
Things Walt Disney Never Told Us

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THE FOLLOWING ITEM appeared recently in a Winnipeg newspaper:

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a burglar lost his shoe as he fled from the home of Mrs. M., age 43. Patrolmen arrested R. T., age 20, who was sitting shoeless in a nearby bar. Authorities said a shoe matching the one found in the M. home was discovered behind the bar.¹

The headline read, "Police Use Cinderella Approach." This brief example is only one of many that illustrate the popularity of fairy-tale heroines in North America. That they are household words as well as "household tales" is attributable to the unintentional efforts of the Grimms and the very intentional efforts of Walt Disney.

Despite the wide appeal of such heroines, they have received little scholarly discussion. Stith Thompson's definition of the term *Märchen* begins by stating that the genre is characterized by "such tales as 'Cinderella,' 'Snow White,' or 'Hansel and Gretel,'" ² but he then goes on to consider only the exploits of *Märchen* heroes. Lord Raglan does not include a single heroine in his international survey of twenty-one heroic characters.³ Linda Dégh explains that she has excluded most heroines from *Folktales of Hungary* because they are much the same throughout Europe; it is only the heroes who take on national coloring.⁴ In North America, where oral forms of the *Märchen* are not abundant and where the Grimm tales are read mainly by or to children, heroines have been virtually ignored except by a handful of writers interested in children's literature.⁵

* I thank all those who have offered suggestions on this article, especially Claire Farrer and Linda Dégh.

¹ *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 14, 1972.

² *The Folktale* (New York, 1946), 8.

³ *The Hero* (New York, 1956), chap. 16.

⁴ Chicago, 1965, xxx.

⁵ See, for example, Marcia Lieberman, "Some Day My Prince Will Come," *College English* (December, 1972), 383-395; Alison Lurie, "Fairy Tale Liberation," *The New York Review of Books* (December 17, 1970), 42-44; and "Witches and Fairies: Fitzgerald to Updike," *The New York Review of Books* (December 2, 1971), 6-8. Sporadic references to fairy-tale heroines are found in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1953), and Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963).

In attempting to correct this imbalance in attention I have surveyed both popular and scholarly collections in English and have asked dozens of women to recall their childhood memories. Almost all of those interviewed were completely unfamiliar with Anglo-American heroines, most of whom appear in scholarly collections not often found in children's sections of libraries. All, however, could easily recall tales popularized through the numerous Grimm translations and the Disney films.⁶ These tales are so thoroughly accepted that one woman even referred to the Grimm stories as "English fairy tales," because her German-born mother told her "real" (German) tales.⁷

What have the Grimm translations offered to North American children? Of the total of 210 stories in the complete edition, there are 40 heroines, not all of them passive and pretty. Very few translations offer more than twenty-five tales, and thus only a handful of heroines is usually included. Most of them run the gamut from mildly abused to severely persecuted. In fact, a dozen docile heroines are the overwhelming favorites, reappearing in book after book from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.⁸ Cinderella (AT 510A) and Frau Holle (AT 480) succeed because of their excessive kindness and patience; Sleeping Beauty (AT 410) and Snow White (AT 709) are so passive that they have to be reawakened to life by a man; and the innocent heroines of "The Little Goose Girl" (AT 533) and "The Six Swans" (AT 451) are the victims of scheming and ambitious women.

The villains are not always women, however. A girl is forced by her father to accept a grotesque suitor in "The Frog Prince" (AT 440), and another is married off to a greedy king by her father in "Rumpelstiltskin" (AT 500). Still another father is encouraged by his daughter to mutilate her in order to save himself in "The Girl Without Hands" (AT 706). Though this tale is not quite as popular as the others, it is sufficiently well known to have inspired author Joyce Carol Oates's newest novel.⁹

Some Grimm heroines do show a bit of spirit, but they are not usually rewarded for it. In "The Clever Peasant Lass" (AT 875) the girl is threatened with abandonment by her boorish husband, and the proud daughter in "King Thrushebeard" (AT 900) is humbled by both her father and her unwanted husband. Only Gretel ("Hansel and Gretel," AT 327) is allowed a brief moment of violence in order to save herself and her brother. No other popular Grimm heroines destroy the villain.

The passivity of these heroines is magnified by the fact that their stories jump

⁶ The impact of the Grimms in England and North America is detailed in Katharine Briggs, "The Influence of the Brothers Grimm in England," and Wayland Hand, "Die Märchen der Brüder Grimms in den Vereinigten Staaten," *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde*, 54 (1963), 511-524 and 525-544.

