

## **Cinderella Doesn't Need a Man: Redefining Fairy Tale Heroines**

By: Lidia Elsdon

A fairy tale is characterized as a story set in a fictional world, often with fantastical elements but still recognizable, centered around themes of morality and intended for entertainment (Comtois, 1995; Jones, 2002; Zipes, 2012). There will often be magical creatures, a beautiful maiden, and an evil stepmother. Most importantly, good always triumphs over evil. Though they are not seated in religion, fairy tales often provide lessons in relation to societal values (Zipes, 2012). "Fairy tales in Western cultures have generally been used to promote and safeguard the values and conventions of its patriarchal societies," (Comtois, 1995, p. 2). But as fairy tales can be reflective of society (Jones, 2002), it is only expected that they will evolve over time as society changes. For instance, thanks to Disney, the female character has dominated as the main focus of fairy tales, as opposed to the male character (Comtois, 1995). Still, the early fairy tales of Disney, such as Snow White and Cinderella, were direct reflections of the strict gender roles of the time.

Fairy tales and folklore have always had a strong foothold in fantasy (James & Mendlesohn, 2012). Whether obvious or not, fantasy draws on many fairy tale elements. Consider the knight in shining armour, the evil stepmother, or the damsel in distress; all of these tropes shared between both genres. For the progression from fairy tale to fantasy to occur, the characters need to develop. "Making the transition from fairy tale to fantasy requires the development of characters faced with particular situations or concerns who ultimately must rely on their initiatives to solve or work through a conflict," (Soltan, 2007, p.34). How then, did early fantasy writers forget to develop their female characters, leaving them as two-dimensional damsels in distress of their fairy tale predecessors?

With the recent rise in feminism and the evolution of female characters in literature and media, we can see a shift in fairy tales again. Look at Disney's recent releases in comparison to Snow White and Cinderella; Frozen and Moana are breaking the previous gender stereotypes perpetuated by fairy tales. With this change, many authors have decided to rewrite a specific fairy tale and modernize the story for today's audience. In these retellings, we often see the female characters taking back the narrative. The princesses are now fighting back. Take "Cinder" by Marissa Meyer, for instance. A more obvious retelling of Cinderella, Meyer (2012) writes of a

cyborg mechanic named Cinder living in a futuristic society. Cinder is an excellent example of a strong female character; she is well developed, experiences realistic emotions, and has strengths and weaknesses. Sure, she meets a prince and dances with him at a ball, but he is not the centre of her storyline and motivations.

These fairy tale retellings have become extremely popular as of late. Fairy tales provide an excellent facet through which to tell a story. This is because fairy tales are, for the most part, universal (Comtois, 1995; Zipes, 2012). While they may not be called by the same names, the historically oral culture of fairy tales means that a version of the same story can exist in several different cultures. Consider the well-known tale, “Beauty and the Beast”. Connections can be found between that and many other stories, including the Celtic “Tam Lin”, the Norwegian “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche in “The Golden Ass”, or the Middle Eastern “One Thousand and One Nights”. While they span across the globe and cultures, these stories all have very similar elements and project similar moral values.

Furthermore, “fairy tales contain truths which are a fundamental reflection of human experience and are so universal in their applicability,” (Comtois, 1995, p. 14). Similarly, Zipes writes, “[fairy tales] are not alive, but they breathe and are vigorous, and as they are passed on to us through traditions of storytelling, they almost assume a life of their own,” (Zipes, 2012, p.28). The nature of the fairy tale is that it demands to be told and retold, adapting to meet the needs of society with each reimagining. Finally, fairy tales resonate with readers on a personal level. We all want to believe in a world where “happily ever after” is expected; we desire validation that we can change ourselves and change the world (Zipes, 2012).

This bibliography provides some excellent examples of fairy tale retellings with strong female characters. With a variety of classic fairy tales and a variety of cultures to choose from, there is a retelling for everyone.

