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Editor: Dr. Genevieve Brown
College of Education
Sam Houston State University

Editor: Dr. Beverly J. Irby
College of Education
Sam Houston State University

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Wake Up Sleeping Beauty: Strong Heroines for Today's World

Dr. Tricia Kuon and Dr. Heidi Weimar

Abstract

Fairy tales have been described as the remains of ideas and social practices of the past (Yearsley, 1924). As *thumbprints* of history, fairy tales teach about the cultures of people while entertaining and explaining the world to the next generation (Yolen, 1992; Zeece, 1996). While the tales are valued as a kind of historical archive and a great source of entertainment, researchers have found that fairy tales have an impact in shaping the ways children view the world. Bettelheim (1976) stated that fairy tales are instrumental in stimulating the imagination of children. He and others maintain that fairy tales answer important questions about the world and how it works. These perceptions of how the world works are influential and long-lasting because the impressionable child will make judgments concerning what is admirable in terms of acceptable behaviors and character traits of people based on what they learn in fairy tales (Hurley, 2005; Storr, 1986; Yolen, 1992).

Key Words: Women, fairy tales, history, leadership

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Introduction

The realization that fairy tales may influence how children believe the world works has led to substantial study of specific portrayals of characteristics, themes, and morals learned from fairy tales. One area of focus has been on gender portrayals, specifically in regard to portrayals of women in fairy tales. This focus brings up several questions: What do fairy tales teach about women? What characteristics are considered to be valuable for a fairy tale heroine? How could gender portrayals of women in fairy tales have an impact on training women to be leaders?

Interestingly, Parsons (2004) found that fairy tales, even newer adaptations, portray women in almost exclusively traditional roles. Heroines are often pictured cooking, cleaning, singing, tending to children, talking to animals, dancing and day dreaming primarily about what life will be like when a handsome prince arrives. Beauty is by far the most common and revered attribute of the fairy tale female but the traits of patience and passivity are also highly regarded (Lyons, 1978; Yolen, 1977; Stone, 1975).

If the majority of female characters are most prized for their beauty, ability to clean, and the fact that they are passive, meaning they are not in control of their lives in large and small ways, what will children who are inundated by fairy tale images in print and media learn about appropriate feminine behavior? In short, children will learn that beauty is the most important trait a girl can possess. Furthermore, it is best for a girl or woman to be fairly helpless because amazingly good things happen to sweet, quiet, demure fairy tale princesses. Indeed, most of the strong, capable, assertive women in fairy tales are also evil as is the case of countless stepmothers including those in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Usually, these evil women end up being punished severely which further sends the message to girls that passivity is a good quality in a female but assertiveness is definitely a bad quality.

In terms of teaching girls to be leaders who will grow up to be women in leadership and teaching boys that it is acceptable and admirable for girls to be leaders, it is important to provide children with examples of fairy tale female characters who are adventurous, capable, and strong. By sharing tales that depict capable and clever females in conjunction with traditional fairy tales which tend to portray females in more traditional ways, we can broaden the perceptions of children and help them to value and accept strength and leadership abilities as qualities to be sought for both genders.

Fortunately, a new group of modern tales, sometimes called fractured fairy tales, has emerged, many of which feature heroic females (Crew, 2002). The fractured tales depict female protagonists who are, overall, more capable, clever, and adventurous than traditional fairy tale females. Following is a description of five fractured tales that are excellent examples of stories featuring stronger, less traditional heroines.

Often, fractured tales take a familiar story and retell it in a new way. Such is the case in *Cinder Edna* by Ellen Jackson. *Cinder Edna* is a tale with two stories in one. Cinder Ella and

Cinder Edna are friends with different approaches to life. While both women are forced to work for a stepmother and stepsisters, beautiful Ella plans to escape her life of drudgery by marrying a wealthy man. Cinder Edna, however, is a new breed of fairy tale heroine. Although she is beautiful, she is said to be strong and spunky. She knows a few good jokes and has learned a great deal from doing housework including how to make 16 different types of tuna casserole.

When invited to the ball, Ella and Edna have different reactions. Ella cries until her fairy godmother appears and magically provides transportation. Edna, not one to believe in magic, rides a bus to the castle. While at the ball, both women meet princes who happen to be brothers. Ella falls in love with Randolph, a dashing handsome man who, when asked what his duties as a prince involve reviewing the troops and sitting around on the throne looking brave and wise. In contrast, Edna is drawn to Prince Rupert who is not particularly handsome but who does have great depth of character; he runs a recycling plant and a home for orphaned kittens. Although both couples marry, the tale hints that only one couple lives happily ever after.

Another example of a familiar tale retold is *Sleeping Ugly* by Jane Yolen. Because physical beauty is often the single most defining characteristic of fairy tale heroines, in an effort to focus on the fact that there are traits other than beauty that are praiseworthy in women, fractured tales often feature plain and even ugly heroines who have personality attributes that make the characters likeable. The heroine of *Sleeping Ugly* is Plain Jane, an orphan whose hair is not attractive, whose nose is long and turned up. Either way the story goes, Plain Jane would have just been plain. However, Jane is said to love animals and is kind to strange women.

In the same forest where Jane lives, a mean and nasty-tempered princess named Miserella also resides. Although Miserella is beautiful on the outside, inside she mean and horrid. In a humorous twist, a good fairy, Plain Jane, and Miserella meet and end up in a 100-year sleep. When a prince happens by, he begins to do his princely duty which includes kissing sleeping women. He first kisses the fairy, then he kisses Jane. When Jane awakens to see the prince, she loves him and says that she wishes he would love her. Hearing her wish and knowing the goodness of her heart, the fairy grants Jane's wish so Jane and the Prince live happily ever after. All concerned decide it would be best to let Miserella continue to sleep.

