

**“An English version of an Italian adaptation of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation of an Indian original”:
Cinderella, Feminism, and Re-vision.**

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Kathleen Higgins' article on Cinderella is a kind of post-feminist reading of what happened to this favourite tale during the 1970's and after. This period – we are still in it to some extent – has seen continuous rewriting of the traditional tales in an ironic mode. The rewritings can also be seen as rereadings, as interpretation pushes the tale as a kind of commentary on the traditional role of the young woman as object of love, lust, or marriage. The really exciting feature of Higgins' account is that the tale for her never really settles down. The features and meanings shift as we move from one critical perspective to another. Of course, the readings she examines can be seen as intellectual performance, sort of the way the hundreds of early versions of Cinderella (either oral or written) were performances, with the position of the central character always shifting. This essay is a critique of a series of critiques, and the broader perspective is refreshing.

– Dr. William Barker

Joseph Jacobs playfully claimed that *Catskin*, the version of the Cinderella story he published, was “an English version of an Italian adaptation of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation of an Indian original” (Yolen 297). His statement proves that the Victorian collector understood some of the fundamental characteristics of the fairytale: it is a product of its time and place as much as of its individual author or teller, and the relationship between the tale itself and the space and time in which it is transmitted cannot be underestimated. Feminist scholarship of the second half of the twentieth century carefully scrutinized fairytales, and found many to be highly problematic. They insisted that fairytales were yet another vehicle for the transmission of patriarchal values and gender roles aimed directly at children in an attempt to enforce and ingrain these values and roles within their earliest periods of development. The last forty years have seen not only a rise in this branch of criticism, but also a rise in attempts to remedy these skewed messages through re-vision, rather than rejection, of fairytales. *Cinderella*, whose iconic Disney version has cemented its place as one of the most popular and widely-known fairytales among young children, can be used to examine the rise of feminist fairytale scholarship and its concern with the role these tales play in children’s notions of gender and self. It can also be used to examine the notion of re-vision: are feminist fairytales a form of treason against a sacrosanct tradition, or are they simply one of many attempts by ideologues throughout history to use a common mode of communication to explore, transmit, and alter shared values?

While Jacobs’s quip points to the wide ranging and far reaching history of the Cinderella-type tale, it is Charles Perrault’s *Cendrillon* and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Ashypet* that seem to be referred to most frequently as the central sources of inspiration for more modern retellings of *Cinderella*. Modern versions of the tale, including Walt Disney’s 1949 film, often contain many of the elements common to both versions, including themes of female jealousy, a sweet and physically beautiful heroine, magical intervention, and the pivotal role played by Cinderella’s lost shoe. *Ashypet*’s heroine can be viewed as enterprising and active as she first seeks the hazel-bush sprig that she needs in order to gain

what she wishes for (Grimm 79), and eventually goes so far as to defy her step-mother and demand of her wishing-tree, “Shake and quake, good hazel tree, / Cast gold and silver over me” (81). *Cendrillon* presents a much meeker heroine, one upon whom much action is taken, with Perrault going so far as to include a second moral addendum to his tale (the first having detailed the value of graciousness in young women):

Without doubt it is a great advantage to have intelligence, courage, good breeding, and common sense. These, and similar talents come only from heaven, and it is good to have them. *However, even these may fail to bring you success, without the blessing of a godfather or a godmother* (qtd. in Lang 71, emphasis mine).

Such a bold statement on fate and the role of magic brings into question the suitability of such a tale in an educational setting, emphasizing as it does a reliance on external rather than internal forces for personal success. It is therefore likely that it is the Grimm rather than the Perrault version to which Jane Yolen refers in her early feminist critique of the modern Cinderella story. She contends that *her* Cinderella “makes intelligent decisions for she knows that wishing solves nothing without the concomitant action” insisting that “to make Cinderella anything less than she is, then, is a heresy of the worst kind” (Yolen 298-99). It is “what she is” that seems to occupy Yolen, and indeed many of the feminist scholars of the 1970s.

Feminist scholarship of the 1970s took up fairytales because, as Karen Rowe points out, “they have always been one of cultures’ primary mechanisms for inculcating roles and behaviors” (238). Fairytales such as *Cinderella* that feature female protagonists garnered particular interest due to their depictions of the roles and expectations of young women. They were “not just entertaining fantasies but powerful transmitters of romantic myths” (239), which many feminist scholars believed served to encourage women to seek fulfillment within narrow, gendered terms. In exploring what they believed to be the patriarchal nature of the society they lived in, feminists looked to fairytales, and to *Cinderella* in particular, in order to understand how patriarchal values were delivered and what possible effect they had on women. The depiction of women in Cinderella stories (that is, of Cinderella, her stepmothers and sisters, her birth mother and fairy godmother), the use of magic or enchantment, and the portrayal of desire and power all come under the feminist lens at this time.