⁷ R. R., interviewed in Winnipeg, January 3, 1973.

⁸ These are, in order of their popularity: "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," "The Frog Prince," "Hansel and Gretel," "Rumpelstiltskin," "King Thrushebeard," "The Little Goose Girl," "Red Riding Hood," "Frau Holle," and "The Six Swans." AT numbers in this article refer to type numbers from Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 74 (Helsinki, 1928).

⁹ *Do With Me What You Will* (New York, 1973). The title is taken from the girl's words to her father.

from twenty percent in the original Grimm collection to as much as seventy-five percent in many children's books. In this sense the fairy tale, a male-oriented genre in Europe (both by tale and by teller), becomes a female-oriented genre in North American children's literature.

But if the Grimm heroines are, for the most part, uninspiring, those of Walt Disney seem barely alive. In fact, two of them hardly manage to stay awake. Disney produced three films based on *Märchen* ("Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" from the Grimms and "Cinderella" from Perrault). All three had passive, pretty heroines, and all three had female villains, thus strongly reinforcing the already popular stereotype of the innocent beauty victimized by the wicked villainess. In fact, only half of the Grimm heroine tales have female villains, and among the Anglo-American tales, only one-third. Yet even Stith Thompson believes otherwise; he states that "for some reason, to the composer of folktales, it is the woman of the family who is nearly always chosen for the part of the villain."¹⁰

But Walt Disney is responsible not only for amplifying the stereotype of good versus bad women suggested by the children's books based on the Grimms, he must also be criticized for his portrayal of a cloying fantasy world filled with cute little beings existing among pretty flowers and singing animals. Though a recent magazine article calls him a "Master of Fantasy," in fact Disney has removed most of the powerful fantasy of the *Märchen* and replaced it with false magic.¹¹

In brief, the popularized heroines of the Grimms and Disney are not only passive and pretty, but also unusually patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet. A woman who failed to be any of these could not become a heroine. Even Cinderella has to do no more than put on dirty rags to conceal herself completely. She is a heroine only when properly cleaned and dressed.

In contrast, *Märchen* heroes can be slovenly, unattractive, and lazy, and their success will not be affected. The Grimms' "Hans-my-Hedgehog" (AT 441) has a hero who actively exploits his grotesque shape in order to gain power, wealth, and—of course—a beautiful wife. The hero of "The Little Red Ox" (AT 511A), unlike his passive sister in "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes" (AT 511), does not docilely accept his fate: he kills his stepmother instead of the helpful ox and rides boldly away. The many youngest-son tales known as "male Cinderellas" almost always have heroes who, unlike the female Cinderella, do not seem to be the least bothered by their unfavored position. One of these, in the Grimms' "The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is" (AT 326), is clearly described as dull and stupid, in contrast to his clever and industrious brother. He is seen as a burden to the family because he does everything wrong. Not exactly the typical Cinderella. The only resemblance between this hero and Cinderella is that he wins in the end because he proves to be more courageous than his brother, not because he sits home awaiting the arrival of a princess.

¹⁰ Thompson, 113.

¹¹ "The World That Disney Built," *Newsweek* (October 15, 1973), 101-102.

Heroes succeed because they act, not because they are. They are judged not by their appearance or inherent sweet nature but by their ability to overcome obstacles, even if these obstacles are defects in their own characters. Heroines are not allowed any defects, nor are they required to develop, since they are already perfect. The only tests of most heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament. At least that is what we learn from the translations of the Grimm tales, and especially from Walt Disney.

To judge from the 186 heroines found in five major Anglo-American folk-tale collections, oral narrators do not confine themselves to passive princesses.¹² There are even women who express a national coloring apparently lacking in European heroines. England has a female version of "Jack and the Beanstalk," for example, and the United States has several heroines well suited to a tough pioneering life. They do not always rely on sympathetic fairy godmothers or overprotective dwarfs, nor do they always await the last-minute arrival of the hero. And, as already mentioned, they are more often aggravated by male villains than by the familiar wicked stepmother.¹³

Among the Ozark tales collected by Vance Randolph, we find women who destroy the threatening male villains and also a girl who does not need her father to convince her that frogs make interesting bedfellows.¹⁴ Leonard Roberts introduces a number of Kentucky heroines who do not fit European stereotypes. The heroine of his version of "Cupid and Psyche" (AT 425A) marries a prize-fighter instead of a more obvious beast and is not intimidated by his brutal treatment.¹⁵ In "The Little Girl and the Giant" (AT 327) a mother and daughter cooperate in escaping from a giant and destroying him.¹⁶ The Randolph and Roberts collections, and others also, offer a number of versions of "Cinderella" (both AT 510A and 510B) that would have made Disney's hair curl.

