
Thinking about Fairy Tales and Gender Bias

~ Jill Taplin

I can remember hearing and reading fairy tales when I was a child and I have been telling them to young children for decades. When I first heard fairy tales told in the kindergarten I found some of them uncomfortable and was not sure what I wanted to bring, but I listened to more experienced kindergarten practitioners and researched the value and deeper meaning of fairy tales for myself.

I grew comfortable with the idea that traditional fairy tales were for earlier kinds of consciousness with which young children are much more in tune, that they contained images of spiritual truths which could not be expressed in other ways, that the flat characters are archetypes to represent different facets of the universal human being, and that each story presents an aspect of the journey of the soul, with its challenging struggles between good and evil forces. The marriage of the prince and princess who then lived, in great prosperity, happily ever after, represented the final union of soul and spirit which would enable the spiritual blueprint to shine out. They gave hope to those who first told and heard them, as well as to us, and to our children.

Over the years, I expanded on these ideas to parents and students, hoping to nourish in them the love for traditional fairy tales which had I developed through my deepened understanding. However, gradually thoughts about gender bias in many well-known fairy tales, among other questions, began to intrude and bring a re-think to how I choose and tell fairy tales for young children, and how I talk to parents and students about them.

This was fuelled when I read a book review of a book published in 2020 with the title *Gender Swapped Fairy Tales* (authors: Fransman and Plackett). In this book, several well-known fairy tales have, using a computer algorithm, had all the genders of the characters changed to the opposite sex. This gives us “Mr. Rapunzel” (with a long golden beard) and “Jacqueline and the Beanstalk.” Not only the genders of the main characters are changed, but all the characters, so we meet wicked wizards, wise old queens, huntswomen, and we soon find that the rich merchant in “Handsome and the Beast” is female, as is the beast, of course. I was interested to discover that I

was not worried by this new take on some old friends. According to the book reviewer, when she tried these on a young child, they were just as acceptable as the original versions.

In the authors’ introduction to *Gender Swapped Fairy Tales* the point is made that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries those who collected the fairy tales from oral sources among the villages and farms would have moulded them, to a greater or lesser extent, within their own cultural norms in a strongly male-dominated and paternalistic society. In fact, the story books of fairy tales published under the name of Andrew Lang (*The Blue Fairy Book*, *The Lilac Fairy Book*, etc.), Lang eventually admitted, had mostly been translated and transcribed by his wife, Nora Lang, although she never got her name onto the cover alongside his!

Then I found various compilations of traditional stories chosen to show that the women can be the strongest characters who take the most active roles, such as the tales “Kate Crackernuts” and “Petronella and the Tower.” One of these is the Osbourne book, *Forgotten Fairy Tales of Brave and Brilliant Girls* which has a short foreword written by Kate Pankhurst (with the suffragette family in her background). Another compilation in the same vein is *Fierce, Fearless and Free: girls in myths and legends from around the world* collected by Lari Don. In both these books, the editors have made some changes to the tales. For example, in *Forgotten Fairy Tales*, the beautiful story of Snow White and Rose Red is retold. In this re-telling, the ending is that Snow White marries the prince, who has been freed of his enchantment by the death of the bear, but her sister, Rose Red, does not marry his brother. Instead, she goes off into the world seeking further adventures. There is something satisfactory about this ending when I think about the two sisters as representatives of the introspective side and the extrovert side living in everyone’s soul.

Research suggests that the brothers Grimm tried to keep close to the originals, fired by their belief in the purity of the folk soul, but Perrault, for example, did plenty of sanitizing to make his stories more acceptable to his aristocratic French audience. There is a compilation of Grimms’ fairy tales with the title

The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, edited by Jack Zipes, which includes versions of each tale included in various editions of their book, beginning with a handwritten text of 1809. The final edition overseen by the brothers was published in 1857 and is the source of the texts commonly accepted as definitive today. Zipes suggests that the originals can be seen as “blunt and unpretentious” because the brothers had not yet “censored them with their sentimental Christianity and puritanical ideology.” He suggests that the brothers saw all their sources as “only as mediators of the treasures of ancient storytelling of ordinary people.” What mattered most to the brothers was that “their informants took the tales seriously and made every effort to preserve the simple orality and naïve morality of the tales.”

This edition of Grimms’ fairy tales, made up of fragments and earlier versions of the stories which found their way into the definitive edition published fifty years later, is an interesting read, particularly the introduction which gives the history of the collecting process and interprets the brothers’ motives for making changes. What I find most significant is that the brothers Grimm had no hesitation about their own roles as “mediators.” Their rationale was that their connection to these traditional tales, and their appreciation for the importance of this folk heritage, had become a foundation from which they were able to retell them for their middle-class central European nineteenth century audience. By making the stories acceptable, while remaining, they believed, authentic to the original impulses, they preserved the stories and made them popular and sure of survival.

