A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FAIRY TALE HEROES AND HEROINES THROUGH GENDER LENS

Giulia SUCIU, Assistant Professor PhD,
University of Oradea

Abstract: *Fairy tales are part and parcel of our life, starting from early childhood; fairy tales are universal: "fairy tale language seems to be the international language of all mankind, of all ages and of all races and cultures." (Von Franz, M.L. Interpretations of Fairy Tales. 1996, p. 27.) Fairy tales are meant to be moral and educational: they shape young minds so as to value inner beauty over appearance, good over evil etc. Fairy tales have always been one of culture's mechanism for instilling roles and behaviour patterns. Being exposed to fairy tales over and over again, children end up taking them for granted and considering the behaviour patterns and gender roles they convey as perfectly normal. What's more, after listening to several fairy tales, children develop certain expectations as to how the characters should behave, the end of the story etc., therefore fairy tales do not just teach children moral values, they also provide them with behaviour patterns and value systems.*

The present paper aims to analyse the heroes and heroines of fairy tales though gender lens, focusing on the gender roles, gender characteristics and behaviour patterns they convey and instil in the minds of their young readers.

Keywords: *fairy tales, gender lens, behaviour patterns, gender roles, discrimination.*

Fairy tales are as old as the hills, part and parcel of our life. They are present in our life from early childhood; every child has been exposed to them at one point in his/her life. We can all look back on our childhood and see ourselves listening to fairy tales before going to sleep.

Fairy tales have circulated throughout the world in different versions, but nowadays – thanks to the advances in technology – children are mesmerised by Disney films, which offer re-enactments of the above-mentioned fairy tales, reinforcing their messages even further. What's more, due to the power of the visual representation, children tend to consider Disney film the real story, rather than the classic one. (That is why the present paper will focus mainly on some well-known Disney films.)

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

Fairy tales are meant to be moral and educational: they shape young minds so as to value inner beauty over appearance, good over evil etc. Fairy tales have always been one of culture's mechanism for instilling roles and behaviour patterns. They are universal; "fairy tale language seems to be the international language of all mankind, of all ages and of all races and cultures."[1]

Fairy tales are an important socializing tool, influencing children and teaching them behaviour patterns. "Gender socialization begins at birth and continues throughout our lives…Throughout childhood, gender differences and gender inequality are created and reinforced."[2] And one way to do this is through fairy tales. Being exposed to fairy tales over and over again, children end up taking them for granted and considering the behavioural patterns and gender roles they convey as perfectly normal. What's more, after listening to several fairy tales, children develop certain expectations as to how the characters should behave, the end of the story etc., therefore fairy tales do not just teach children moral values, they also provide them with behaviour patterns and value systems.

I became aware of the impact these fairy tales have on children when I overheard my six-year-old girl playing with her dolls and we had the following conversation.

Me 'Why are you screaming?'

Her 'Because a fire-breathing dragon is keeping me trapped in a tower.'

Me 'Why don't you do something about it? Why don't you fight with the dragon?' (By the way, my daughter has an orange belt in karate)

Her 'I'm waiting for the prince!

Me 'He might be late…'

Her "He is never late!'

No matter how much I tried to change the course of events, she stuck to the original version of the story, the one that she had heard/seen over and over again, the one in which the princess in distress does nothing to change her destiny, but wait submissively for the prince on a white horse to appear and save her from the dragon. Which made me realise that fairy tales are not just harmless stories meant to enchant us as children. It is true that fairy tales are meant to encourage imagination and creative

[1] Von Franz, M.L.. *Interpretations of Fairy Tales*. 1996, p. 27.

[2] Kimmel, M.S.. *The Gendered Society*. 2000. p.122

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

thinking, being a form of escapism from reality, but at the same time they are teaching children wrong lessons about appropriate behaviour, love and gender roles. And their effect on children is much more lasting than a mere lesson.

Fairy tales have come under much scrutiny lately and have been widely studied on the one hand because of the important part they play in popular culture and on the other hand because of the impact they have on children. The problem with fairy tales is that they are not only descriptive, but they are also prescriptive, prescribing how we should behave and what we should do, what we should look like etc. Thus gender roles and gender specific behaviour are indoctrinated through fairy tales.

Fairy tales play a decisive role in shaping children's perception of themselves and of the world around them, reinforcing dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity. In order to pin down these ideas of masculinity and femininity, I decided to take a look at fairy tale heroes and heroines through gender lens.

Fairy Tale Heroines or What Do Girls Learn about Being a Woman

It does not take a genius to see that fairy tales portray heroines in restricted roles, either trapped in a tower, guarded by a fire-breathing dragon or serving the household as an ill-treated servant, in both cases forced to wait for the knight in shining armour to rescue her. Which is more or less similar to women's position in the past: they had to stay at home with their parents until a man could support them. But the situation of women has changed; in the 1980s women successfully gained many rights and having equal rights with men meant that they were expected to have the same 'journey' as fairy-tale heroes, i.e. pursue a career, go travelling etc. Now, the question that arises is whether these changes are reflected in fairy-tales too, or are children left with out-dated views of woman's role and position.

