MASCULINE VS. FEMININE IN ROMANIAN AND GERMAN FAIRY TALES

Cătălina BĂLINIŞTEANU, Teaching Assistant Ph.D.,
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău

Abstract: We share the opinion of Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996), Zipes (1994), Taxel (1992)[1] who consider that children's literature is one of the vehicles that inculcate gender stereotypes and transmit the young readers the information about the mentality and culture of other countries. The paper will be a contrastive study of German and Romanian fairy tales and will focus on issues such as gender, sexuality and power. It will also seek to question the way in which the idealised white female body is made to represent cultural norms which privilege the hetero-normative patriarchy which excludes 'the Other' or any other feminist identity formations. Gender roles are central to our study because we are interested in analysing the influence of these texts on children in perceiving women from their environment. We have chosen for our analysis fairy tales from both German and Romanian cultural space because on the one hand we wanted to highlight the traditional elements present in these narratives, and on the other hand our intention was to discuss the 'globalisation' of certain themes, motifs and symbols.

Keywords: public vs. private life, subject-object relations, patriarchal order, gender roles

Although fairy tales are regarded as innocent narratives suitable especially to young children, that families use to entertain their descendants, recent critical works have shown the frightening influence this literature has on children's personal conceptions about issues such as gender, race and class. A thorough analysis shows the extent to which certain scenes, themes or motifs induce to children various prejudices or preconceptions about the gender roles. The results of this analysis highlights on the one hand the differences between German and Romanian folklore as they are displayed in the fairy tales collected by Brothers Grimm and by the Romanian folklorist Petre Ispirescu; on the other hand, the analysis also reveals the similarities found in several fairy tales to prove that popular themes transcended the geographical borders and have been slightly altered so that to impregnate a specific narrative with national motifs. In the end, we will briefly summarize the gender stereotypes and compare them with the ideologies or conventions of people that are responsible for the contents of these fairy tales.

I. METHOD and CORPUS

Some critics[2] have chosen to make a quantitative analysis of gender stereotypes in fairy tales, but we were more interested in carrying out a qualitative analysis focusing on the

[1] Knowles, M. and K. Malmkjaer, *Language and Control in Children's Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996; Jack Zipes, *Fairy tale as myth/myth as fairy tale*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1994, p. 33; J. Taxel, "The politics of children's literature" in V. Harris (ed.), *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8*, Norwood MA, Christopher- Gordon Publishers Inc., 1992, p. 8, p. 13.
[2] Christine M. Yzaguirre, *A Whole New World? The Evolution of Disney Animated Heroines from Snow White to Mulan*., MA thesis, Seton Hall University, 2006.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

ideology of these texts. A thematic analysis was performed on the most known fairy tales collected from German and Romanian folklore (Brothers Grimm: *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Hänsel and Gretel*, *The Goose Girl*; Petre Ispirescu: *Ileana Sîmziana*, *Fata moşului cea cu minte*, *Fata săracului cea isteaţă*, *Zâna Zânelor*, *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe şi viaţă fără de moarte*). First a template was developed in the form of codes, themes and motifs to organize the indexing material. These codes were organized in three main categories: 1. common gender stereotypes in fairy tales; 2. differences between German and Romanian tales; 3. globalisation of themes, motifs and symbols. For the third category we conducted our analysis on three popular tales from both cultures: *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *The Frog Prince*, *Cat-skin* with their Romanian equivalents: *Cele douăsprezece fete de împărat şi palatal fermecat*, *Broasca ţestoasă fermecată* and *Găinăreasa*. After having presented the results of our indexing, the qualitative analysis allows the researcher to point out to the consumer of texts and of research the potential influence of the gender stereotypes from fairy tales. In the discussions from the end of this paper we will show how fairy tales are seen as a collection of values and norms which teach children which is the privileged class, who (what gender) holds the power in society, who is omitted or pushed aside by the dominant culture.

