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### Fairytales and Pants

They began as moral fables spoken in hushed whispers around the fire and told by whoever had the keenest memory to recite handed-down stories pieced from generations long-passed. Young or old, rich or poor—they provided all kinds with lessons they could both enjoy and learn from. These ‘fairy tales’ taught boys that bravery and valor were the attributes of a proficient man and girls that beauty and passivity were the keys to desirability. Over the centuries, some of these yarns vanished completely while others were written down and changed repeatedly, branching off into different forms and shapes. However, for many of these revitalized and refabricated European fairy tales the basic messages remain the same.

Every little girl dreams of being a princess. In fact, my first Halloween costume was a fake Cinderella gown. Every little girl knows that being the ‘fairest of them all’ is the reason *Snow White* received her prince’s waking kiss. In the end, these tales push girls back into the roles and thought processes of times when the glass ceiling was made of steel and women had little to no rights under a severely patriarchal society. Fairy tales reinforce sexist principles of femininity by emphasizing the feminine beauty ideal, portraying women as subservient and solely dependent on men in a patriarchal world, and promoting a strict initiation into womanhood and happiness through marriage alone. I am not saying that all fairy tales should be banished from the shelves from public libraries or that parents should never let their little girls watch *Sleeping Beauty*. Rather, it is simple a word of warning for parents to be aware of what they are

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subjugating their young, impressionable children to. Girls need a balance between good and pathetic role models in what they watch and read. After all, there are no 'Handsome Princes' in America, unless you count Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*.

To begin, the thing most feminists will tirade about first and foremost when regarding fairy tales is how the stories push the importance of a woman's physical appearance. "The feminine beauty ideal-- the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain-- is of particular interest to feminist scholars" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2). We see the feminine beauty ideal throughout most tales. Off the top of my head, I can easily name *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Cinderella was a beautiful aristocrat forced into rags whose dainty perfect nature was made evident only by her looks and her ridiculously tiny feet, Snow White was the fairest in the land and saw her Prince for all of two seconds at the beginning and end of the famed Disney movie before marrying him, and one of the 'gifts' the good fairies bestowed upon Sleeping Beauty at her birth was, of course, beauty. Not once in any of these three stories was cleverness and wit praised or honored. It did not matter that Snow White was daft enough to take a bite out of a poisoned apple so long as she looked pretty in her glass coffin when the prince arrived.

Some may argue that this trend is utilized merely because most people innately prefer stories with attractive protagonists. However, according to Zipes, "fairy tales written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were intended to teach girls and young women how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner and to teach boys and girls appropriate gender values and attitudes" (qtd. in Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 5). These fairy tales served as a template, teaching how one must behave in accordance to one's own

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gender. While men were expected to show bravery, women were expected to remain pretty and docile. They were given impossible expectations to live up to and still are. In the modern world, that emphasis on gender values can be seen transferring into female youths. One of my worst nightmares as a child is a prime example of this incorrect emphasis on appropriate gender values. I dreamed that a handsome prince was picking his princess from a group of finely-dressed ladies, of which I was among. Each girl was adorned in an elaborate ball gown—glitter and all—just as pretty princesses were meant to be dressed. However, when I looked down to see what color my own dress was, I found myself instantly traumatized by the sight of jeans and a T-shirt. Needless to say, I woke up screaming.

In the modern world, attributes and values for young women that might have seemed crucial in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries no longer apply. That doesn't stop Disney from stuffing sexist modified fairy tales down the throats of today's youth. "In the great majority of the tales, to be a heroine, in even a limited sense requires extreme youth and extreme physical beauty; it would not be sufficient to be merely beautiful, one must be 'the greatest beauty in the kingdom' - 'the fairest in the land'"(Oates 4). People might argue that the 'fairest in the land' phenomenon is passé, but it still exists even today. Beauty pageants are held all over the world and while the contestants nowadays may argue that the judges no longer simply look at outer beauty, everyone has seen one of those six-year-old 'beauty queens' with makeup smeared all over her face, an orange fake tan, and oversized permed hair whose mother is fist-fighting another stage mom behind the scenes. It seems the fairy tale sponsored idea of a girl being the fairest in the land has hardly died off.

Fairy tales have further impressed the importance of physical appearance and youth in women by linking it with virtuousness. This is why we see ugly stepsisters, less-attractive step

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mothers, and frightening witches as antagonists as opposed to beautiful heroines. Beauty is good. Ugly is evil. “Discourse analyses reveal several themes in relationship to beauty. Often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil (31 percent of all Grimm stories associate beauty with goodness, and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil)” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 9).

