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Gavin, Helen

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# The damsel in distress: not as sweet as she is painted?

*Helen Gavin*

## **Abstract**

Once upon a time (the 1960's), in a land far, far away (Yorkshire), a little girl with measles missed two weeks of school. When she returned, all the children were changed; they had been introduced to fairy stories. Absent while her class-mates listened to amazing tales, the precocious little brat never quite fell under the spell. Even to a child, the way the characters behaved was odd. Five-year olds can believe in magic; they can even believe in monsters. What was unpalatable was the sweet, passive nature of the heroines, and their unquestioning response to dreadful evil visited upon them by stepmothers or magical creatures. For example, Little Red Riding Hood is told to go straight to Grandma's house, with no dallying or talking to strangers when walking through the woods. Why? Because she might be kidnapped, or worse, by a wolf who can, somewhat bizarrely, talk. Snow White is told by her diminutive hosts to never answer the door, an instruction she disobeys with calamitous consequences. Cinderella is subjected to abuse and exploitation, yet makes no appeal to her father. Feminist despair of the portrayal of women in the modern retellings of the stories is well documented. However, the original folk tales from which they are drawn are different; they are purposefully horrific in nature, possibly acting as cautionary narratives, or to explain things mysterious to the pre-industrial world, where psychiatry consisted of trepanation or spell casting. In this paper, we present an analysis of three tales and show how the portrayal of sex, violence and evil in European fairy tales, and characters such as the damsel in distress and wicked stepmothers, are motifs designed to caution against unconventional behaviour.

**Key Words:** Fairy tales; damsel in distress; passive acceptance of evil.

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## **1. Introduction**

Fairy stories have always seemed odd to us, we somewhat precocious children, but why shouldn't a child question things that are patently not true? Perhaps some children simply wish for the fairy godmother to appear and make them beautiful, or for next door's dog to stand on his hind legs and discuss the merits of large ears. When we grow up, fairy stories still seem unreal to us, but for different reasons, the beautiful girl-women in them so obviously not us, and we wait in vain for our prince to come.

Writers such as Marcia Lieberman<sup>1</sup> and Andrea Dworkin<sup>2</sup> point to characters portraying the damsel in distress, and the lack of strong female characters other than wicked stepmothers or hags, as motifs designed to discourage girls developing autonomous existence. Such debates are important, and reflect how literature can be manipulated to reinforce stereotypes. Turkel<sup>3</sup> suggests that the happy ending, such a necessary part of the mix, reinforces gender stereotypes, because the heroine

is usually a passive victim of the whims of other characters, her destiny the fulfilment of others' wishes. However, this analysis may have missed the point of the modern renderings. The traditional stories appear to have contained strong, non-passive female characters who disappear in the anthologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Along with their departure, there appears to be another element missing. The original stories are purposefully horrific in nature, but the horror has gone. For example, Cinderella's ugly sisters, wishing to fit into the enchanted footwear, cut off their own toes, filling the slipper with blood<sup>4</sup>. Try finding that amongst all the "bibbidi-bobbidi-boo" of the Disney version! Even stories that the Western world has adopted from other cultures, such as Ala-din, have been "cleansed," turning the evil spiteful jinni into a simply mischievous, but benevolent, spirit<sup>5</sup> even when voiced by Robin Williams, or appearing in a pantomime. Many of the traditional European stories we know today as frivolous entertainment, are indicative, in their original form, of the psychological & cultural issues of pre-industrialised society, such as xenophobia, closeness to death and fear of violent crime. These issues are still represented in the tales familiar to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, but in a more agreeable form for modern sensibilities. The various difficulties our heroines encounter, although brought about by wilful disobedience or lack of attention, do lead them to their destinies. However, the description of the outcomes is mild in comparison to the original folk tale from which the story is derived. It would seem that not only have we Disneyfied our stories for global consumption, we have forgotten their original intent – warnings to the disobedient and unconventional, but perhaps also a glint of hope in a dangerous world. This happens for two different reasons – the first is that tales are adapted to fit with contemporary and geographical contexts, for example we would now define Cinderella's plight as a failing of social services. The second reason is to ensure no-one is upset by the gore and horror, but judging by the other material available to children today, Disney need not worry.

To consider the meanings of the pieces of stories, concepts, and events that have been cleansed out of the older tales, several stories will be deconstructed to attempt a psychological understanding of the issues hidden within them.

