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Brier Rose: The Sleeping Sexism in Literature

Once upon a time, a young woman lived impoverished and obeyed the demands of an older, uglier woman. Since the young woman was kind, patient, passive, and most importantly, beautiful, the local prince found her and wed her without learning the young maiden's name. While this tale seems ridiculous and unbelievable, it represents the tale of *Cinderella*. And most other fairy tales follow this pattern; *Rapunzel*, *Brier Rose*, *Snow White*, and *The Little Mermaid* all have a young, beautiful woman who lives her life as society's perfect image of femininity and is rewarded with marriage to a handsome, young prince. Fairy tales have been used for centuries as ways to teach children the "dos" and "don'ts" of a particular culture. Children read these tales and, not understanding the deeper metaphors and lessons and only seeing the physical actions of these characters, try to follow their examples. This idea of teaching the proper behavior has helped contribute to the ever-changing objectification and emotional confinement of females. Stories like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Brier Rose* all are tales that provide young women with a multitude of examples on the expected behaviors of women. The classic Brothers Grimm fairy tale *Brier Rose*, in particular, demonstrates the hidden sexism that fairy tales contain, and through the constant retelling of fairy tale like stories ensures that women are being taught how to act in more submissive, responsible ways. This furthers the stereotype that women are incompetent humans and has a lasting impact on society and expected gender roles.

Fairy tales, much like that of *Brier Rose*, contain hidden sexism that subtly teaches children, more specifically women, how they are expected to act so as to conform to societal standards. The tale of *Brier Rose* tells the story of a young, unnamed princess who is cursed at birth to sleep for 100 years after pricking her finger on a spindle. At first glance this tale seems to have little to no malicious intent; it is simply a story about a princess needing rescue. However, the sexism within this tale exists in several obvious ways. The first and most important way is how beauty is prized throughout the tale. For example, when the princess is born, she was “so beautiful that the king ... decided to hold a great feast” to show off her beauty (*Brier Rose* 186). Beauty is important in this story, and the princess is rewarded for being seen as beautiful since beauty is something that should be rewarded. Eleven wise women come and give gifts to the princess such as “virtue, ... beauty, ... wealth, and so on, until they had given her nearly everything one could possibly wish for in the world” (*Brier Rose* 186). Through these gifts it is apparent that beauty and virtue are “everything” that a girl could need from life. Intelligence and practicality do not matter since those characteristics were not part of the gifts that the wise women brought meaning all the princess needed was to be beautiful and she would be perfect. This is the message that is instilled into the readership of fairy tales: the best women are the prettiest of women, and those pretty women are rewarded for their beauty. But the emphasis on beauty and the importance of women to be viewed as such is not the only source of sexism.

The treatment of the unnamed princess shows the attitude that people of the seventeenth century had of women. When the princess is cursed to prick her finger on a spindle and fall asleep for 100 years, the King, “to guard his dear child against such a catastrophe, ... issued an order that all spindles in his kingdom were to be burned” (*Brier Rose* 186). He does this instead of telling the princess of her curse so she knows to stay away from spindles. The King makes this

choice to not tell the princess because it is believed that women cannot be trusted to make educated choices, nor be trusted to keep themselves safe. Because of the curse, the princess, like “most heroines ... [becomes] entirely passive, submissive, and helpless; ... Sleeping Beauty ... lies asleep in the ultimate state of passivity, waiting for a brave prince to awaken and save her” (Lieberman 191). The princess has to rely on prince after prince with the hope that one of them can break the spell. She is unable to find a way out of her predicament herself. *Brier Rose* demonstrates the helplessness that most women are expected to follow. Women should not have to take care of themselves, and if they are pretty then they will not have to. By portraying Brier Rose as a helpless woman, this fairy tale helps perpetuate sexism that continues to affect America.

The sexism in *Brier Rose* demonstrates the expected behavior of women in society. Since this story has been constantly retold, its messages about female passiveness and beauty has long been injected into the expectations that children, the main audience of fairy tales, are exposed to, and has had an obvious effect on those expectations in society. These classic tales encourage their readerships to view society and, more specifically, the women in society with the male gaze which is the idea that people should view both people and objects through a masculine perspective. The idea of using the male gaze is one that is extremely prevalent in the sexism of fairy tales. Fairy tales encourage “readers ... to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male systems of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (Warhol 569). They encourage women to conform to certain expectations; women are expected to look a certain way, act a certain way, do certain activities, and aspire to be wives. As aforementioned, fairy tales place a high importance on female beauty. Fairy tales focus on beautiful girls and create the illusion that being beautiful is synonymous

with being successful by showing that “girls win prizes if they are the fairest of them all” (Lieberman 188). Much like the princesses in fairy tales, girls believe that being beautiful will help them be ‘chosen.’ And once they are chosen, they can live their ‘happily ever after’ by succumbing to marriage.

Fairy tales portray “marriage [as] the fulcrum and major event” that life, be it real or fairy tale, leads up to (Lieberman 189). Because of the importance that fairy tales put on marriage by making this event the end of the tale, women are expected not only to get married, but to want to do so. *Brier Rose* is an example of this phenomenon. The day she turns fifteen she is cursed to sleep for one hundred years. When she awakens, she marries the first man she sees. There is no reluctance toward that outcome because it is an outcome that women are expected to desire. In fact, in fairy tales in which the princess is reluctant to be married, “there is a sense of triumph when a wilful princess submits or is forced to submit to a husband” (Lieberman 198). Marriage is the end of the story. Fairy tales help secure the family unit by encouraging people to marry so as to find their own ‘happily ever after.’ These common fairy tale tropes have bounced off the pages of the tale and into real life, helping convince women to act in more conformed ways.