II. RESULTS

Gender approach to literature is supposed to examine how sexual identity influences the creation of literary works and of characters. The central issues of our paper deal with the patriarchal attitudes that have dominated literature and arts and how women have been presented based on the assumptions produced by male authors. In order to show the power relations between men and women as suggested to readers in the children's literature we will present some of the gender stereotypes displayed in both German and Romanian fairy tales. The list includes:

1. Gender stereotypes in fairy tales

a. The attributes of the fairy tale princess

Many critics perceive the female characters as idealized depictions of women whose qualities (beauty, innocence, humbleness, caring and obliging nature, mothering instincts) are suitable to a domestic existence[3]. This type of existence is specific to all women in a patriarchal society, since they are restricted to private spaces, not being allowed to develop public activities such as fighting, hunting, trading, or ruling the country. Due to this existence, women are presented as passive characters, as victims who do not challenge the actions or decisions of others, who submissively accept their fate: before they get to their royal position, all princesses have to clean cottages, pick fruits from the woods, live like peasant girls. Their whole life seems to be ruled by external forces, they seem to have "no input or voice regarding the matter"[4], and their passivity gives a rather static impression which is sometimes

[3] Stefaan Van Den Abbeele, *Disney's spice girl vs. Dreamworks wonderboy. Ecofeministische filmanalyse van Mulan en The Prince of Egypt*, MA thesis, Gent University, 2000, pp. 73-74.
[4] Jill Henke; Diane Zimmerman Umble; Nancy J. Smith, "Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine" in *Women's Studies in Communication 19.2*, Summer 1996, pp. 229-249.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

enhanced to inertness (Sleeping Beauty, Snow White need a man's kiss to awaken them from their sleep).

Both German and Romanian folklore teach the readers that a woman's beauty rather than her personality is the quality most appreciated by princes and/or heroes: the heroine is pursued not for her actions, she is hatred or envied by the female antagonist for her physical appearance and for her youth. Even the powerful female antagonists show their frustration for not being as beautiful as the heroine, this suggesting that beauty remains the most desired quality in a woman. Her beauty prevents Snow White from being killed by the huntsman; all men fall instantly in love with the heroine after seeing her at different balls/wedding parties (Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Zâna Zânelor, Ileana Sîmziana, all emperor's daughters from Romanian fairy tales); Snow White is not buried immediately after her poisoning ("but her cheeks were still rosy, and her face looked just as it did while she was alive; so the dwarfs said, 'We will never bury her in the cold ground'…", *Snow-drop*, pg. 98); if she is away from home, transcending the private space, the beautiful heroine is easily accepted by other and receives help whenever she needs it (Snow White is welcomed in the dwarfs' cottage, the Romanian female protagonists are helped by all sorts fantastic creatures in their pursuit for happiness). The heroine's grace differentiates her from other female characters and her elegance cannot be surpassed by her opponents: Cinderella or other Romanian princesses dance with their suitors "in regal ballet style, spinning and twirling gracefully across the dance floor"[5] as opposed to their antagonists' clumsiness. The women's display of charm, grace and beauty make them more appealing to their Prince Charming, hence the man's choice of dance partner or wife instead of other 'eligible maiden'.

In this context women's submissiveness is strongly contrasted to the hero's masculinity and common sense: protagonists are never ridiculed in fairy tales – men are neither hyper-masculine nor effeminate: the prince is no muscle-bound hero, nor domineering man, nor is he a sensitive, romantic, loving man. In fact, man's physical appearance is very rarely presented because his deeds are supposed to foreground his qualities; in this respect, fairy tales do not want to force the reader to visualize the hero's image, therefore the confusing representations provided to spectators by different movies or animated films are avoided. As opposed to women, men do not submit to a stereotyped image of male beauty. Man's pastimes such as hunting, drinking or competing with his adversaries fulfil a stereotyped image of masculinity. Fairy tales sometimes present their heroes under different disguises which repel women (the prince is transformed into a frog, a beast, or other creatures); male ugliness is not viewed as a burden (as in the woman's case), sometimes this horrific guise makes the woman proves her superficiality or dignity.

b. Women = objects of desire

"Men are active agents of the gaze and women are passive objects of the gaze"[6]. Due to their beauty and to their passive character, women are considered merely some beautiful objects in the men's hands. They are displayed just as dolls are in a shop window – their comparison with dolls represents in fact "the reduction of woman to the passive object of the

[5] Christine M. Yzaguirre, *op.cit.*, p. 28.
[6] Priscilla Netto, "Reclaiming the Body of the "Hottentot"", in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 12 (2), London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, SAGE Publications, p. 157.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

male gaze"[7]. Furthermore, dolls are 'mindless', consequently women can be easily subjected to the male desire. The most known example is Snow White who is constantly considered an object: when she first meets the seven dwarfs, she is asleep and therefore she becomes vulnerable to their gaze. When Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are supposedly dead, the glass coffin/bier highlights their beauty, and again they become objects which are put on aesthetic display, as if their main occupations are being beautiful and inert, waiting for the 'active observing subject' to undo the spell. Kathi Maio even suggests that all heroines are 'dead' until they unite with a man[8].