Sometimes fractured tales will use familiar fairy tale motifs and tell a new story that is fairy tale-like. *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch is such a story which features a spunky princess named Elizabeth. Elizabeth is also beautiful, intelligent, and planning to marry a handsome prince named Ronald. When a fierce dragon smashes Elizabeth's castle, burns her lovely clothes, and abducts Prince Ronald, Elizabeth puts on her paper bag, the only unburned thing she can find to wear, and goes quickly to rescue Prince Ronald. Realizing that she cannot overpower the dragon, Elizabeth relies on her intelligence and wit to save Ronald. Surprisingly, once freed, Ronald is not very grateful to Elizabeth. In fact, he criticizes Elizabeth's bag-clad, charred-hair appearance. Elizabeth responds by telling Ronald that his clothes are pretty, and his hair is neat, but he is a bum. The two do not marry after all which does not bother Elizabeth who is seen on the last page of the book still dressed in her bag dancing away into the sunset.

Another way of fracturing a fairy tale is when an author writes a sequel to a well-known story. *Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter* by Diane Stanley first retells the story of *Rumpelstiltskin*:

Once there was a miller's daughter who got into a heap of trouble. It was all because her father liked to make up stories and pass them off as truth. Unfortunately, the story he told was that his daughter could spin straw into gold, which, of course, she could not. Even more unfortunately, he told this whopper in the hearing of a palace servant who rushed right off to tell the king. Since the king loved nothing in this world more than gold, he had the miller's daughter hauled up to the palace immediately and made her an offer she couldn't refuse. He put her in a room full of straw and ordered her to spin it into gold by morning, or die.

Magically, a little man named Rumpelstiltskin shows up each morning at 3:00 a.m. to spin the straw into gold for the miller's daughter, Meredith. On the third night, Rumpelstiltskin told Meredith that he wants her first-born child in exchange for spinning the straw into gold, because he desperately wants to be a father. Meredith decides that she prefers Rumpelstiltskin to the king so she marries Rumpelstiltskin.

The two are happily married and have a daughter who is bright and clever. When the king learns that she is the daughter of the man who could spin straw into gold, he quickly has her brought to his castle. Although she knows she can call on her father to help her, Rumpelstiltskin's daughter decided instead to carry out a plan to change the king's life perspective and transform his kingdom for the good of he and all who live in the kingdom.

Another common practice of fractured fairy tales is to tell a familiar story placing the woman in the male's role and the man in the woman's role. *The Cowboy and the Black-Eyed Pea* by Tony Johnston is an adaptation of *The Princess and the Pea* set on a Texas ranch. Farethee Well, the tale's heroine, is warned by her father shortly before his death that when he dies and she inherits the ranch, cowboys and men pretending to be cowboys, will flock to the ranch in hopes of marrying her and her fortune. Her dad wisely instructed Farethee Well to *find a real cowboy* who would love her for herself and not just for her cattle. Her daddy also told Farethee Well the secret of recognizing a real cowboy by his sensitivity. He said that at the slightest touch, the real cowboy would bruise.

Given her father's advice, Farethee Well decided that the best way to determine if a man is a real cowboy is to slip a black-eyed pea under his saddle blanket and send him out on the range. If he is unbothered by the pea, she will know he is a fake.

As predicted, several fakes do show up on the ranch sporting big mustaches and neck scarves. When the real cowboy appeared, the unseen black-eyed pea caused him great pain. Even riding atop 100 saddle blankets, the real cowboy's sensitivity was apparent and Farethee Well fell in love.

Due to the always present popularity of traditional fairy tale literature and the increasing interest in fractured tales, new titles similar to those just detailed are published each year. Just as traditional tales have influenced the way children perceive and understand the world and how it works, exposure to fractured tales can balance and broaden these learned perceptions and teach children the essential messages that girls can be strong yet sweet, adventurous and nurturing, capable, clever, and caring. Valuing all of these characteristics as models of femininity to strive towards will empower and lead to great things for girls including high self-esteem, a desire to succeed in all areas of life, and the knowledge that girls can grow to be great women in leadership.

More Fractured Fairy Tale Titles

We suggest other modern fairy tales as indicated in Table 1. These tales place women in a not so vulnerable position with men and shed a different light on gender within stories. Perhaps these fractured fairy tales will be told in the future alongside old ones to disrupt traditional stereotypical thought related to women's roles.

Table 1.

Fractured Fairy Tales

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Banks, L. R. (1992). *Farthest-Away mountain*. NY: HarperCollins.

Berenzy, A. (1995). *Rapunzel*. NY: Henry Holt & Company.

Chin, C. (1997). *China's bravest girl: The legend of Hua Mu Lan*. NY: Children's Book Press.

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Huck, C. (1994). *Princess Furball*. NY: HarperCollins.

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Biography

Dr. Tricia Kuon is an assistant professor in the Library Science department at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. Tricia's Ph.D. is in Curriculum and Instruction with emphasis in Literature for Children from the University of Wyoming. She was an elementary school librarian for several years and currently teaches library science courses at Sam Houston State University.

Dr. Holly Weimar is a faculty member of the Library Science department at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. Holly's Ed. D. is in Curriculum and Instruction with emphasis in Teacher Education from the University of Houston. She was an elementary and intermediate school librarian for many years and is currently teaching courses in Library Science at Sam Houston State University.

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