The connection between the behavior of fairy tale characters and the expected behavior of women in the real world is one that is easily observed; however, this connection is one that also has more subtle, lingering effects in the way other literature and media utilize both the fairy tale fascination and the behaviors within the fairy tale genre to control societal expectations and actions. New fairy tales are no longer being produced, but that does not mean that they no longer have the same influence that they once had nor are they any less entertaining. Many modern romances still contain tropes that fairy tales had and promoted. Pulp fiction, romance novels, and “domestic fictions” follow the fairy tale pattern, and these works “reduce fairy tales to

sentimental clichés, while ... continue[ing] to glamorize a heroine's traditional yearning for romantic love which culminates in marriage" (Rowe 210). These modern stories are the more realistic versions of fairy tales by "transfer[ing] from fairy tales into real life those fantasies which exalt acquiescence to male power" (Rowe 211).

Despite having modern aspects and making more relatable female characters, these heroines still find themselves resorting to marriage with a powerful man. Disney is a major culprit of this phenomenon. Newer Disney movies, like *Tangled* and *Frozen*, have female protagonists that are intended to be strong role models for young girls. However, even these strong, 'independent' females still end up getting married, or at least have a male love interest. Rapunzel has Flynn Ryder, and Anna has Kristoff. Elsa, Anna's sister in *Frozen*, is the outlier in this situation since she does not have a romantic interest; however, this character is feared for the majority of the film since she possesses powers and is viewed as evil and dangerous. When given the option between being viewed as a frightening 'witch' or simple female with a male companion, young girls would aspire to be more like Anna, or the girl who fits in even if fitting in means having to find a male partner. These newer works, much like older fairy tales before them, "make marriage not simply one ideal, but the only estate toward which women should aspire" (Rowe 211). All of these tropes, despite being the same ones that readers critiqued in the older fairy tales, are given a pass in these newer novels and media since these newer works attempt to make more modern the female protagonist. For example, the female protagonist Katniss Everdeen in the popular dystopian books series *Hunger Games* is powerful, willful, and extremely independent. However, in the end she still marries one of her two possible love interests. The fantasy of romance, love, and marriage exists through romance novels and pulp

fiction, and so do these negative aspects that continue to trap women in a cage of expectations. Many film adaptations of fairy tales find themselves following this pattern as well.

Modern movies that act as fairy tale adaptations are seen as being better, modern adaptations, yet they still end with and include a beautiful woman marrying a powerful man. An example would be the Cinderella adaptation *Ever After* (1998). In it, the Cinderella like character is given a more rambunctious personality, yet she still finds herself helpless as she is being controlled by her wicked stepmother. When she meets the Prince, she is sassy and possesses an attitude; however, she still marries him in the end. (Preston 202) Another example of this newer fairytale adaptation is *The Princess Diaries* (2001) which follows the same plot that *Ever After* does except it sets its story in a modern day high school. While the protagonist Mia does not get married at the end of this movie, since she is still in high school, she still has a male love interest. Even though these adaptations try to give women more freedom, it still shows marriage and love as an important part of life that all women should aspire to have. Despite the effort of feminism to eliminate a majority of oppressive expectations, “romantic [media] ... transmit clear warnings to rebellious females: resistance to the cultural imperative to wed ... [is] a threat to ... social fabric [and] they will be compelled to submit” (Rowe 217). Even though times have changed, there still remains several parts of the fairy tales that, despite the best efforts of modern writers, remain ever present in today’s media.

Fairy tales are an extremely popular genre. For years these tales of female passivity and beauty have been the cornerstones in children’s literature as well as many popular romance novels. While changes have been made to the pattern that fairy tales created, these changes are only surface deep. If writers want to make a change, they must first recognize that the constant themes that fairy tales possessed still exist. While female characters are being shown as more

powerful and independent, the expectation of marriage still is extremely prevalent. Where beauty is not as prized, it is still something that is expected for female protagonists to have. To make stories and movies that truly embrace female freedom, these tropes and patterns must be identified and absolved. Uniqueness and independence from the normal set of expectations must be embraced. Doing this will help society start to understand that stereotypes are illusions when compared to reality.

Works Cited

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Back in fairy tale land, the Evil Queen presents Snow with an offer, which Charming does not want her to take. 3. Quite a Common Fairy. Description. 4. Nasty Habits. Description. Mr. Gold makes a decision to confront Pan, while Neal finds himself back in Neverland and in the custody of one of Pan's most loyal Lost Boys. Back in fairy tale land, Rumplestiltskin goes in search of a missing Baelfire, who has followed a mysterious figure who steals away children with his music. 5. Good Form. Description. Hook brings the ailing David along on a quest. 6. Ariel. Description. To repay Ariel (JoA Fairy tales present a great number of opportunities for improving learner's English. If books provide only colourful illustrations and tend to hone students' reading and comprehension skills, video fairy tales are excellent tools for practising both reading (some of them have subtitles) and listening skills. Apart from that, presented pictures completely absorb kids in the fairy tale. The author of this fairy tale is Hans Christian Andersen. It is about the prince who wants to get married but can't find a suitable wife. Whoever he meets are ill-mannered, too fat or too thin. One stormy night a young woman drenched with rain seeks appears in the prince's castle. She claims to be a princess. In the morning, the guest tells her hosts that she had a sleepless night because there was something hard in the bed. Read Snow-White And Rose-Red from the story Fairy Tales by LunaHertz with 17,156 reads. rapunzel, fantasy, snowwhite. There was once a poor widow who lived in... She had two snow-white, and the other rose-red. They were as good and happy, children who were like the two rose-trees, and one was called snow-white was more quiet and gentle than rose-red. white Snow-white and rose-red kept their mother's little cottage so at them, but said nothing and went away into the forest.