It is not the first time when the woman's body, by being constituted as an object for the male gaze, is sexualized and fetishized. In fact the implications of placing the female body in relation to the gaze have also been theorized as involving fetishism and voyeurism – fetishism involves disavowal in which the desire to gaze is both indulged and denied. In this process of looking at or of admiring the female body, the mirror serves as a male judge on female beauty; the reflection in the mirror represents the only standard which grants women any value: critics such as Maria Tatar, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see the voice in the mirror as the voice of patriarchy (in the absence of a father or husband) which rewards or appreciates women according to their beauty. Of these cultural norms about physical appearance are well aware all stepmothers who envy the female protagonists, especially the Queen from *Snow White* in search of self-assessment.

c. Public life for men and private activities for women

Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario explains that the traditional fairy tales heroines were extremely "passive" and "unchallenging": "[they] did domestic chores, obeyed authority and never questioned what was expected of them"[9]. All future wives from both German and Romanian fairy tales perform naturally domestic chores as their daily activity (no matter if they were the emperor's daughters or simple peasant girls). The cleaning, cooking and housekeeping help all heroines to attain 'domestic bliss'; even when heroines flee from their homes and try to escape oppression (*Snow White, Găinăreasa, Fata moşului cea cu minte, The Goose-Girl, Cinderella, Hänsel and Gretel*), they find pleasure in domestic activities – Maria Tatar claims this is part of their maturation process: all these young women have to learn to please their future husbands, because in any patriarchal society women are dependent on men's approval[10]. Women's attempt to please men exceeds their habitual passivity and expresses their ability for survival[11] which implies submissiveness, endurance, but also shrewdness to beguile others.

However, their power as the mistress of the house does not extend outside this domestic world, or any private space. If women are restricted to housekeeping, cooking,

[7] Kirsten Malfroid, *Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Disney Princesses Series*, Gent University, 2009, p. 29.
[8] Kathi Maio, "Disney's dolls" in *New Internationalist* (308), December 1998, pp. 12-14.
[9] R. Do Rozario, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess" in *Women's Studies in Communication*, 27 (1), 2004, pp. 34-60.
[10] "In carrying out domestic chores, Snow White moves into a new developmental stage, demonstrating her ability to engage in labor and to carry out the terms of a contract. No longer a child, she is preparing herself for the state of matrimony" (Maria Tatar cited in Grimm p. 248).
[11] "Survival for those with subordinate status depends quite literally on being able to read others, respond in ways that please others and assume responsibility for others" (Christine M. Yzaguirre, *op.cit.*, p. 19).

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

making the beds, washing, sewing, knitting in exchange for protection and stability, men are free to take on any challenging or dangerous task: hunting, providing for his family's needs, fighting for justice, imposing their wish on others, ruling the count(r)y, killing. The hero's personality is shaped according to his deeds which would define his position within a culture/ society, therefore, it is only logical for him to lead a public life.

d. Women are 'dead' until their encounter with the prince

As we have already mentioned, women seem to lead a dull, meaningless, static existence before meeting their prince. 'Helpless' seems to be the attribute of most fairy tale heroines, as they are always dependent on men and in need of their protection[12]. Both Romanian and German heroines depend on a man to save them from their current miserable situation; their only dream in life is reflected in their hope that someone will rescue them and this goal cannot be attained through rebellion, but through resignation. In fact, the patriarchal society considered obedience and devotion some of the most important values a woman should possess, thus the tendency to comply with these norms is rewarded with the fulfilment of her dreams.

