

Don't Bet on the Prince

Zipes

Preface

It is obviously difficult to define *the* feminist fairy tale. Part of the difficulty is due to the fact that some feminist fairy tales are written by authors who would not necessarily define themselves as feminists. Despite this fact, their tales, and the others in this collection, are imbued with a particular vision of the world which I would call feminist. Not only do the authors challenge conventional views of gender, socialisation, and sex roles, but they also map out an alternative aesthetic terrain for the fairy tale as genre to open up new horizons for readers and writers alike.

Created out of dissatisfaction with the dominant male discourse of traditional fairy tales and with those social values and institutions which have provided the framework for sexist prescriptions, the feminist fairy tale conceives a different view of the world and speaks in a voice that has been customarily silenced. It draws attention to the illusions of the traditional fairy tales by demonstrating that they have been structured according to the subordination of women, and in speaking out for women the feminist fairy tale also speaks out for other oppressed groups and for an *other* world, which may have appeared Utopian at one time but is now already within the grasp of those people seeking to bring about more equality in social and work relations. Thus the aesthetics of the feminist fairy tale demands an open-ended discourse which calls for the readers to complete the liberating expectations of the narrative in terms of their own experience and their social context.

Although one can find feminist fairy tales throughout the world, the most innovative ones in the West are being written in England and America. Such experimentation is largely an outcome of the women's movement, which, in my opinion, has been strongest in these two countries. Ever since the late 1960s there has been a growing tendency on the part of women in England and America—and not only women—to express a non-sexist view of the world through fairy tales or through criticism about fairy tales. The political purpose and design of

most of the tales are clear: the narratives are symbolical representations of the authors' critique of the patriarchal status quo and of their desire to change the current socialisation process.

The primary intended audience of feminist fairy tales consists of children and women, but this does not mean that men are excluded. By reconstructing fairy-tale worlds along non-sexist lines, the writers of feminist fairy tales address society at large, question recurrent patterns of values and the stable expectations about roles and relations. They do not naively believe that one can change gender arrangements and social behaviour by simply reformulating the traditional fairy tales. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated by psychologists and educators time and again that stories and fairy tales do influence the manner in which children conceive the world and their places in it even before they begin to read. Arthur Applebee has shown conclusively how story characters become part of a child's 'real world' and form part of their cultural heritage. Thus, tales play an important role in early socialisation. For instance, upon hearing a fairy tale, children of four and five will 'assimilate the story to their past experience of similar tales, providing themselves with expectations about such things as types of characters, patterns of behaviour, and suitable endings. On the other hand, their understanding of "fairy tales" will be somewhat altered and expanded by the new characters and actions which they meet in the particular tale'.¹ As a key agent of socialisation, the fairy tale enables the child to discover his or her place in the world and to test hypotheses about the world. For years the classical literary tales were mainly articulations and representations of a male viewpoint.² Even when women wrote and told the tales, they submerged their voices to serve a patriarchal social order or to disguise their discontent with it. The fact now that male and female writers have explicitly altered the aesthetic constructs and social contents of the tales to present a feminist viewpoint is an indication that there have been major changes in the socialisation and education of children in England and America since the 1960s. That is, the feminist tales themselves have emerged from the struggles of the women's movement and are being used to elaborate social choices and alternatives for both females and males. As indicators of social, psychological, and political change, they are also agents of a new socialisation.

What is also new is that many feminist tales and criticism have been written by males, some who would refer to themselves as socialist feminists and others who are just generally dissatisfied with male domination and privilege in English and American society. Moreover, numerous male educators and psychologists have drawn connections