The Grimm’s fairy tale, *Mother Holle*, expressed this same notion of beauty being good and virtuous while ugliness is frowned upon. In the story, a widow has two daughters who receive the chance to work for a woman named Mother Holle. One of the daughters is portrayed as beautiful and industrious while the other is made ugly and therefore lazy. When the first daughter admits she is homesick, Mother Holle showers her with gold on her way home for being so lovely. When the other daughter is dismissed from the household, instead of gold a kettle of pitch is poured on her that can never be removed from her person. In this extreme example, beauty is rewarded whilst ugliness is punished (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz). This fairy tale may not be the most well-known or contemporary but similar themes are seen in tales such as *Cinderella* where her stepsisters are portrayed as ugly and therefore also wicked and cruel. This objectification against unattractive people exists past the realm of fairy tales and can extend into the mindsets of young girls. As a child in pre-school and some of elementary school, I picked up on that very prejudice and refused to be friends with anyone I deemed not ‘pretty’ enough. I was a princess and all my subjects had to be at least mildly attractive. I even rejected those generic, slightly-chubby realistic Barbie dolls in favor of the stick-thin perfect ones like most girls my age. Needless to say, I dropped the attitude when I became twenty pounds heavier than all the other children in second grade.

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Men in these fairy tales are hardly held to this same standard. In fact, in a statistical analysis using the complete collection of Grimm's fairy tales performed by Baker-Sperry and Graurholz, it was found that there are about five times as many references to women's beauty per tale as to men's handsomeness and the number of references to men's attractiveness ranges from 0 to 35 per story, whereas the range for women is 0 to 114. Indeed, it is obvious to see what values were deemed important for women to garner. In fact, beauty was seen as such an important value that the fairy tales placed a dangerous after-effect on it. Beauty was seen to be the object of envy. "Of the tales in which danger or harm is associated with physical attractiveness (28 percent of all tales), 89 percent involve harm to women. Forty percent of these acts of victimization are the direct result of the character's physical appearance" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 10). Cinderella was forced into a world of drudgery and filth because her step mother and sisters were so utterly jealous of her jaw-dropping beauty and Snow White's step-mother strived to have her murdered so as to relinquish any competition between their appearances. All in all, fairy tales like these truly glamorized the victimization of women due to their beauty by multiplying its significance and making it seem to be an attribute capable of creating substantial conflict. It was the key to success and therefore vied after.

Perhaps one of the few fairy tales where a woman's main attribute was anything other than beauty lies in the tale of Hansel and Gretel. In this story, it is Gretel who kills the wicked witch to save herself and her now-obese brother, but tales like this are few and far between and utilize children or animals rather than young women. Whereas children and animals in fairy tales are usually given rather ambiguous roles centering around a moral to the story, young women protagonists act primarily as icons for how females entering adulthood should behave. Teaching a child it is bad to talk to strangers through fairy tales is one thing, but dictating gender roles by

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incorporating a young passive heroin that is victimized and eventually rescued by a handsome prince is another.

Next, the portrayal of women as subservient and dependent on men in fairy tales is unsurprising considering the periods of intense patriarchal authority in which they were usually told. However, the extent of this depiction might come to a shock to those who have not thought to further examine the tales they read. Everyone has heard of the expressions ‘damsel in distress,’ ‘wicked witch,’ and ‘the knight in shining armor.’ “Ultimately, the prince delivers the heroine from women's wrath. His power to save her and her utter dependence on him seem key to their imagined future happiness” (Fisher and Silber 121). The prince is a necessity in fairy tales. It is because of him that the princess is rescued and everyone lives happily ever after. The majority of fairy tales center around a beautiful woman being tossed into peril while a man comes to her rescue. Knights in shining armor save damsels from dragons, princes rescue their future queens from witches, and hunters slice open wolves’ bellies to liberate young ladies just reaching puberty. My favorite Disney movie was *Mulan* for this very reason. She was the only ‘Disney Princess’ to save everyone else rather than depend on a man to rescue her. Needless to say, *Mulan* was based on Chinese folklore and not European fairytales, hinting that the two might be vastly different.

Fairy tales also marked women as property to further express their subservience to men. In *The Girl Without Hands*, a father informs his daughter that he must cut off her hands to save himself from the devil whom he had sold her soul to. Cutting off her hands would stop her from keeping them clean with her tears and therefore obtainable to the devil. She simply replied, "Dear Father, do with me what you will, I am your child" (Grimm). Women were truly seen as mere property and this type of horridly meek docility was seen as ideal for young women. The

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father was willing to forfeit his daughter's soul to save his own by chopping off her hands and she willingly gave in to his selfish pleas. "All **good** heroines accept their fate passively, unquestioningly. To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy-tale **goodness**" (Oates 100). Even today, this idea still rings true in situations of college rape. According to the Koss study which collected data from female students on 32 college campuses, only 58% of the victims reported the crime to anyone and a mere 5% reported it to the police (qtd. in Ward, Chapman, Cohn, White and Williams 65). Young women are often too frightened to express their own distress, believing that no one will do anything to assist them while also finding themselves unsure of how to describe the experience they underwent. They keep the pain inside.