However, although the female protagonists follow the rules of the patriarchal order, they sometimes show emancipatory signs of rebellion and independence: when treated unfairly by their antagonists or accused of things they have not done, the heroines (despite their silenced attitude) try to find a solution to their problems or ask for help: Cinderella addresses the magic hazel-tree, the Romanian heroines turn to different magic horses or old fairies for help. Standing up for their rights or persevering in their goals indicates signs of protest or strength of character, showing them not to be entirely passive.

e. Marriage viewed as a reward for women

Readers notice that, in the majority of fairy tales, love at first sight is very common – this is another traditional message transmitted by the children's literature: man and woman meet, they instantly fall love and live undoubtedly happily ever after. Children are misled into believing that a happy marriage is the end of any good person, other details are considered irrelevant as long as illusions are created and maintained. Marriage is presented as the rightful reward offered to women for having endured different hardships, pressures and constraints; this state would be the perfect chance for women to evade social isolation, as they have always been restricted to private spaces. The heroines seldom transcend the boundaries of the private sphere, and when they do, they have a specific purpose: the encounter with their future husband. Women are not allowed to show any other higher ambitions, they are rarely offered the chance to rule a community or fight with dragons (e.g. the emperor's youngest daughter, who is sent to steal Ileana Sîmziana and to fulfil all her wishes, is one of the few examples of feminine power and authority; however in the end of the fairy tale she is magically transformed into a man, so that she could marry Ileana Sîmziana).

Most fairy tales suggest that protagonists (no matter what gender they might be) go on a quest, or pursue an objective; for women this quest does not require leaving home, but the

[12] Colette Dowling in *The Cinderella Complex*: "We've been ….taught from the time we were very young to do only those things which allows us to feel comfortable and secure. In fact we were not trained for freedom at all, but for its categorical opposite – dependency" (cited in Christine M. Yzaguirre, *op.cit.*, p. 19).

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

fulfilment of their wish/dream. Marriage is defined as a dream particularly feminine, in contrast with the masculine yearning for adventure. Deane Michelle Hoisington claims that marriage serves to obstruct girls' craving for adventure[13], in fact it is used to restrain female characters from pursuing ambitious plans; wealth could be attained by women only through inheritance or marriage instead of work or fight. Thus, marriage comes as a reward for women, who are victims of different abuses and behave like martyrs. On the other hand, Naomi Woods believes that dreams and illusions act for women as narcotics which quench their thirst for adventure and independence[14].

f. The (step)mother figure

Although the female characters outnumber the male ones, most of them are of little importance and their function is not vital for the plot – here we point out the striking absence of mothers (the protagonists are orphans as in the case of German heroines: Snow White, Cinderella) or their lack of importance in the heroine's life (the girls from *Sleeping Beauty* or *Fata săracului cea cu isteaţă* do not resort to their mothers' advice or help when they are in trouble). The mother figure is the least developed character in fairy tales, and it reflects the woman's position in the patriarchal society, symbolizing her complete dependence on the husband; the motherly concern for the daughter merely represents an effort to sustain tradition and patriarchal order.

The female character that proves to be as important as the heroine is the stepmother, usually depicted as the villain of the fairy tale, who acts in a cruel manner towards the stepdaughter and who is generally jealous of her beauty and prospects (*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Fata moşului cea cuminte*). The abuse of the stepdaughters seems to be the only goal that the female antagonists aim; their evilness contrasted with the heroines' kindness enhances the good virtues of the princesses. This binary opposition good daughter vs. wicked stepmother resembles the virgin-whore dichotomy from the 19th century, when women were either placed on a pedestal or driven into the slums. This antagonism uses as catalysts the evaluation of women in terms of beauty, their struggle for authority in the domestic sphere and fulfilment of their dreams. Ultimately all wicked stepmothers are punished for their deeds, thus patriarchal order is again legitimized and reaffirmed, because the male character has the necessary strength to stop the abuses. The stepmothers do not want to conform to the social constraints, they violate the cultural norms. Their attributes contradict the good qualities which are to be expected from a woman: these female characters do not act as pseudo-parents, they totally ignore the mothering qualities. Furthermore, instead of advocating for true love, the antagonists prefer a marriage based on financial profit and social evolution.