Four British heroines are outstanding. One ("Kate Crackernuts," AT 306 and 711), in an unusual version of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," not only rescues a prince from nocturnal fairies but also cures the beautiful stepsister deformed by the heroine's own jealous mother.¹⁷ Another, in "Mossycot" (AT 510B), leaves home voluntarily—with the encouragement of a loving mother, not because of the threats of an incestuous father.¹⁸ Unlike many of her counter-

¹² Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folktales*, vol. 1 (London, 1970); Marie Campbell, *Tales from the Cloud Walking Country* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1958); Emelyn Gardner, *Folklore from the Scholarie Hills, New York* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1937); Vance Randolph, *The Devil's Pretty Daughter* (New York, 1955), *Sticks in the Knapsack* (New York, 1958), *The Talking Turtle* (New York, 1957), and *Who Blowed Up the Church House?* (New York, 1952); and Leonard Roberts, *Old Greasybeard* (Detroit, 1959), *South from Hell-fer-Sartin* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1955), and *Up Cutsbin and Down Greasy* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1959).

¹³ Of the 186 heroine tales, only 62—exactly one-third—had exclusively female villains. Of the male villains, many were angry fathers, murderous lovers, and jealous husbands.

¹⁴ Vengeful heroines are found in abundance in *The Devil's Pretty Daughter*: "What Candy Ashcraft Done," 6; "How Toodie Fixed Old Grunt," 63; and "The Girl and the Road Agent," 139. In the same volume is "The Toad-frog," 91.

¹⁵ "Bully Bornes," *South from Hell-fer-Sartin*, 60–63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

¹⁷ Briggs, *A Dictionary*, 344.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 416.

parts, she is not only unintimidated by her jealous fellow-workers, but actually bewitches them into silence.

Still another heroine (in "Tib and the Old Witch," AT 328) leaves home in protest over her father's rejection of her lover.¹⁹ She is not locked in a tower as in the Grimms' "Lady Madelaine" (AT 510A), nor is she forced to choose against her will as in "King Thrushbeard." Neither does she return home after her adventures to live happily ever after.

Even more aggressive is the heroine of "Mally Whuppee" (AT 328).²⁰ She also leaves home, but with two sisters whom she protects from a giant and for whom she wins husbands before she wins one for herself. She earns them by answering a king's challenge to return and steal the giant's treasures. Unlike Jack ("The Boy Steals the Giant's Treasures," AT 328), she succeeds in doing so without killing the giant. She even prevents him from unknowingly destroying his own wife. A more violent American version of the same tale has the heroine in competition with her sisters, who want to kill her, and more violent toward the giant; she does not destroy him but does drown his wife.²¹

In none of these tales do we find the stereotyped conflict between the passive, beautiful woman and the aggressive, ugly one. Most of the active heroines are not even described in terms of their natural attributes—and Mally Whuppee is presented as less attractive than her stepsister. Like heroes, they are judged by their actions. Though most do marry, their weddings are no more central to the tale than is the concluding marriage of most heroes. Some husbands are even won as passive prizes, in the same way that princesses are won by heroes in many tales. Most important, active heroines are not victims of hostile forces beyond their control but are, instead, challengers who confront the world rather than waiting for success to fall at their pretty feet. Unfortunately, heroines of this sort are not numerous in oral tales and do not exist at all in any of the Grimm tales or the Disney films.

Female aggressiveness is not the only aspect of heroine tales that is unfamiliar to most of us. Sexuality in fairy tales seems to be limited to Jack's beanstalk.²² Overt sexual references, if they even find their way into original collections, rarely appear in children's books. Translations of the Grimms, for example, usually omit the fact that Rapunzel's initial encounter with the prince resulted in twins. The Grimms' "other" Cinderella, "All-Kinds-of-Fur" (AT 510B), is usually left out altogether, since the heroine is forced to leave home to avoid her father's threats of an incestuous marriage. A "Disney version" of this tale is difficult to imagine, for Disney found even the more passive Grimm version of Cinderella (AT 510A) unsuitable for children and used the more innocuous Perrault version instead.

Other sexual references are more subtle. We must look closely to discover that it is at puberty that Rapunzel is locked in a tower, Snow White is sent out to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 522.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

²¹ "Polly, Nancy, and Muncimeg," in Roberts, *Up Cusbin and Down Greasy*, 119-123.

