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Women Behind the Scenes: How Women are Perceived in Fairy Tales

Women throughout history have been labeled as many things including passive and helpless. The stigma of being a woman in a male dominated world stuck for centuries in the world of fairy tales. Through research, this paper will examine historical evidence of how both men and women perceived the female gender in literature. I will analyze literary works by Perrault and d'Aulnoy as well as commentary from Zipes about the use of a female figure in reimaged Disney tales. With these references to explain the evolution of fairy tales and the picturing of women, a better understanding will be built on how females were distinguished.

The life of fairy tales can be traced back to early periods before printing or common language was abundantly used. The stories were created by women for entertainment. The term "fairy tale" in current standards would mean "made up" or "fantasy", but these tales are all but that. Socially, economically, and historically, fairy tales have never been "made up." These tales are reflections of the life experiences women of the 17th and 18th centuries endured. The creators of these tales pictured a desirable life while including the adversity they endured. "The experiences fairy stories recount are remembered, lived experiences of women, not fairytale concoctions from the depths of the psyche; they are rooted in the social, legal and economic history of marriage and the family, and they have all the stark actuality of the real, and the power real-life has to bite into the psyche and etch its design" (Warner). During the time of the creation

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of tales, males were overpowering often leaving women unheard. This made it quite easy for the credit to be taken away from women. Life ordeals that women underwent were accessible as a social story event that then could be transformed into anecdotes.

Knowing that women pictured themselves during the time of oral tellings as magical with all of their wishes granted, men on the other hand, only saw these stories as beneficial on their part. Women poured time and effort into creating another life that they could live vicariously through. During this time where women were seen and not heard over men, the 17th and 18th centuries were a moment where women wanted to reinvent their image. By doing so they were seen as valuable to many including Mr. Wilde. “Oscar Wilde's father, a doctor in Merrion Square, Dublin in the mid-nineteenth century, used to ask for stories as his fee from his poorest patients: he then wrote them down. Many of these were told to him by women” (Warner). The women of the time longed for the life of a fairy tale princess. Unfortunately, the best they could do was create a fictional world in which they could portray themselves as valuable.

There was a large difference in the way men pictured women versus women. In this article “Cendrillon and the Ogre: Women in Fairy Tales and Sade,” Carol Rifelj analyzes the common features Perrault and the Marquis de Sade used to represent women in their writings in comparison to how women imagined themselves. Within this text, we are able to uncover the ideas of why women were portrayed as passive and weak. Gender roles were heavily influenced by finances and luxuries in the 17th century. With finances at the center of their world, male

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writers like Perrault for example saw women as an image of beauty with nothing more. “When we turn to descriptions of female characters, we find that the heroines are all beautiful princesses. But their presentation is somewhat different from that in Perrault: in women's tales, they can have other qualities” (Rifelj). What Rifelj seems to explain here is how women added much more to their characters than looks while males believed it was the one true feature. According to Rifelj, a woman would add greater detail to her scenes, plots, and character descriptions. This was common because the females would focus more on the setting around them more than themselves. This possibly could be a foreshadowing that these females were painting an image of where they wish to be in life rather than where they are. Rifelj’s analysis supports my argument because she breaks down the minor details often left out when referring to the differences between females pictured by women versus men in tales of the 17th century.

As tales developed and variations were created, the salon era approached. During this time women would gather in sitting areas and share tales for entertainment. When reviewing many common fairy tales shared such as “Cinderella”, “Snow White”, and “Beauty and the Beast”, a common feature of each protagonist is youth. Each young woman in the tales was at the age where marriage was taken largely into consideration. For instance, in many versions of “Cinderella”, the step sisters were dressed in immaculate clothing and powdered their faces heavily with makeup to attract a prince. They as well as many other women in tales were pushed to find a male to “fill” their life and bring them safety. This concept grew more and more which

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led to other spikes in family statistics that can be traced into the 20th century. “The matter of fairy tales reflects lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age” (Warner). These women not only were pressured into marriages, but they also had to endure hardship to reach their fairy tale ending. The 21st century is much different from what was portrayed in these tales. During the height of these tales in the early 1920’s when Disney reimaged them, the percentage at which women were married was 92.3%. Now, as of 2010 the proportion of married women is at its lowest of 31%. We can see the effect that recreations of these tales are doing. (Cruz) Women are gaining an independence streak and we can trace this back to them wanting to break the common standards set centuries ago.

In today’s social standards, women are becoming more outspoken about the independent lifestyles they feel they deserve. This is a growing crowd that is seen as powerful and persuasive. Tracing back to a time when women were seen as helpless or in need of saving, tales from the 17th and 18th century were a key representation for what women do not want to be seen as anymore. “Trembling and in awe, he dropped to his knees before her. Since the end of the enchantment had come, the princess woke up. She looked at him with more feeling in her eyes than is really appropriate for a first encounter and said: ‘Is that you, prince? You certainly took your time’” (Jones, 111). Sleeping Beauty is known as the princess of little words. She was

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untouchable and powerless until a man came to her rescue. Through live action films recreated by the Disney productions in the 21st century, it is noticed that Sleeping Beauty is not a tale that has been reimaged. The tales they have filmed all involve a female protagonist which is self-sufficient such as Rapunzel, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast. The visuals of women portrayed in these newer films are a heavy reason for little girls growing up self-sufficient and independent.

When thinking about how fairy tales are seen to this day, we can marginalize the viewership to young girls. This is when we localize our view to princesses in particular. Walt Disney had a role in the view of women and their treatment. A step towards the future movement of women empowerment can be traced back to the early 20th century when Walt Disney decided women and their helplessness were not his center focus any longer. "Disney went much further than the Grimms to make his films more memorable than the tale, for he does not celebrate the domestication of women so much as the triumph of the banished and the underdogs" (Tatar, 430). With this improvement made in the timeline of fairy tale evolution, these stories have transformed from a salon affair for women entertainment to a family gathering where all ages and genders can enjoy the fiction feature. The iconic revolution to fairy tales is credited to Mr. Walt Disney. He began to show the female protagonist as a shadow. There was no need for a male figure to save the life of a woman in his eyes, and this was a very uncommon circumstance

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for the genre. “With the rise of warrior women in popular entertainments comes a degree of cultural anxiety about producing a new stereotype that, while disavowing the notion of princesses passively awaiting liberation, risks installing an even more disturbing archetype of female heroism” (Tatar, 459-460). A new version of tales was controversial and a step into unknown territory. There was far less support for these changes that occurred because women would soon gain many advantages not being seen as “property” following the right to vote in the 20’s. Men believe this would lead to women gaining more independence and have less need for their strong role though.

In short, after examining historical evidence of how both men and women perceived the female gender in literature, there is a plausible explanation for how women have gained control of their representation over time. Analyzing these references which explain the evolution of fairy tales and the picturing of women, a stronger understanding has been constructed and we can now recognize why women over time have gained a voice of independence and more credibility.

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