[13] Deane M. Hoisington (ed.), *Disney's World. The Art of exclusion*, MA , 1996, cited in Kirsten Malfroid, p. 41.
[14] "Sociologically, the dreams here are opiates of a sort in that they demand and receive a kind of subservience, an obedience to larger social structures: the institutions of love, marriage, procreation, and of patriarchal order" (Naomi Woods, "Domesticating Dreams in Walt Disney's Cinderella" in *The Lion and the Unicorn 20.1*, *Web of Science. Project Muse*. Gent University Library. 1996, p. 35.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

2. Differences between German and Romanian fairy tales

Beyond the gender stereotypes present in the majority of patriarchal texts we have to emphasize the narrative roles taken up by men and women as they were provided by structuralistic literary critics such as Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas or Claude Bremond[15]: usually women are assigned the role of an object/patient/princess, whereas men are subjects/ agents/heroes due to their agencies. The Romanian fairy tales generally follow the pattern provided by Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, in which the story-teller presents the facts diachronically with the subject/hero in his pursuit for the object/prize/princess. Most of the Romanian heroines are not the main characters, they are just waiting to be found by the prince who has to come out victorious in his battle with the villain or to break the spell which kept them isolated. Although German female characters are subjected to the patriarchal constraints, the hero/prince is often a minor character in the story appearing only towards the end, rescuing the princess and (re-)establishing the traditional order. The German fairy tales seem to show greater importance to women, however without ignoring the patriarchal norms: *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Goose Girl* show the women's attitude/ actions before attaining their 'happily ever after' ending. The difference between the two cultures lies in the pursuer of the quest: the Romanian heroes go on a quest and among the rewards they receive, there is also a princess implied (who will eventually become his wife), whereas in German fairy tales the quest is undertaken by a female character, who despite minor subversive actions succeeds in getting the promised reward for not totally transgressing the conventional boundaries.

The physical description of all these heroines seems to have complied with all existing beauty norms; Brothers Grimm insist on the heroine's youth and innocence – most of their female protagonists have hardly reached their puberty (Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty seem barely physiologically capable of sexual reproduction) – , whereas Petre Ispirescu focuses on the body images – women draw the men's attention through their sexual attractiveness; we cannot say that they are depicted as lascivious sex symbols, but as opposed to the German prudish heroines[16], they prove to be cunning, independent and rather comfortable with their sexuality. Although the Romanian heroines cannot enjoy their sexuality too openly, their charm is described as more aggressive, since they use their seductive qualities as weapon – they demand from their future husbands the fulfilment of several tasks, hence the hero's fights with dragons, evil witches or other fantastic creatures.

Furthermore, if the German heroines seem to equal in social status their future husbands (Snow White, Sleeping Beauty or the female protagonist from *The Goose Girl* are all princesses), some Romanian female characters challenge seriously the social boundaries: either the girls are poor and marry the landowner or the prince, or the emperor's daughter/ a

[15] Bremond, Claude, *Logica povestirii*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1981; Greimas, A. J., *Elemente pentru o gramatică narativă*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1975; Propp, Vladimir, *Morfologia basmului*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1970.

[16] Here we might also mention the images offered by Walt Disney in his animated movies for Snow White, Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty as described by Christine M. Yzaguirre (*op.cit.*, p. 51): all wear long dresses with neat collars, puffy sleeves, decent skirts and laced underskirt; even their hair is constrained by ribbons or scarves – all these offer a traditional, prudish outfit by not revealing much naked skin. This type of femininity is contrasted heavily with the female antagonists, whose blatant sexuality is perceived by Bruno Bettelheim as a counterpoint to "the oedipal desires of a father and daughter" (Bettelheim cited in Maria Tatar, p. 240)

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

fairy chooses to get married to a socially inferior man (a yeoman, a servant, a former soldier, etc). Besides this transcendence of social boundaries, the Romanian heroines prove to subvert morality. *Fata săracului cea isteaţă* (The Yeoman's Clever Daughter) is presented as strikingly independent and brave, so we might consider this fairy tale as a feminist manifesto, since the heroine is not afraid of defying her husband's authority; she has confidence in her intelligence and helps her father face the trials imposed to him by the landlord – she gives the right answers to the landlord's questions; ultimately she is not afraid of her sexuality – when the landlord asks her to come to his manor neither dressed, nor naked, she takes off her clothes and uses a fishing net to cover her nudity. So she defies the traditional dressing code, ignoring the conservative length of the skirt or the coverage of the cleavage. She does not fear to use her sexuality as a tool, her body serves almost as a pornographic object to be looked at. Another example of incipient emancipation is mirrored by *Zâna Zânelor* (The Queen of fairies – the equivalent for Queen Mab in the English folklore), when the female protagonist chooses to spend the nights into her lover's chamber without being married to him. No sign of prudishness is shown by Ispirescu when he reveals the readers that the queen of fairies gave birth to a(n illegitimate) son as the natural consequence of her love affair with the emperor's son. This attitude reflects the "New Women" of the late 19th century who feel liberated from the social constraints.