### **3. The child within the stories**

Crime has always been with us. The history and culture of every civilisation in the world recounts violent and sexual crimes in its description of early human behaviour. For example, in the Judeo-Christian bible, in the book of Judges, the forcible abduction and sexual enslavement of the women of Jabesh-gilead by the twelve thousand warriors sent to destroy the city is described, although the rape is called marriage. Then of course we have the favourite passage for some teachers from Proverbs "*Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.*"

Such motifs even appear in some cultures, in their folk tales, as commonplace. According Refilwe Malimabe-Ramagosh<sup>6</sup>, folk tales in Setswana (the official

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language of Botswana) routinely depict child abuse, by both male and female adults, and serve to perpetuate cultural beliefs that see children as objects to be used in ways that are unpalatable to modern society.

Thus folk tales may be another ancient way in which crime is described, beyond the recounting of creation myths and religious laws. Reading and writing are skills that have only recently moved from the province of the elite, providing all members of a population access to written material. Hitherto, it is postulated, stories were related via oral tradition. In a society in which writing is rare, it would seem reasonable to suppose that transmission of cultural values and expectations is carried out verbally. To enable them to be understood and remembered, the cultural material is subsumed into stories depicting good and evil. This hypothesis of oral transmission is disputed by Bottigheimer<sup>7</sup> who asserts that the idea of folk invention and oral transmission of tales cannot be verified. She points out, for example, that the earliest written version of the story Europeans know as “*Cinderella*” is in a Venetian anthology written by Straparola c. 1550<sup>8</sup>. At this time, there were economic circumstances in which the idea of a rise from rags to riches was very attractive (nothing changes, today we depend on the National Lottery). She goes further, and says that there is no evidence of any form of the Cinderella story before it was written by Straparola. Bottigheimer ignores the difficulties with her critique of the oral transmission position. Although writing is, in modern times, almost universal, the development of writing is still a difficult skill<sup>9</sup> to acquire, as any teacher will attest. Moreover, the ability to write does not necessarily lead to writing lucid narratives, and many struggle to acquire this ability even in adulthood, as many University lecturers will attest. The emergence of writing does not mean that oral transmission stopped, nor does it follow that the written forms were the first ways in which the stories were told, simply because there is no template to be found. Bottigheimer has fallen into the first logical trap of empiricism, and has assumed that absence of evidence means evidence of absence.

Proponents of the non-traditional genesis of our modern fairy tales also suggest that the universality of stories must mean that they were first told in the period after writing and printing had become commonplace<sup>10</sup>. In other words, the stories were not handed down orally, then transcribed by the authors, but that these authors are the first to invent the tales, and that the evidence for this is that everywhere that reading is a form of knowledge transmission have the same stories. This again ignores much of the evidence in the older forms of the fairy tales. For example, the Italian version of Snow White (“*Il Pentamerone*”) contains none of the merry little men who whistle on their way to work. This seems to be due to traditional Italian folklore containing no mention of dwarves<sup>11</sup>, unlike the stories in Northern Europe. Even if the authors were the first to write about their own version of Snow White, and thus included only the local “colour”, it still demonstrates that they were influenced by something peculiar to the region.

Perhaps a middle picture is more likely; that oral tradition contained the stories and kept them alive, with the authors and transcribers embellishing and editing for their own audiences.

So, if we accept that the verbally communicated stories may have informed the writing, to what extent did the writing modify the oral traditions, and why?

Examination of fairy tales familiar to Western children shows that a great deal has been taken from the stories.

### **3. Being beautiful can be hazardous to your health.**

A beautiful child, a jealous stepmother, a talking mirror, diamond mining dwarves, and, of course, a handsome, but anonymous prince. What a sweetly magical, moralistic tale for bedtime story telling. The horror arrives in palatable form – a cowardly woodcutter who butchers a boar instead of the princess and a poisoned apple that must have been dosed, given its action, with something like tetrodotoxin and ketamine (medications thought to compose the drugs used to zombify a person)<sup>12</sup>. George Romero would have had a field day if he had turned his attention to his little tale, with a beautiful zombie entombed in a crystal coffin. The stepmother's jealousy is interesting however. It has variously been interpreted simply as the Queen wishing to remain as the most fair in the land, and her fear of aging personified in the burgeoning beauty of her stepdaughter. However, if we apply evolutionary psychology, we have a step-parent wishing to remove any children not biologically her own, thus making the King desire children with his new wife. An alternative interpretation is that it is the female manifestation of the Oedipal complex. In neo-Freudian psychology this is termed the Electra complex<sup>13</sup>, and in psychodynamic psychosexual development is successfully resolved by the child's identification with the same-sex parent figure. There is a huge problem with this interpretation of Snow White, as it is the parent who has unresolved sexual issues, not the child. If the Freudian explanation was true, we'd see a lot of girls killing their female parental figure, but we don't. A parent is the most likely target to a murderous child, but this is very rare.<sup>14</sup> Snow White is not homicidal, she is always a passive recipient of whatever befalls her, her stepmother's attempted murder of her, the reluctant hospitality of the little men, and the awakening by the Prince's lust (this last being interpreted in Freudian terms as the removal of the last obstacle to her womanhood, her virginity<sup>15</sup>). Snow White as a story then, portrays what to male eyes is the necessity of an aging woman desiring to remain youthful in order to retain the attraction of the alpha male, jealousy between cross generational women and the need to remove children who are not genetically related. Throw in a few zombie medications, a soft hearted assassin, various little men and an unnamed Prince and the story really comes to life. But it's still a story right? It couldn't really happen.