²² See Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969), 107-113, for two examples of phallic interpretation of "Jack and the Beanstalk."

be murdered, and Sleeping Beauty put to sleep. Such heroines have their freedom severely restricted at a time in life when heroes are discovering full independence and increased power. Restrictions on girls at puberty, in contrast to the increased freedom their brothers enjoy, possibly explain the intensely sympathetic reaction many women have to such passive heroines in fairy tales.²³ In the specific tales mentioned, this restriction reflects anxiety about competition with other women that increased sexuality offers. It might also be seen as a protection for the heroine herself, who must remain pure for the one man who will eventually claim her. The restriction of women at puberty can also be interpreted as a reaction of men to the threat of female sexuality.²⁴

Though female symbols in general have certainly been considered by Freud, Jung, and a handful of other scholars, they still lack a familiar name, and, compared with phallic symbols, have received practically no attention from folk-tale scholars.²⁵

As Freud notes, female symbols are those that suggest the possibility of either entry or entrapment. These would include rooms and houses, ovens, jugs and bowls, shoes, and forests and flowers. Such symbols do not appear randomly or without meaning. They take their significance from the context in which they are used; thus it is not necessary to interpret every house, for example, as a female symbol. Occasionally the symbolism is obvious, such as the hero's plucking of the enchanted flower in AT 407, "The Girl as Flower." Other references are more obscure—the fitting of Cinderella's slipper in AT 510A or her ring in AT 510B.²⁶

Both male and female symbols can be portrayed positively or negatively, reflecting either desire or anxiety. In this sense Jack's powerful beanstalk leading to a treasure contrasts sharply with the imposing tower in "Rapunzel" or with the dagger used to murder Bluebeard's wives in some versions of AT 312. Similarly, the lovely enchanted flower presents quite a different image than does the threatening witch's hut or the magic forest, both of which trap unwary male travelers.²⁷ It is Hansel, one remembers, who is trapped first in the witch's hut and then in her cage.

Sexuality is also portrayed as harmful to the heroine herself. There are many symbolic hints that women should not become too familiar with their own bodies. Bluebeard's wives are murdered for looking into forbidden rooms, and Sleeping Beauty is punished with near death from a sharp object for doing so. Other heroines are threatened with death for breaking a tabu against looking into a fireplace in versions of AT 480 ("The Kind and the Unkind Girls"), and little

²³ V. S., interviewed in Winnipeg, May 3, 1973.

²⁴ See, for example, H. R. Hays, *The Dangerous Sex* (Richmond Hills, Ontario, 1964), especially chap. 4.

²⁵ See, for example: Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction To Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1969), 156-177; Carl Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 9, part I (Princeton, New Jersey, 1968); and Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1961), 15-17.

²⁶ For a provocative interpretation of Cinderella and female sexuality, see Lea Kavablum, *Cinderella: Radical Feminist, Alchemist* (Guttenberg, New Jersey: privately printed, 1973).

²⁷ See, for example, Hays, 148.

girls are murdered by their stepmothers for breaking jugs in several versions of AT 720 ("The Juniper Tree").

Sexual imagery of this sort would not be obvious to most children (or to most adults), but some writers feel that fairy tales do satisfy a more general psychological need, at least for North American children. They suggest that children might view themselves as the helpless underdogs who eventually triumph over the powerful witches and ogres representing their parents.²⁸ Michael Hornyansky emphasizes that North American children are still avid readers of fairy tales, possibly because of such identification: "The stories they want to hear last thing at night . . . are 'Sleeping Beauty,' 'Red Riding Hood,' 'Cinderella,' 'Snow White,' 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' and that crowd: stories full of princes, princesses, giants, wicked witches, wolves, dwarfs, and other persons not normally encountered."²⁹

Hornyansky mentions only one hero tale, thus underlining the observation made earlier in this paper that the large number of heroine tales in fairy-tale books indicates that these are meant for girls. It does not seem an exaggeration to say, as one feminist writer does, that fairy tales may serve as "training manuals" in passive behavior, and that "Millions of women must surely have formed 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 stories. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls."³⁰ A popular psychiatrist, the late Eric Berne, felt that fairy tales offer not only dreams and hopes but actual programs for behavior. Your favorite fairy tale may parallel and inform your attitudes and acts.³¹

