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Fairy-Tale Heroines of the (non)Mass Imagination
Interview Conducted by Weronika Kostecka

As experts in fairy tale studies, in your numerous publications, you discuss intertextual and transfictional incarnations of such cult fairy-tale heroines as Snow White, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, or Rapunzel. What are the directions of the cultural evolution of these female characters that you consider the most significant?

Cristina Bacchilega: These fairy-tale heroines, most of whom are known today as Disney princesses, have as you suggest been imagined in so many different ways over time and across cultures. Going way back in history, an aspect of fairy-tale female characters' evolution has to do with how their association with pre-Christian mythologies and rituals was replaced in classic fairy tales by images of femininity that are mythic in a different way, i.e., fantasies of womanhood. Not that all classic fairy tales, however, promote the same gender ideology: the late-seventeenth-century Cinderella character in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's "Finette Cendron" is much savvier and more active than the Grimms' nineteenth-century Ashputtle. I think it helps not to equate 'cultural evolution' with progress, and to keep in mind that cultures vary based not only on language and place, but gender, social class, age, and more.

Anne Duggan: I think it's important to recognize that these "classic" heroines (as we view them) were not always as prominent as they are today. In *Staging Fairyland*, Jennifer Schacker talks about a nineteenth-century British fancy-dress ball in which aristocrats disguised themselves not only as Red Riding Hood and Cin-

derella, but also as heroines from d'Aulnoy's fairy tales, including Princess Fair Star, the Fair One with the Golden Locks, and the White Cat. So "cult" fairy-tale heroines and more generally the fairy-tale canon are not the same across time and space, and one could even argue that the genre's cultural evolution led to the circulation of more and not fewer passive heroines in the twentieth century. Second, it is also important to acknowledge that before Disney, there were different variants of, for instance, "Cinderella" and "Rapunzel" that were circulating through printed tale collections, stage adaptations, and even marketing campaigns in Western Europe. D'Aulnoy's spunky "Finette-Cendron" was an important one that fed into French, German, Czech, and American folklore, among other mediums, and Giambattista Basile's "Petrosinella," a version of "Rapunzel," presents us with enterprising heroines who are by no means virtuous in any conventional understanding of the term, and yet they come out on top. Finally, as these examples suggest, it is important not to view the history of fairy-tale heroines in terms of a linear progress, where the heroines are increasingly more empowered as we reach 2022; the heroines in tales by Basile and d'Aulnoy, among others, suggests a far more complex history.

Pauline Greenhill: Joining fairy-tale scholars including the fabulous Kay Stone, I really like recovering pre-Disneyfied (and post-Disneyfied!) versions of those characters. Kay's probably best-known article, "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us," pointed out that the versions of fairy tales popularised in animated cinema didn't represent the form itself, and in particular not its North American iterations. Traditional stories from Canada and the United States had bolder heroines for whom marriage to a prince wasn't their sole life ambition. It's still a lesson I have to teach most students, who simply presume Disney and fairy tale are identical. Kay has said much more on that and other topics since, and all her work is very much worth checking out, including the wonderfully titled *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*. I of course have special fondness for Little Red Riding Hood, since she sent me in a productive research direction that I've been continuing with great enjoyment for well over ten years. At a conference in 2009, my University of Winnipeg Criminal Justice Department colleague Steven Kohm gave a paper on pedophile crime films. I realised that two of the three movies he was talking about were "Little Red Riding Hood" themed. I boldly approached him afterward to ask if he wanted to collaborate on a paper on "Little Red Riding Hood" crime films, and we've been conspiring together ever since. His inspiration is one of the main reasons why my work in the last few years has turned more and more directly to issues of justice.

Which tendencies in the field of fairy-tale heroines' transformations seem the most important to you and why?

Cristina Bacchilega: Thinking about fairy-tale adaptations today, one of the important trends is returning to older versions in which female characters dis-

play features that we don't expect. Let's stay with the fairy tale Pauline just re-called. In the French "Story of Grandmother" collected from nineteenth-cen-tury oral tradition, the Red Riding Hood character is quite resourceful: she is a little peasant girl who tricks the wolf and escapes on her own. In 1997, the NYC director David Kaplan retold "The Story of Grandmother" in his short film *Little Red Riding Hood*, where he beautifully represents the ambivalences of adolescent and queer sexualities in a tale that has otherwise been associated with victim-blaming rape and violence.

Mayako Murai: To me, the evolution of Little Red Riding Hood seems most sig-nificant in that it reflects the changing views of not only human society but also its relationship with nature and wildlife. Reimagining Little Red Riding Hood at this critical moment of multispecies survival involves a radical redrawing of hu-man-animal and culture-nature boundaries, and I expect that we will see further co-evolutions of Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf, and the forest.