## **Beauty and the Beast**

### **A Court of Thorns and Roses, by Sarah J. Maas. 2015.**

Feyre is used to hunting, to providing for her family. But when she kills a massive wolf, a faerie in disguise, a debt must be paid. Her captor, Tamlin, hides behind a mask and a curse. Though everything may seem enchanted in Tamlin's Spring Court, darkness lurks behind every corner and soon, Feyre must learn to face the darkness of the faerie realm to save the one she loves... and herself. Targeted towards older teens, this lush retelling of Beauty and the Beast will enchant readers with every word.

## **One Thousand and One Nights**

### **The Wrath and the Dawn, by Renée Ahdieh. 2015.**

The Wrath and the Dawn is a retelling of the Middle Eastern folktale, One Thousand and One Nights. Khalid, the Caliph of Khorasan, kills one girl every day and when Shahrzad's cousin is killed, Shahrzad herself volunteers to be his next victim. She is the only one of Khalid's wives to survive another day; each night, she tells him a new story, ensuring her survival. With her keen political skills and way with words, she must attempt to unravel the mysterious curse that haunts her husband and their kingdom.

## **The Little Mermaid**

### **To Kill a Kingdom, by Alexandra Christo. 2018.**

In a world where Sirens terrorize the seas, hunting for human hearts, Lira, the daughter of the Siren Queen, is the most vicious of them all. But one mistake exiles Lira to the human world... and a human body. Elian, a human prince intent on destroying the Siren race, rescues a drowning Lira from the ocean. She claims to know a key that will put an end to the Siren's rule of terror. Told in dual points of view, Lira and Elian must work together in a race to key, but can they really trust each other?

## **The Princess and the Frog**

**Enchanted, by Alethea Kontis. 2012.**

Sunday Woodcutter is the youngest of seven daughters, each named after the days of the week. Though her life is prophesied to be filled with sorrow, she finds comfort in writing stories; the only problem is, sometimes her stories happen to come true. Thus, it is no surprise to her when she meets a talking frog and the two become fast friends. But an innocent kiss on his slimy head leads to something even Sunday couldn't have written. Alethea Kontis weaves an intricate story of fairy tales in her Woodcutter Sister series.

## **Robin Hood**

**Scarlet, by A.C. Gaughen. 2012.**

Scarlet has escaped her old life. Disguised as a boy, she joins Robin Hood's band of thieves. When Lord Gisbourne shows up in Nottingham, intent on putting a stop to Robin Hood and his gang, Scarlet's secrets are in danger of being exposed. This fast-paced adventure will leave readers wanting more as they fall in love with familiar characters, like Robin and John Little, and new ones.

## **Little Red Riding Hood**

**Crimson Bound, by Rosamund Hodge. 2015.**

Rachelle always knew the forest surrounding her aunt's house was dangerous, but she could handle it. After all, she was an apprentice magician, learning to protect her village from the darkness that lurks in the forest. But an encounter with one such creature leaves her bound to the darkness. Now, Rachelle fights for the kingdom as a soldier, despite her unearthly bargain that still haunts her. When she is assigned to protect the Prince Armand, she begins to unravel the many secrets behind the crown. Can Rachelle save the kingdom from darkness while fighting the darkness inside herself?

## **Goose Girl**

**The Goose Girl, by Shannon Hale. 2005.**

Princess Anidora-Kiladra Talianna Isilee's aunt taught her the language of the birds. When her mother secures her a political marriage alliance, Ani must leave her family and the life she knows behind. But on the road to her new home and husband, Ani's lady in waiting attacks her and steals her identity, hoping to become the Queen of Bayern herself. Now in disguise as a poor village girl, Ani gets hired at the palace to care for the geese. To take back her identity she must fight back with her new friends and learn that there might be more magic inside of her than she knew.

## **Mulan**

**Flame in the Mist, by Renée Ahdieh. 2017.**

Born a girl, Mariko knows her only destiny is to be a possession of her father, and then a possession of her husband. But she wants more than this. When her caravan is attacked by the Black Clan on the way to her wedding, she sees a chance to escape the life she dreads. Disguised as a boy, Mariko joins the Black Clan with the goal to destroy them from the inside. But they value her skills with chemistry and inventing. Soon she finds herself growing closer to the mysterious Okami, but both have secrets too deep to reveal.

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