In order to do that, I put on my 'gendered spectacles' and read/watched once again some of the famous international fairy tales in chronological order. The first one – it goes without saying – was Snow White, whose most precious asset is her beauty – '*Lips red as a rose, Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow*' - as the Magic mirror describes her. But her beauty is also her curse, since it attracts the envy of her step mother. The implications that stem from the gender stereotypes portrayed by the

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

heroine need no further analysis: one woman, willingly and happily cleaning and cooking for seven – little – men, who does not lift a finger to change her lot, but waits patiently and submissively for the charming prince who is supposed to find her in the heart of the forest…'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.'[3]

Though similar in many ways to Snow White, Cinderella is not so naïve and childish. Though kind to all around her, be it animals or human beings, at times she proves to be quite sarcastic – usually in her comments regarding Lucifer and her step mother, which she keeps to herself quite wisely. She is also determined and has the courage to stand up for what she wants when she confronts her step mother about going to the ball. She proves to be quite skilled in keeping the household, but she is also quite creative and resourceful when we think of the way she re-designed her mother's old dress so that she could go to the ball.

From a feminist point of view, Aurora (*The Sleeping Beauty*) seems to be the least feminist of all fairy tale heroines so far: she makes no choices for herself; she does not seem to possess any abilities - we do not see her cook, clean, sew etc., she falls into the trap of the evil character and falls asleep for the rest of the film. But then again, her breath taking beauty ensures the happy ending, and we are once again shown that dreams do come true and love conquers all, without any action or will on the part of the heroine.

Princess Ariel (*The Little Mermaid)* appeared in a period characterised by liberation movements, by the radical redefinitions of social and gender roles, therefore she was bound to differ from the previous heroines. Ariel is a bright spirited, adventurous and stubborn mermaid, with a will of her own, who disobeys her father and takes control of her destiny. She is not happy in her limited surroundings and wants more out of life. She goes in search of the prince instead of waiting patiently for him to come and find her. Still, if you come to think of it, the message of the fairy tale is not as positive as it may seem at first sight: it is acceptable to abandon your family, change your body radically and give up your talent to find a man.

[3] Rowe, K.E. – *Feminism and Fairy Tales*. In Jack Zipes.. *Don't Bet on the Prince*. 1986. p.217

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

Mulan, the heroine of the fairy tale with the same name, is courageous and strong-willed, outspoken and independent, not fitting the profile of the young Chinese girl of the time. Having the appearance and behaviour of a tomboy, she is capable of defending herself, mastering the use of swords and kung-fu fighting styles. She is also the first heroine to realize she wanted to be more than someone's daughter or wife. Mulan is a woman who breaks out of her culture traditional role and defies all traditional roles for that matter and manages to be true to herself, despite the existing misconceptions and gender stereotypes and eventually earns the respect of her family and those around her, including the Emperor who bows in front of her.

At first sight Mulan seems to be a character feminists would acclaim, but if we delve into the issue, we realize that the only way in which she could accomplish something, was pretending to be a man. And in the end, when offered the position of the Emperor's Consul, a position in which she would have control over many men, she refuses so that she could go home and be with her family, which brings us back to the stereotyped gender role of women as homemakers.

Rapunzel, the protagonist of *Tangled*, is a cheerful, independent person who knows what she wants and finds a way to achieve her goals. While locked away in the tower, she finds ways to entertain herself: painting, reading, candle-making, singing etc., becoming quite an expert in literature, astronomy, art and music, therefore, a proficiently educated princess. With the help of a thief – not a prince!!!! – she gets out of the tower and her life begins.

Ever since women have started raising awareness to gender issues in fairy tales, women appear to be portrayed in more powerfully independent roles, with a will of their own, capable to stand up for their rights and for what they want. Nevertheless, one thing remained unchanged: all heroines are still very beautiful, the message remaining more or less the same: they can achieve things on their own as long as they are attractive. And though there are heroines endowed with strength and wisdom, let's face it: which story is better known to the general public? *Mulan* or *Sleeping Beauty*?

Fairy Tale Heroes or Tales of Masculinity

The heroes of fairy tales are stereotypical too. They are all handsome, brave and wealthy, presented as the Ideal, the man every woman needs,

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

guaranteeing the 'happily ever after'. Yet, despite all these traits, they seem to lack any personality. We know nothing about them, about their ambitions, about their feelings, they appear rather late in the course of events, in a nutshell, they simply seem to be on the right place at the right time.

Their range of emotions is also pretty limited. Except foolishly falling in love at first sight – thus conveying the wrong message about love – and grieving when their beloved princess is dead, they show no other emotions.

The Prince in *Snow White* appears at the very end of the story, finds Snow White – against all odds – in the heart of the forest, falls in love with her and decides to take her to his castle. He does nothing heroic to save her, he has no goals, no ambitions.