- Between 1907 and 1909, Martha Randell killed three of her partner's children (two girls and a boy) by swabbing hydrochloric acid on their throats so that they would be unable to eat and starve to death. The fourth child only survived

the fate of his siblings by running away to his biological mother. Martha was the last woman to be hanged in the Western State of Australia.

- In April, 1930, Edna Mumbulo was found guilty of pouring gasoline over her 11 year old stepdaughter Hilda and setting light to her, in a successfully fatal attempt to obtain the girl's \$6,000 estate and receiving the sole affections of the girl's father
- In 2011, Elisa Baker pleaded guilty to the murder of her ten-year-old Australian stepdaughter, Zahra. The child's head has never been found.

Wicked stepmothers indeed, but none can be said to have killed because their stepchildren were too beautiful.

#### **4. Fairy godmothers and an offer a girl can't refuse**

Poor little Cinders was also the victim of a stepfamily, but not just her stepmother this time, the stepsisters are in on the abuse too. It is often described as a rags to riches story that befits times of hardship and penury. But it is not so – Cinderella is about restored wealth and status, that which has been denied her by her stepfamily, a dispute in which her biological father seems to have absolutely no power whatsoever. Angela Carter<sup>16</sup> remarks on the mysterious figure of the father, who must be so besotted with his new wife that he cannot see the neglect and abuse of his daughter. She points out that, in this domestic drama, the father is content to leave everything in it to the women to play out. Similarly the Prince, although a relatively active participant in this story, is somewhat peripheral to it, being merely a vessel by which Cinders escapes the drudgery. The horror comes, not in the neglect of the child, but the mutilation of her step sisters, in their attempt to fit their great big feet into the tiny crystal (or silver or gold or fur) slipper that has ended in the Prince's hands.

This story has not just been Disneyfied though, it has also been pantomimed. The form of pantomime we see today is almost unique to England. It is hilarious to watch overseas visitors at Christmas time bemused by the cross dressing, sexual innuendo and the audience participation (this in a country where polite queuing is mandatory) in a show intended for children.

Cinders regains her status due to her beauty and ability to dance until midnight in some very strange shoes, one of which is lost and does not transmute, but the other does, presumably. You are beginning to see the puzzlement of that little girl in Yorkshire. It is a very old story though, magic and transformation is an enduring motif of many cultures. The oldest record is from 9<sup>th</sup> century China, transcribed as an old story even then, by Tuan Ch'eng Shih<sup>17</sup>. Yeh-hsien, the Chinese Cinderella, is befriended by a talking goldfish, which magically provides her with beautiful clothes on festival day. The rest is history, the shoe, the warlord, the foot binding. Foot binding? Yes, this was a culture in which tiny feet were highly prized, highborn women had their feet bound from birth<sup>18</sup>.

What is remarkable about this story is the longing and dreaming it engenders, not the Prince and the ball, but the escape from a daily grind that we all experience.

But the oddest effect of Cinderella can be found in psychiatry. Goodwin and colleagues<sup>19</sup> describe the Cinderella syndrome, in which adoptive children claim that they are dressed in rags and made to do all the work of the household, and that the stepsiblings are favoured above them. Whilst these are often false accusations, what has been discovered is that they over-mask physical or sexual abuse in a previous household, after early loss of a mothering figure, and true emotional abuse in the adoptive home. Child protection professionals are now trained to recognise that, even in a child not displaying actual abuse, a possibility that, at some point, the child really has been abused needs to be investigated. The child's false accusation of abuse is a cry for help and should not be dismissed as a manipulative fabrication.