It seems that women in fairy tales have an inability to feel even the most natural of emotions. Resentment towards one's own situation is expressly forbidden in favor of silent acceptance. In Italian versions of *Cinderella*, Cuzza Senare is even forced to do slave work to prove herself. "The tasks she must fulfill (saddling and bridling her young master's horse, polishing his boots or combing his hair) aim once again at establishing whether or not she is capable of taking care of her future husband" (Perco and Bacchilega 78). In the more popular fairy tale *The Princess and the Pea*, this reality of a woman needing to prove herself worthy of the man in question also exists. Here, the princess must display her feminine attributes of daintiness and sensitivity to even the tiniest pea beneath a tower of mattresses to gain the prince's affections. The role models of these fairy tales teach girls that they must set out to win male approval through their ladylike qualities and ability to do womanly household tasks, demoting their self-worth in comparison to young boys.

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The last way fairy tales force women into a dependent light is by shattering their relationships with other women around them. We have all watched as the evil stepmother and or witch makes the heroine's life a living hell. In fact, the presence of a good woman figure in the young lady's life is almost always obsolete. "While the fairy tales consistently polarize the characterization of motherhood, a profound imbalance in these opposing maternal portraits stands out: as a character, the bad mother is at the center, dominating not just the princess, but the plot. In contrast to the good mother (Cinderella's or Snow White's, for example), who has a barely perceptible part to play - appearing literally for a sentence or two before dying - the wicked stepmother assumes a starring role as the girl's tenacious adversary" (Fisher and Silber 123). Why must the only other woman in the plot serve as the girl's sworn enemy? It seems Freudian ideals come into play where girls must hate their own mothers innately.

However, the more natural attribution for this occurrence might be seen in the views of the pre-modern era. Relationships between women were secondary and fairy tales showed girls that stepping into the patriarchal world was protected and safe in comparison to world of women. They also showed the strains between different generations. Fairy tales push for women to be solely dependent on men by illustrating their powerlessness without men in the world around them, marking them as mere property, and shredding ties between girls and older women by enforcing a strict rivalry between those who are young and passive and those who are ambitious and elder. "The lot of women in a patriarchal society which privileged them as valuable possessions (of men), or branded them as worthless and contemptible, made it inevitable that women should perceive other women as dangerous rivals; that there are so many "step" mothers in the tales suggests how frequently women died in childbirth or as a consequence of constant childbearing; how frequently they were replaced by younger wives" (Oates 99). Oftentimes,

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these older women were simply trying to stay somewhere on the social ladder, struggling not to be forgotten or shunned from the light of the patriarchal world. They were ambitious; something was morphed into a portrayal of malevolence in fairy tales. They were always made to be the 'wicked witch' while the heroine was sweet, young, and docile. It is found in the Brother's Grimm that women who wished for a high social status, power, or bear any drive whatsoever, resorted to devious behavior to reach their goals. However, the men in these stories hold their positions of power in society simply through being male alone and were therefore hardly displayed as evil. In the end, the older woman's goal is using her own malicious wit to get her way and grasp the man's attention (Fisher and Silber 127). This, undoubtedly, leads to her death and the heroine and reader learn from her demise that it is better to be pretty and passive than competitive and intelligent. Even kind, loving older women were given the boot when it came to being role models. In the Grimm version of *Cinderella*, after the girl's mother passed away, her good and loving spirit was incarnated into the hazel bush and birds. In the end, when Cinderella was married to the prince she left the bush behind and entered into the patriarchal world completely (Fisher and Silber 122). It seems that relationships between women were truly discouraged and a sign of reaching maturity was leaving behind the female role models in one's life to completely enter the world of men, where women are solely dependent on their husbands. A contemporary way of looking at this competition between women would be to consider modern reality shows such as *The Bachelor*, *Rock of Love*, and the *Flavor of Love* where young women squabble, shriek, and degrade themselves in an effort to fight for the man's attention. Inevitably, after all of the mean, old, or ugly girls are 'eliminated' from the competition the most passive, sweet woman is chosen to be the man's bride or girlfriend. During this entire process, the show portrays many of the women back-stabbing each other, spreading rumors, and

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physically beating one another out of jealousy. The girl who wins, of course, is finally freed at the end of the show of all that ridiculous female violence and enjoys solace in the male reality star's arms. It is a regular Cinderella story.

In the end, it is evident that the protagonists of fairy tales are hardly role models for young girls in the twenty-first century. Not only do these yarns enforce a false beauty idea, they also impose a heavy standard of docility and subordination to patriarchal society that women no longer need to suffer under. Of course, the original fairy tales also center around themes such as sodomy, cannibalism, mutilation, and incest, so it is no wonder they might seem a tad out of date. Eventually the messages these old tales offer will be skewed over the years through reinterpretation to fit into society's ethical and social molds, just as they have been for centuries past. From the looks of new adaptations of old folklore in the media today, it seems the damsel in distress will finally learn to save herself once in a while, but even so the truth exists that some of the gender norms children learn from fairy tales are fairly out of date. On the night of Halloween, I would love to see a little girl walk down the streets dressed as a lawyer or a doctor rather than a fairy tale princess. Girls need to be taught from a young age to have the confidence and the drive to achieve for themselves rather than spend their time daydreaming about a Prince who will marry them, buy them pretty dresses, and shower them with jewelry. The last thing we need is more candidates for *The Real Housewives of Orange County*.

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