Rather than accept these views uncritically, I interviewed forty women of varying ages and backgrounds.³² All had read fairy tales, almost all could name several favorite heroines but rarely any heroes, and most of these tales were from Disney or the Grimms. Many admitted that they were certainly influenced by their reading of fairy tales. Some had openly admired the lovely princesses and hoped to imitate them—especially their ability to obtain a man and a suburban castle without much effort. An eleven-year-old told me, "I thought I'd just sit around and get all this money. I used to think 'Cinderella' should be *my* story."³³ Another admirer of Cinderella, a nine-year-old, said, "Well, I wouldn't really want to marry a prince like she did—just somebody *like* a prince."³⁴

Others reluctantly admired the passive princess because there were few alter-

²⁸ See, for example, Eric Berne, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* (New York, 1973), especially chap. 3; Bruno Bettelheim, "Bringing Up Children" (monthly column), *Ladies' Home Journal* (October and November, 1973); Michael Hornyansky, "The Truth of Fables," *Only Connect*, ed. Sheila Egoff and others (Toronto, 1969), 121-132.

²⁹ Hornyansky, 121.

³⁰ Lieberman, 385.

³¹ Berne, chaps. 3, 12, and 13.

³² Interviews were conducted in Miami, Minneapolis, and Winnipeg, from December, 1972, to August, 1973. The ages of the women ranged from seven to sixty-one.

³³ R. S., Winnipeg, June 13, 1973.

³⁴ C. C., Miami, December 25, 1972.

native images, but they did not expect to imitate either her attributes or her material successes. Said a twenty-nine-year-old:

I remember the feeling of being left out in fairy stories. Whatever the story was about, it wasn't about *me*. But this feeling didn't make me not interested in them—I knew there was something I was supposed to do to fit in but I didn't. So I thought there was something wrong with *me*, not with the fairy stories.³⁵

A twenty-four-year-old told me that she had really expected to bloom one day as Cinderella had done, but she was still waiting.³⁶

Many of those who admired the passive princess, either openly or reluctantly, recognized her image in various forms of popular entertainment, notably in romantic tales on television and in comic books, magazines, and novels read almost exclusively by women. Even women who had shaken the persistent princess in their daily lives returned to her in fantasy through such popular materials. The woman who mentioned feeling left out in fairy stories said she had to force herself to stop buying romantic magazines: "They depressed me and made me feel confused. There was something about them—something like the victimized fairy-tale women—that I didn't want to see in myself."³⁷

Many informants under the age of fifteen (the post-Disney generation) were not so impressed with the passive heroines of Disney and the Grimms. Some found them boring and stopped reading fairy tales altogether, such as the young woman who said, "That poor princess, so beautiful and helpless. She sure will have a long wait for that prince to show up!"³⁸ Others who liked the fantasy world of the *Märchen* claimed they compensated for the lack of interesting heroines by reading about heroes, but they could rarely name even one.

Still others performed a fascinating feat of selective memory by transforming relatively passive heroines into active ones. Several were mentioned (including the persecuted sister of AT 451, "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers"), but the best remembered was Gretel, who pushes the witch into the oven. In fact, this is her only aggressive act, and it seems almost accidental in comparison with those of the ever-confident Hansel. He does not even lose hope when he is caged but devises the fake finger to fool the witch into delaying his death. Yet not surprisingly it is the tearful Gretel who is remembered by girls in search of active heroines, for Gretel is indeed aggressive when compared with most of the Grimm heroines and *all* of the Disney heroines. However, when contrasted with the Anglo-American heroines mentioned earlier, she seems far less heroic. We see through her what we have lost by taking our heroines from Grimm and Disney, rather than from the tales of our own heritage.

Among the informants, whether they admired Cinderella or found her boring, whether they felt heroines like Gretel were active or were not, there was general agreement that considerably more diversity would have been welcome. Many reacted favorably to a rewritten version of AT 300 ("The Dragon-Slayer"), in

³⁵ L. J., Winnipeg, January 6, 1973.

³⁶ S. L., Winnipeg, January 26, 1973.

³⁷ L. J., of n. 35.

³⁸ L. M., Miami, December 22, 1972.

which an unintimidated princess destroys her own dragon and leaves the men to clean up the remains.³⁹ All were interested to hear that there were even traditional heroines—and Anglo-American ones at that—who were equally impressive. Walt Disney neglected to tell us that Cinderella's freedom does not always end at midnight.

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³⁹ Jay Williams, "The Practical Princess," *Ms.* (August, 1972), 61-64. Another "liberated" tale by the same author is "Petronella," *McCall's* (January, 1973), 74-110.