There are stranger stories yet, in which some children are seemingly deliberately placed in danger

#### **4. If you go down to the woods today.**

The third damsel to be considered isn't a princess deprived of her birthright needing a prince to rescue or restore her. She is much more lowly, from peasant stock, and her story is much more earthy and contains more familiar things that may have troubled the parents of a pretty little girl. The community must have known about the danger in the woods, but Little Red Riding Hood is nevertheless sent off to visit grandma. She is told not to stray from the path, so mum and dad knew there was something, well, dangerous in there. Freudian and Neo-Freudian interpretations of Red's story concentrate on the themes of menstruation and loss of virginity<sup>20,21</sup>, but we would like to point out that sometimes a little red hood is simply a little red hood. And, to be honest, the more interesting character, and the one more deserving of sympathy is the wolf. We don't know if he killed anyone, the only one he eats is grandma, you know, the selfish old biddy who can't be bothered to make her own cookies. And then he is killed because he swallowed her, and out pops grannie, none the worse for wear. Wolfie is simply a guy who got a bad press. He may even have been mentally ill, and we can file for a not guilty by reason of insanity defence. Lycanthropy is a rare psychiatric syndrome that involves a delusion that the affected person can transform into, or has transformed into, a non-human animal. There is also a mythical condition in which humans are said to supernaturally shapeshift into wolves or other animals, a gift to be desired in some cultures. Symptoms of clinical lycanthropy include self-reports of feeling like an animal, patterns of feral behaviour such as scratching, crying, whining, barking or howling and moving on all fours and true belief of becoming an animal. Treatment is difficult, there are a variety of symptoms and it may be comorbid with other psychological issues such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or depression. A major finding is that the patient undergoes some physical changes which are represented to him via changes in *proprioception* (the sense of self awareness of location and orientation). Some studies have identified that there may be neurological changes in areas of the brain which control proprioceptive input and interpretation. Two patients in 1999<sup>22</sup> showed anomalous activity in those brain

structures that suggest that when their bodies were changing slightly their minds were exaggerating or misinterpreting the input.

#### 5. Our stories

In summary then, it appears to be clear that, at least in European cultures, the idea of the fairy tale in modern life is cleansed of gore and horror that appear in the original tales of caution and hope. Snow White is a vapid beauty causing parental jealousy way beyond that which she deserves, the stepmother simply responding to an evolutionary urge to rid herself of non-biological offspring in order to supplant her in the King's favour. Cinderella is a story about restoration, not the acquisition of riches, and some poor children have become enmeshed in a psychiatric confusion to which we have attributed her name. Little Red Riding Hood and her bedridden granny are ciphers in which we explore ancient understanding about mental illness.

Still going to watch Disney films everyone?

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marcia Lieberman (1972) has suggested that the representation of women and girls in fairy stories helps form a limited sex role concept in terms of successful endeavour

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Dworkin's deconstruction of the female role in fairy tales is an influential examination of this position.

<sup>3</sup> Turkel (2002) says our longing for the happy ending is disempowering women and girls.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Windling, 2007 *Cinderella: Ashes, Blood, and the Slipper of Glass*

<sup>5</sup> Ismail & Ramadan, 2012 describe the Jinn as evil

<sup>6</sup> Malimabe-Ramagosh and colleagues talk about the Swetsana folk tale as including child abuse as an expected and even justified behaviour

<sup>7</sup> In *Fairy tales: a new history* Ruth Bottigheimer attempts to show that the concept of oral origins for our modern fairy tales is nonsense. However, she uses the same logic that she critiques in constructing her own argument.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Liliana Tolchinsky details the emergence of literacy in children as the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill, dependent upon many others.

<sup>10</sup> Bottigheimer *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Italo Calvino includes a story about Snow White, but with robbers, not dwarves.

<sup>12</sup> Psychologist Terence Hines records the beliefs that these drugs are involved in the process of zombification along with a form of hypnosis and reinforcement of cultural beliefs, but he dismisses this as an over credulous report, although does not offer any alternative hypotheses.

<sup>13</sup> A term derived from the Greek tragedy of Electra, and used by Carl Jung to describe the female equivalent to the Oedipus complex. The Electra complex is a



psychosexual problem in that a woman may become father-fixated. The term is neo-Freudian as Freud rejected it as inaccurate.

<sup>14</sup> Gavin & Porter describe the murder of a parent or parents by girls in their about to be published book *Female Aggression*

<sup>15</sup> Kay Stone, 1975 shows us what Disney missed.

<sup>16</sup> Angela Carter (1992) writes that Cinderella's (aka Ashputtle) father is blind to the filth in which his daughter lives because he is besotted with his new wife, but that this should be no excuse for the physical abuse and neglect she is experiencing, because it happens in his house.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Waley, 1947, gives us a translation of the Yeh-Hsien story

<sup>18</sup> Beverley Jackson, 1998 discusses foot binding as a national foot fetish and a practice that caused untold pain, damage and death.

<sup>19</sup> Goodwin et al 1980 discusses the Cinderella syndrome

<sup>20</sup> Kay Stone, 1975

<sup>21</sup> Jack Zipes suggests the red symbolises menstrual blood, with the dark forest the world of womanhood that the girl is entering. P382

<sup>22</sup> Moselhy HF (1999) describes the neurological changes in patients with lycanthropy.

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