The German folklore resembles the Hollywood typology regarding the female antagonist who is presented as a true *femme fatale*, so popular in the silent Hollywood movies. The female villain proves to be just as beautiful and seductive as the heroine, thus the struggle for power and authority within the domestic sphere cannot be won by the good woman because she does not resort to all kinds of subversive strategies, as her opponent does, consequently the princesses need the help of a man; these provocative, sexually mature women threat even men with their "unnatural, phallic" power. In Romanian fairy tales the opposition between heroines and their antagonists is marked by the contrast in both virtue and beauty. For any kind, hard-working, beautiful heroine there is also an evil, lazy, ugly antagonist who tries to prevent the heroes from attaining their goals. The reader also observes that sometimes the female antagonists prove to be more dangerous than the male ones. It reminds us of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, where the evil monster's (Grendel's) power is exceeded by that of his mother; the Romanian heroes, after having fought all kinds of dragons or villains, have to confront the old crones who want to revenge their sons' death (Scorpia, Gheonoaia, Muma Zmeilor, zgripţuroaica, etc). The allusion to the female antagonists in the fairy tales indicates that powerful women are inevitably ugly and evil.

3. Globalisation of themes, motifs, roles

Certain tales collected by Brothers Grimm have different variants in many countries, thus we speak about the globalisation of themes and motifs, which has increased the cross-cultural contacts. This process of borrowing views and ideas from other cultures did not totally harm the uniqueness of a specific cultural space. For instance, each German story chosen for analysis (*The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *The Frog Prince* or *Cat-skin*) suffered some transformations once they were told to Romanian children; traditional motifs and symbols were added to the original plot, so that the story-teller would make the listener/reader believe he/she is dealing with a Romanian tale.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

In *The Frog Prince* the hero is under a spell which can be broken only by a princess' kiss, whereas the Romanian *Broasca cea fermecată* follows the traditional pattern: the heroine has been cursed and waits for her prince to be rescued. The difference between these two variants is marked by the incipient emancipation of Western women, hence the increasing role of the female character in the man's salvation. Although the princess from the German tale has to obey the patriarchal voice (when her father tells her that she must keep her promise to the frog), she shows signs of protest and independence (when she does not want to receive the frog in her chamber or when she throws the frog into the wall in disgust). The theme is differently presented in the Romanian tale, which prefers to preserve the traditional norms, in which men rescue women from their ordeals and in which women are submissive to their husbands and accept being beautiful objects in the men's hands; furthermore, the woman's rich clothes displays her husband's wealth and her character is a proof of the right choice made by the rational man.

Both *Cat-skin* and *Găinăreasa* point out the reversal of the traditional gender roles: in these tales the women leave their homes and undertake a quest, whose outcome is marriage. The female protagonists dare defy their fathers out of rational reasons (so they would not be contested by the patriarchal readers for their disobedience), they flee from their homes transgressing the boundaries of private spaces, then they act so that they might seduce their future husbands instead of waiting for the prince to choose them (they disguise, dress up and flirt with the prince). The next fairy tale (with its both variants: *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* and *Cele douăsprezece fete de împărat şi palatul fermecat*), despite its disguises and witchcrafts, depicts the women's subjugation to men: in the beginning the twelve princesses act rebelliously when they try to deceive everybody by slipping away from the castle, but ultimately the hero succeeds in finding out their secret and puts an end to their adventures.

We have undertaken this comparison of German and Romanian fairy tales to emphasize the incipient signs of equality in relationships in the Western folklore as well as the more traditional divisions of power for couples in the Eastern children's literature. All these fairy tales were created/ collected in patriarchal times, hence our interest in power relations and traditional gender roles; gender seems to determine automatically one's character.

III. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide information about how children may be influenced in their perception of reality, considering the fact that millions of children have read these fairy tales. We have tried to point out that these narratives contain a strong message about the construction of the 'appropriate' gender roles. The majority of fairy tales present men as subjects and women as objects, various heroes struggle against the villains to deserve in the end to marry the princess, who is continuously treated as "one of the dearest possessions" by men (*Snow-Drop*, pg. 99). A consequence of this message might be the fact that young boys believe to be the only ones capable of adventures, journeys, crimes and of defending their country, whereas young girls are taught to be polite, modest, to act in a ladylike manner so that they might be good wives and mothers in the future. The fairy tales try to convince the young girls that a woman's talents, aspirations and agencies are limited to the domestic

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

sphere, that she will always be dominated by men and that culture/society will try to mould her personality in order to meet the male expectations.