In *Cinderella*, we find out about the prince's goal: to get married. But again, he does nothing to ensure the happily ever after; others organise the ball for him, others go throughout the country to find his future wife etc.

The prince in *Sleeping Beauty* is the first to go on a quest: he sets out to find the castle where Aurora has been hidden, in order to bring her back to life and marry her. The hero of *The Little Mermaid* doesn't stand out either: he even needs to be saved by the heroine. He is easily deceived and almost marries the villain of the story.

Despite the movement for democracy, fairy tale heroes did not change. Although monarchs lost their power throughout Europe, the fictional counterparts remained – the hero of fairy tales is still the flawless, brave prince.

But change appears to be on its way. The hero in Mulan is the first one that has a name and a title General LiShang– all the previous heroes were presented as simply 'the prince', this anonymity reinforcing somehow their lack of personality. General LiShang is a highly capable leader, dedicated to his cause, putting his duty above his feelings. He is also nicknamed Pretty Boy because of his good looks, but he has more than an attractive physique; he is reserved and thoughtful, logical and calm.

Tangled takes this change even further. The male character of the film is Flyn Rider, a cocky, arrogant self-centred thief. He is endowed with many skills: escaping the authorities, hiding out, stealing things from under people's nose – far from the classic hero endowed only with positive traits. However, as the story unfolds, he changes his priorities

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

and turns into a very compassionate, chivalrous and trustworthy person. He is even willing to sacrifice his own life to save Rapunzel but in the end is saved by the heroine and they lived happily ever after.
Men's portrayal in fairy tales does not seem to vary a lot along the time. The gender archetype of the handsome, brave prince seems to prevail in most plots. They appear to be simply the means by which the heroine achieves the 'happily ever after' after many sufferings.

Instead of a conclusion – fairy tales and gender roles

Fairy tales have changed over time, and yet they remained fundamentally the same. Fairy tales perpetuate Christian patriarchal concepts whose aim is to maintain a gender hierarchy, validating women through submissiveness and men through bravery.
Beauty is of paramount importance in fairy tales, whether we are talking about heroes or heroines. Disney films present us with visual ideas of beauty. As Kay Stone puts it 'heroines are not allowed any defects, nor are they required to develop since they are already perfect'.[4] Such 'perfect embodiments' of the feminine ideal make women slaves to the beauty myth, perpetuating the stereotype that 'a woman's character is directly tied to her appearance and that youthful beauty is the ideal.'[5] In other words, attractiveness is an indicator of the heroine's chances of future happiness. Such messages may result in low self-esteem, low expectations and emphasize the importance of looks as women's most important asset.
Fairy tales have changed along the time; ideals of feminine beauty have changed over time; as women gained more power and social opportunity, their stereotyped gender portrayal in fairy tales may have suffered a few alterations. Nevertheless, fairy tales maintained the same standard ideals of gender roles: the passive, submissive female and the brave male still remain deeply rooted into our consciousness.
Disney films are engraved into our consciousness. They plant a seed in the minds of children, influencing as they grow their perspective of reality. They brainwash children into accepting stereotyped gender roles

[4] Stone, K. - *Things Walt Disney Never Told Us.* 1975. p.45
[5] Bacchilega, C. – *An Introduction to the Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale*. Western Folklore. p9

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)

and convey messages according to which the key to happiness is a man on a white horse.

'The disenfranchised or oppressed heroine must be rescued by a daring prince. Heterosexual happiness and marriage are always the ultimate goals of the story. There is no character development because all characters must be recognizable as types that remain unchanged throughout the film. Good cannot become evil, nor can evil become good. The world is viewed…as a dichotomy, and only the good will inherit the earth.'[6]

So, should we stop reading fairy tales to our children? I think that the solution is simple: existing fairy tales need to be re-written in order to match the reality around us or new ones, - more realistic - should take their place so as not to leave children with a distorted view of what it means to be a man/woman in today's society.

Bibliography:

- Applebee, A. *The Child's Concept of Story*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Bacchilega, C. – *An Introduction to the Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale*. Western Folklore Vol.52. No 1. January 1993, published by Western States Folklore Society.
- Baker-Sperry, L. and Grauerholz, L., *The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales*, Gender and Society, 2003.
- Kimmel, M.S. *The Gendered Society*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Rowe, K.E. – *Feminism and Fairy Tales*. In Jack Zipes. *Don't Bet on the Prince*. 1986
- Stone, K. – *Things Walt Disney Never Told Us* in *Women and Folklore*, by Clare R.Ferrer. Texas Press. 1975
- Unger, R. and Crawford, M. *Women and Gender*, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 1996.
- Von Franz, M.L. *Interpretations of Fairy Tales*, Boston, Shambala, Random House, 1996.
- Zipes, J. *Happily Ever After – Fairy Tales, Children and Culture Industry*. New York. Routledge. 1997.

[6] Zipes,J. *Happily Ever After – Fairy Tales, Children and Culture Industry*. 1997. p.93

BDD-A23295 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:45 UTC)