between gender arrangements and the miseducation and abuse of children in England and America. They have found that it is impossible to assume a critical stance of society as a male without adopting some of the criteria elaborated by feminists and, of course, by other underprivileged groups. Or, to put it more succinctly, I would claim that it is impossible today to be a critic without being a feminist. Such an assertion is not intended to be doctrinaire. Rather it emanates from my experience and work as teacher, writer, and storyteller. The rigid principles of fairness by which I governed my life were principles which I dictated to women and which restricted my own experience. Most men suffer from male myopia, and our vision can only be corrected by adjusting our lenses to include a feminist viewpoint. There is a moral imperative behind such an adjustment just as there is a moral view to all art and especially to feminist fairy tales and feminist criticism. Neither male morality nor female morality in American and English society is superior to the other. Yet, we have governed our lives and continue to govern our lives according to male 'norms' as though they were normal and superior. Such recent studies as Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* and R.C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin's *Not In Our Genes* have shown that forms of gender behaviour have been produced culturally through social interaction and ontogenetic development. The gender specific upbringing in England and America has led to *different* sets of moral ideologies which need better integration and *not* the rationalisation of the male view for domination which most men prefer. Gilligan has studied the ways in which men are reared to cultivate an ethic of justice based on abstract and rational principles and the ways in which women are reared to value an ethic of care based on nurturing and personal responsibilities.

In the representation of maturity, both perspectives converge in the realization that just as inequality adversely affects both parties in an unequal relationship, so too violence is destructive for everyone involved. This dialogue between fairness and care not only provides a better understanding of relations between the sexes but also gives rise to a more comprehensive portrayal of adult work and family relationships.³

In the history of the literary fairy tale one can trace the development of a debate and possible dialogue about sex roles and domination which corresponds to the actual practice of child rearing and value systems which have come to be established in England and America. Obviously the different fairy tales contain many different concerns other than gender formation and politics. Yet, the social essence of the fairy tale in particular as well as the manner in which we continually

return to it and reformulate it to conceive new worlds, or to reinforce our belief in the present one, indicates that we attribute great moral and ideological power to it in the process of socialising and educating our children.

In documenting the rise of the contemporary feminist fairy tale and the feminist critique, my aim has been to bring together material which will enable us to understand the vitality of the fairy tale and the significance of the transformations which have taken place in the last 15 years. The make-believe of the feminist fairy tales will perhaps make believers out of many children, and as adults, these children will undoubtedly conceive other tales which speak to the tensions and struggles of their lives. For the time being, however, the feminist fairy tales are here to stay, and, if the tales and criticism in the present collection are any indication, then they will continue to provide us with intriguing choices to chart our lives for years to come.

Notes

- 1 *The Child's Concept of Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 3–4.
- 2 See my book, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (London: Heinemann and New York: Wildman, 1983).
- 3 *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 174.

Introduction

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For centuries now theologians, educators, literary critics, psychologists, and librarians have debated the pros and cons of reading fairy tales to children. The basic question they continually ask is whether children should be exposed to the cruelty, violence, and superstition of make-believe worlds. This debate began practically the very moment the tales were written down and established a genre with children in mind—children as targets. From the late seventeenth century to the present, serious talk has centred on the moral aspect and related psychological effect of the *literary* tales. Yet, the pedantic posture of moralism has always been suspect, for its rigidity has prevented us from focusing on the real problem, if there is such a thing as the 'real problem' *with* fairy tales. Instead of examining social relations and psychological behaviour first—the very stuff which constitutes the subject matter of the tales—*both* the proponents and opponents of fairy tales have based and continue to base their criticism on the harsh scenes and sexual connotations of the tales, supposedly suitable or unsuitable for children. Take your pick: 'Away with smut and violence!' vs. 'Let our children open their eyes to sex and resolve their oedipal problems'. The code words of the debate change, but there is, in fact, a 'real problem' which remains: the moral attack against fairy tales (censorship) and the rational defence of the tales (liberal civil rights) emanate from a *mutual repression* of what is actually happening in society.

Recent feminist criticism and feminist fairy tales in America and England have sought to confront the 'real problem' which lies *beyond* and *around* fairy tales. At the very least, feminists endeavour to alter our gaze and challenge our perspective with regard to literature and society. And they accomplish this change by forcing us to look at and take our everyday occurrences more seriously than we do. As we know, the everyday for a woman often consists of menial tasks at home or at work where her rights and needs are denied in various ways and her