Rowe takes issue with modern versions of Cinderella that appear to share more with Perrault than Grimm. She argues that the Cinderella of her time is one who exalts the long held tendency to commodify women’s beauty and sexuality, one that conflates love with material security (245). This tendency points to the skewed manner in which she insists traditional (that is, Perrault-inspired) Cinderella stories depict female use of power. Female fairytale characters who actively engage in the world and who attempt to author their own fate, like Cinderella’s step-mother and step-sisters, are vilified and understood as necessarily opposed to the heroine, and they are often (as when borrowing from the Grimm tradition) punished for their abhorrent, *unfeminine* use of power (247-48). Fairytale

heroines like the modern Cinderella, however, exemplify what many feminists viewed as stifling, limiting female characteristics like passivity, evident by the fact that

because the heroine adopts conventional female virtues, that is patience, sacrifice and dependency, and *because* she submits to patriarchal needs, she consequently receives both the prince and a guarantee of social and financial security through marriage. Status and fortune never result from the female's self-exertion, but from passive assimilation into her husband's sphere. (246)

The third element of female power in Cinderella, that of the role played by the Fairy Godmother, makes clear not only the degree to which modern retellings of the tale have thoroughly mixed the Perrault and Grimm versions into a single, contemporary understanding of the story, but also the manner in which female power can be at once presented and undermined. By tying Cinderella's fate so tightly to the use of magic by another, the narrative subtly reinforces the passivity of Cinderella in determining the course of her life. It also manages to by-pass any real example of female power by relegating the elements of change to *magic*, to a figure, though technically female, that resides solely in the realm of the fantastic and non-human. This separation of female characteristics that places Cinderella (rather powerless) at its centre makes "vulnerability, avoidance, sublimation and dependency alluringly virtuous," ensuring that tales like Cinderella "transmit to young women an alarming prophecy that marriage is an *enchantment* which will shield her against harsh realities outside the domestic realm and guarantee everlasting happiness" (250). This understanding of the manner in which fairytales operate within contemporary culture leads to the questioning of the appropriateness of these stories for children; and to the question of re-vision.

The feminist criticism of fairytales in the 1970s and 1980s led to an interest in the effects of current and possible future versions of fairytales on children, the ways in which they were used in children's education, and the role that future re-visions might play. The notion of "the feminist fairytale" emerged and called into question what exactly it was desired that fairytales *do*. Was it the responsibility of the fairytale to teach children? And if it was, just what should it teach them? What had fairytales already taught them? While critics as far back as Dickens had decried the notion of altering fairytales for the sake of current ideology, insisting that they must maintain their "simplicity, and purity" (qtd. in Crowley 298) modern feminists such as Lurie insisted that the current fairytale cannon, far from pure or unadulterated, was

culturally specific and evolve[d] according to the shifting values of a society. The tales that form our popular canon have been edited and selected to reflect and reproduce patriarchal values. The tales best known today are not representative of the genre but are a result of "the skewed selection and silent revision of subversive texts." (qtd. in Parsons 137)

The Cinderella of which Yolen is so protective is one she does not recognize in the modern Cinderella who “cannot perform even a simple action to save herself” (302). This Cinderella is the product of another re-vision, another attempt to transmit specific ideas through a familiar character or tale. Yolen fears that, in an attempt to mold Cinderella into an appropriate vessel for what she deems the “mass-market[ed] Happily-Ever-After” (301), one is left with a Cinderella who cannot think or act for herself, resulting in a “tale of wishes-come-true-regardless” (303) and a character in which she finds little value.

The tradition of fairytales as an educational tool for children, far from being the domain of modern feminists, or even of the modern patriarchal society they resist, can be traced, as Zipes points out, to the “educated writers of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries [who] purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social order of that time” (qtd. in Trousdale 2). Feminists and educators of the 1970s and 1980s began a careful examination not just of the tales and their own academic response to them, but also of the perceived effects of the tales upon children. Children are encouraged in educational settings, they insisted, to approach literature (including fairytales) by imagining themselves as part of the story. They claimed that

by entering into story worlds, and by being inserted into the storylines of their culture, students come to know what counts as being a woman, or being a man, in the culture to which the stories belong. They come to know the range of cultural possibilities available for femininity and masculinity – and the limits to that range ... through constant repetition and layering, [and] story patterns. (Gilbert qtd. in Trousdale 3)

