. Donna Jo Napoli is one feminist author who has found success re-visioning fairy tales, creating feminist rather than fractured fairy tales.<sup>33</sup> She has altered generic conventions in three main areas in her books that allow her to rework the discursive foundations of the traditional material: narrative strategy, representation of male and female characters, and renegotiation of patriarchal ideologies and values.<sup>34</sup>

Napoli chooses narrative strategies that subvert the traditional omniscient anonymous narrator in order to present other sides of the story. She frequently chooses a first-person narrative, allowing the protagonist to be the agent of his own narration. Feminists frequently write of the importance of giving voice, agency, and subjectivity to those who have previously been silenced and objectified. A female protagonist is enabled if she narrates her own story.

In children's literature, the character's voice serves as a metaphor of female agency, providing her with the potential for self-determination. In *The Magic Circle*, a feminist re-vision of *Hansel and Gretel*, Napoli makes a deliberate decision to give her sorceress protagonist (the traditional witch) voice and agency. Napoli's decisions regarding the sorceress invite the readers to empathize with a character who has not only been objectified and vilified in the traditional tales, but whose representation has, more generally, "been symbolic of misogynist attitudes toward women."<sup>35</sup>

A truly feminist children's story has recently been defined as one in which the main character is empowered, regardless of

gender.<sup>36</sup> In keeping with this definition, Napoli alters the representation of male and female characters with regard to issues of gender and gendered relationships.

In her fairy tales, Napoli pays as much attention to subverting stereotypes of heroes and princes as she does to redefining female protagonists.<sup>37</sup> Napoli re-visions the classic tale *Beauty and the Beast* in her novel, *Beast*. In *Beast*, Napoli alters the tale by presenting the story through the first-person narrative of Prince Orasmyn, the Beast. Napoli introduces her readers to a Beast who possesses the "traditionally feminine attributes of delicate respect for Beauty's [Belle's] feelings, nurturance, comfort, gentleness, and patience."<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, Napoli skews the traditional power dynamic between Belle and Beast. In his lion form, Beast reads with difficulty and can only communicate by scratching words with his paws or using nonverbal signs. Conversely, Belle has full access to language in its spoken and written forms. She keeps a journal of sorts and writes her own story, chronicling her thoughts and feelings about the Beast and her situation. "Napoli, thus, positions Belle in a positive relation to language and culture by subverting androcentric theories that devalue women's status in a patriarchal sex-gender system on the grounds that women do not have full access to the symbolic (language as power and culture)."<sup>39</sup> In this way, Napoli alters the traditional representation of male and female characters in order to create a feminist, rather than fractured, fairy tale.

The third way in which Napoli alters generic conventions in her books is the renegotiation of patriarchal ideologies and values. In the Brothers' Grimm telling of the story of *Rumpelstiltskin*, the tale "rests on the premise that a daughter who produces wealth, whether through her own labor or through magical means, is a girl who can make a good marriage."<sup>40</sup> Napoli's retelling of the tale, *Spinners*, attempts to challenge the patriarchal capitalist value placed on marriage by the Grimms' version of the story by emphasizing the artistry, rather than the economics, of spinning. In *Spinners*, spinning and weaving, though it earns Saskia a living, also earns her respect as an artist with the ability to create beauty where none existed before.<sup>41</sup> Napoli empowers Saskia with the same talent that the Grimm Brothers used to sell her into marriage.

Children use fairy tales to identify cultural norms about the world in which they live. Contained within these cultural norms are the shared beliefs about gender roles held by the child's society. As fairy tales are often a child's early exposure to gender identity and how it defines a character, these gender roles should be as realistic as possible.

Real men and women are not the stuff of fairy tales, completely good or completely evil archetypes. They are complicated. Real men and women play roles beyond the traditional gender-defined positions depicted in canonical fairy tales.

For feminist fairy tales to meet the needs of a society of children in want of fully realized, complicated characters (regardless of gender), feminist writers need to move beyond straight

role reversal. Children see through these fractured fairy tales and do not identify with their one-dimensional protagonists.

Feminist fairy tales must be stories in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender. In order to do this, more authors should follow Donna Jo Napoli's lead and re-vision traditional stories by changing narrative conventions, empowering female and male protagonists, and developing narratives that encode truly feminist themes and values. ♀

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