Another message is the one referring to the heroine's beauty which strongly encourages the young girls to put themselves to different ordeals in order to meet with the unrealistic beauty ideals, without realizing that in this way they will soon turn into sexualized objects. Girls are taught to believe that youth and beauty are the only valuable female assets. Very rarely assertiveness and shrewdness are appreciated in fairy tales, even if a woman is intelligent and brave, she should always use these qualities to attract the attention or gain the affection of a man. If not, they will immediately fall into the category of 'bad' women. Nowadays emancipation of women adds another pressure on the young girls: their mothers probably enjoyed successful careers, so the daughter is expected to combine the professional life with the marriage bliss and motherhood.

In fairy tales transgressing the conventional boundaries triggers the punishment of female antagonist; so the female readers are warned that, no matter the circumstances, women should better not compete with men, instead they should accept their limitation to the domestic sphere, be obedient, keep silent and remain submissive. Subtly the fairy tales imply the fact that women are too weak to resist temptations (as Snow White cannot resist the Queen disguised into an old lady), hence their dependency on men. Ambitious heroines, who express their will to power, show the young readers that, in a patriarchal society, women are likely to face painful lessons or even punishments if they try to dominate the man or manipulate him.

Taken into account all these stereotypes created to express the patriarchal order we observe that all fairy tales tend to simplify the relationships, which in the contemporary society can be very complex. For example, the absence of one parent is little explained and the presence of a step-parent is mostly presented as the negative intruder in a family who hates and mistreats stepchildren. Moreover, femininity is depicted in fairy tales as a cultural division into two components which are polarized into an evil, envious older woman and the naïve, obedient girl – a binary opposition specific for the 19th century, but no longer pertinent for the contemporary society. This tendency to simplify special family structures might influence negatively the child's expectations about family and relationships. If a child incorporates into his belief system the fairy tale representations of man and woman, the child's anxieties may be heightened about marriage, about his position in society.

Bibliography

Bremond, Claude, *Logica povestirii*, trad. Micaela Slăvescu, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1981.

Brothers Grimm, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Penguin Books, London, 1999.

Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess" in *Women's Studies in Communication*, 27 (1), 2004, pp. 34-60.

Greimas, A. J., *Elemente pentru o gramatică narativă*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1975.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)

Henke, Jill; Diane Zimmerman Umble; Nancy J. Smith, "Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine" in *Women's Studies in Communication 19.2*, 1996, pp. 229-249.
Ispirescu, Petre, *Legende sau Basmele Românilor*, Editura Facla, Timişoara, 1984.
Knowles, M. and K. Malmkjaer, *Language and Control in Children's Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996.
Malfroid, Kirsten, *Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Disney Princesses Series*, MA thesis, Gent University, 2009.
Maio, Kathi, "Disney's dolls" in *New Internationalist* (308), December 1998, pp. 12-14.
Netto, Priscilla, "Reclaiming the Body of the "Hottentot"", in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 12 (2), SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, pp. 149–163.
Propp, Vladimir, *Morfologia basmului*, trad. Radu Nicolau, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1970.
Tatar Maria, "Introduction" to *Snow White. Children's Stories and Household Tales. By Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm*, New York, Norton, 2004, pp. 240-243.
Taxel, J., "The politics of children's literature" in V. Harris (ed.), *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8*, Norwood MA, Christopher- Gordon Publishers Inc., 1992, pp. 3-35.
Van Den Abbeele, Stefaan, *Disney's spice girl vs. Dreamworks wonderboy. Ecofeministische filmanalyse van Mulan en The Prince of Egypt*, MA thesis, Gent University, 2000.
Woods, Naomi, "Domesticating Dreams in Walt Disney's Cinderella" in *The Lion and the Unicorn 20.1. Web of Science. Project Muse*. Gent University Library, 1996, pp. 25 -49.
Yzaguirre, Christine M., *A Whole New World? The Evolution of Disney Animated Heroines from Snow White to Mulan*., MA thesis, Seton Hall University, 2006.
Zipes, Jack, *Fairy tale as myth/myth as fairy tale*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1994.

BDD-A23409 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:24 UTC)