What does this mean for us today, as we try to meet our own qualms, not to mention questions from parents about aspects of the traditional fairy tales which we choose to tell in the kindergarten? I believe that it emphasizes the importance of developing connections to fairy tales and of deepening our understanding of all the images in them. With an appreciation of the spiritual nature of many fairy tale images, we can develop what might be described as a relationship of trust. Books which I can recommend in this connection are the following:

- Rudolf Meyer (1988), *The Wisdom of Fairy Tales*. Covers many aspects of fairy tales and their importance and meaning. Many of the Grimm collection and some others are discussed in different chapters, from a Christian and anthroposophical outlook.

- Bruno Bettelheim (1991), *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim (1903 – 1990) was a leading psychoanalyst, born in Vienna, interned in Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps during the Second World War, and then moving to the USA. He shows a very keen awareness of the importance of fairy tales in child development. However, his interpretations (mostly in the second half of the book) are based on psychoanalytic formulae and I am less convinced by some of these.
- Daniel Udo De Haes (WECAN, 2018), *The World of Fairy Tales: A path to the essence of the young child through fairy tales*. This is a companion volume to *The Creative Word: The young child’s experience of language and stories*. This book looks at the young child aged four and upwards and how fairy tales meet their needs.
- Friedel Lenz (WECAN, 2022), *The Picture Language of Folktales*. This book includes 25 Grimms’ fairy tales with interpretations.

Fairy tales are a world-wide tradition, with more than 300 versions of Cinderella, for example, and we can find the universal images embedded in culturally differentiated environments when we discover fairy tales from many different parts of the world. It is well worth pursuing fairy tales from many places for the different aspects which we may find highlighted. For example, “The Wooing of Kwelanga” is a Zulu tale where, although the hero is the one who appears to be active, the heroine is the agency behind everything which happens. With its theme of courage, and its inclusion of a powerful female character supporting the courageous male, this makes an excellent Michaelmas story.

With a sure foundation of a “relationship of trust” which will only be established through time and effort, I believe that there is then the possibility that we will be able to mediate traditional fairy tales to meet contemporary needs. For example, it is not necessary to learn stories “word for word,” which could seriously restrict stories told in the kindergarten to the short and easily memorised. My approach is to create the images in my mind’s eye as I read a story I want to tell, live with those images, and then tell the story from the images as I recall them. There is an inevitable shaping of the story in this process.

I am beginning to think that we can also reach a point out of a place of love and understanding, where we might make changes around gender and other elements in fairy tales which we find extremely

problematic. Of course, there are potential dangers of hasty, unthought-through cleanup operations not based on deep connection with what the tale has to offer. I am not advocating “Disneyfication” or sanitizing of all the uncomfortable elements in traditional stories. Images of evil characters and gruesome events are an essential part of the fairy tale world and should not be removed, though they need to be told in a carefully unemotional, objective way. My approach for a mixed-aged kindergarten is to choose stories where evil is not so graphically represented, and leave the grimmer stories for older children, who love the natural justice of the pecking out of eyes and dancing to death in shoes of burning coals.

What I am arguing for is some freedom in our approach to fairy tales, based on our understanding of their importance to the development of children from the age of around five years old. They are a vital source

of “soul milk” around the birth of the etheric, in the same way that mother’s milk is vital just after physical birth. We should keep them in our kindergartens, talk to parents about their value, and feel empowered to mediate them for the place we are today. That does not mean modernising for the sake of it; it does mean thoughtful review. ♦

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Creating an Inclusive Environment

Making space for the gender spectrum and diverse families within kindergarten

~ Stephanie Gill

A healthy social life is found only when, in the mirror of each soul, the whole community finds its reflection, and when, in the whole community, the virtue of each one is living.

—Rudolf Steiner

This article aims to help practitioners to find practical ways to challenge gender stereotypes and create a safe, welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) children, families and staff. (See References and Glossary at end.)

By reflecting on our practice, we may discover ways that we can weave inclusive language and representation into the life of the kindergarten. This can help us to be supportive of all children and create an environment that is inclusive of all families. The emphasis in kindergarten that “everyone is welcome” is the foundation of this inclusive approach.

Rather than seeing gender as binary (either male or female) and fixed (linked to our physical sex),

we can educate ourselves to perceive a spectrum of possibilities. This could include gender that is fluid or defines itself in a non-binary way, transgender as well as cis-gender people, and those who are intersex. “LGBTQ-inclusive teaching ensures that LGBTQ children and young people, and children and young people with such families, see themselves reflected in what they learn. It also encourages all young people to grow up with inclusive and accepting attitudes.”^[1]

It is a requirement that, in England, every school will need to teach children about relationships and families. This includes LGBTQ families, and that means helping children to understand that it’s OK to have two mums, two dads, or any other family structure. Children deserve to learn about a world which reflects the one in which they are growing up. Many children will have LGBTQ parents, friends or family members, and this new guidance will help them to grow up knowing that their families are accepted as much as everyone else’s.^[2] In the UK, the 2010 Equality