Through their cultural ubiquity and constant repetition, fairytales come to exist as “scripts” for all manner of appropriate social behavior (Parsons 135), including gender roles, and these scripts help form “the boundaries of agency, subjectivity, and anticipated rewards” (Walkerdine qtd. in Parsons 136). The Cinderella story is perhaps most disturbing to feminists and educators because of the characters’ most obvious traits of passivity and beauty-as-virtue. Many insist that fairytales are particularly powerful in shaping children’s conceptions of self because of the

unique correspondences between characteristics of the young child and characteristics of fairy tales, including animism and a belief in magic, a morality of constraint, an expression of causality by juxtaposition of events, and the egocentrism of the child and the centrality of the fairy tale hero or heroine in the world of the tale. (Favat qtd. in Trousdale 7)

Fairytales occupy a unique role in the education of children, and many feminists fear that

the contemporary Cinderella story is one that encourages young girls to aspire to the role of “glamorous sufferer or victim” (Lieberman qtd. in Parsons 137)

Modern feminist re-visions of fairytales all undertake the task of presenting to children what they believe to be a more balanced, positive, and realistic depiction of gender, power, and self-determination. How to achieve this end, however, is far from simple or agreed upon. Some critics, including Knopefelmacher, point to the problematic origins of tales such as Cinderella, noting that “the Grimm version is based on female empowerment enabling its reclamation by women, while the Perrault version embodies a patriarchal point of view rendering it all but impossible to reclaim” (143). This problem brings to the fore the larger issue of feminist re-vision of a tale like *Cinderella*: can the negative or damaging aspects of the tale be remedied by simply changing the roles within the existing tale? If so, which version should feminists turn to and what can they do with it? Or is it in the interest of feminists and educators to use Cinderella as a less literal inspiration, and more as a familiar starting place to ground more radical re-visions, not just of character, but of the fairytale form itself?

Earlier feminist re-visions of *Cinderella*, such as the version that appears in Barbara Walker’s 1996 *Feminist Fairy Tales* chooses to engage in simple role reversal, presenting the previously passive Cinderella as strong-willed and active, but leaving the traditional story structure as is (Crowley 306). This form of superficial ideological re-vision recalls the fairytale re-visions undertaken by Cruickshank in the nineteenth century that so angered Charles Dickens, and represents what Crowley and Pennington deem to be a “feminist fraud on the fairies” (306). The “overtly prescriptive and primarily didactic” re-telling (306), rather than a true re-vision, represents a superficial alteration, a mere grafting of feminist traits and characters onto the largely unaltered original. This form of re-vision, labeled by some educators as “feminist frauds” or “fractured fairytales” does not offer to its readers (educators, feminists, and children alike) any *real* alternative to the traditional Cinderella narrative because it “challenge[s] gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies only at the story level of the text” (Kuykendal 40). In order to truly revise the genre and present to children an alternative formulation of gender, power, and heroism, feminist authors must engage the form of the tale itself and re-imagine it on a structural as well as textual level. To challenge existing conventions, authors must “rework 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 (Crew qtd. in Kuykendal 39). The *Cinderella* retellings of Emma Donoghue and Francesca Lia Block are put forth as examples of this more thoughtful and complex form of re-vision, a form that rejects the singular, essentialist view of gender found in older versions and in superficial re-tellings like Walker’s in favour of a more nuanced exploration of gender. These re-visions present wider range of possibility not only for Cinderella, but also for understanding and valuing the contributions and complexities of the more minor characters of both sexes “that work only when the structures of their tales are exploded” (Crowley 307).

Modern re-tellings of *Cinderella* are not “fractured” or “frauds” simply because they attempt to modernize or problematize the depiction of women and power found in older versions. While purists like Dickens may have bemoaned what they believed to be the sully of pure, eternal forms of narrative, their belief in the timelessness and apolitical

integrity of fairytales was revealed to be a naïve illusion as early as the Victorian period (Yolen 297). What can be questioned are the values of particular re-tellings and the aspects of the original that each maintains or rejects. While the Grimms' *Ashypet* certainly points to the seeds of action and agency in the Cinderella character, modern feminists and educators still find troubling the notions of femininity and power found in the narrative, especially given the role they believe fairytales play in the formations of children's notions of gender roles and personal expectations. Rather than treason, modern feminist versions of *Cinderella* engage in the long-standing tradition of ideological re-vision, in an attempt to re-direct the tale's message in aid of their modern purpose. The level of success they achieve, it seems, depends not simply upon inserting discreet, modern characteristics into the static forms of traditional versions, but on exploding the structure itself and attempting to re-build from its fractured remains something entirely different.

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