Pauline Greenhill: This ecological perspective is also significant to me. Per-haps because I'm looking for them these days, I'm seeing more characters in fairy-tale and fairy-tale-inflected media who aren't just the young white Euro North American cisfemale norm. Of course, those figures have been around forever, but among my current favourites is the heroine Duszejko – and all her fellow Reds – from the Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik directed *Pokot* from 2017, based on Olga Tokarczuk's novel – the truly excellent Polish film about ecological justice that everyone should see. I see that movie and its fairy-tale characters as an example for filmmakers to emulate on creating complex address to the pressing issues of the moment – supporting the earth and elimi-nating oppression.

Cristina Bacchilega: Another shift we see today, even in mainstream fairy tales, is the softening of oppositions on which the heroine/villain conflict is based. We see this with Red Riding Hood sometimes becoming a hybrid, were-wolf-like being herself, and we see it in the recent Disney "Sleeping Beauty" re-make in the way the backstory of Maleficent humanizes her and builds a con-nection between her and Aurora.

How do the trends you observe in less popular, marginalized fairy-tale nar-ratives differ from those set by mainstream culture?

Anne Duggan: Currently I am really interested in a group of French ani-mators – Paul Grimault, Jean-François Laguionie, Michel Ocelot, Florence Miailhe, and Sébastien Laudenbach – who use fairy tales and folk tales to ex-plore questions related to class, gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and the envi-ronment through visually stunning films. Both artistically and ideologically, these films go very much against the grain of Disney fairy-tale films in the progressive uses they make of the fairy-tale genre. I feel that, on the one hand, the impact of Disney films marginalized tales from earlier centuries that had

more empowered heroines, while, on the other, these twentieth and twenty-first century French fairy-tale films that are truly inclusive and empowering must grapple with Disney's hegemony over the animated film market.

Pauline Greenhill: My interest in showing that traditional modes of folktale and fairy-tale telling aren't entirely lost was a bit part of the inspiration for doing *Clever Maids, Fearless Jacks, and a Cat: Fairy Tales from a Living Oral Tradition* with distinguished Newfoundland storyteller and scholar Anita Best and Newfoundland folktale expert Martin Lovelace. Anita and Martin had collected tales from two wonderful tellers, Pius Power Sr. and Alice Lannon. Neither teller was represented in Herbert Halpert and J.D.A. Widdowson's *Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition* and I wanted to work again with ethnopoetic transcription, which is so much better at conveying the artistry of these narrations than prose. It's the book I'm most honoured to have been involved with. Both Pius Power and Alice Lannon featured strong female characters and humane male characters. One of my favourite stories is "Jack Ships to the Cat," about an unpromising young hero who triumphs because he doesn't think he's too good to work for a cat. (We cat people know how important it is to defer always to our feline bosses.) So perhaps a trend is that more narrations beyond the oral tradition are reproducing ideas that were already part of those stories, even if they aren't conventionally understood as such.

Mayako Murai: I find that boundaries, such as those between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and human and nonhuman, tend to be less clear in lesser-known fairy tales. Familiar contrasts are there, but they are not necessarily opposed to each other and can be more fluid, ambiguous, compatible, or interchangeable. Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to tell who the heroine is or whose story it is. These narratives seem to represent worldviews beyond what can be tolerated by mainstream culture. Such tales are especially important in today's world where people feel increasingly divided.

Cristina Bacchilega: Some of the adaptation strategies used in mainstream and what I have been calling "activist" fairy tales today are the same. But two things we can observe about contemporary activist fairy tales are that they tend to shake up our ideas about fairy tales and that their creators tend to be from groups that may very well have felt excluded from the genre. In our *Inviting Interruptions: Wonder Tales in the Twenty-First Century* collection, Jennifer Orme and I present somewhat quirky or unorthodox fairy tales that disruptively play out gender roles in combination with issues of race and ethnicity, disability, nonnormative sexualities, self-hatred, and eco-criticism. These fairy tales invite readers and viewers to imagine ways of being in the world and relating to others that are not those of the capitalist white heteronormative patriarchy. Several fairy-tale scholars have observed that the fairy tale, in its transformations and for the most part hopeful outcomes, offers unexpected possibilities to the downtrodden heroine or hero to act on the world, to make it right, the way it "should" be.

Today's fairy tales are activist when they activate our taste for justice and center themselves in experiences and perspectives that are often excluded from or vilified in mainstream fairy-tale culture. I'm saying intersectionality – attending to how different identity markers and their dynamics contribute to the ways others perceive us and the ways we feel about ourselves in the world – is a trend; two wonder-filled and moving examples from 2020 are *The Magic Fish*, a graphic novel by Vietnamese American artist Trung Le Nguyen, and *Cinderella Is Dead*, a YA novel by Black American author Kalynn Bayron.

Cristina, in many of your publications, including the *Inviting Interruptions* collection and your monograph *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*, you presented the intertextual and transfictional fairy-tale web and discussed how fairy tales are ideologically entangled. What ideologies concerning girls and women, in your opinion, dominate the widely available, pop-cultural fairy-tale web? What ideologies and what perspectives that fairy-tale narratives could offer do we need today, in our world full of all kinds of conflicts and tensions? Conversely: do you see the danger of perpetuating traditional, oppressive patterns through fairy tales despite the attempts to transform them?

Cristina Bacchilega: In the pop-cultural fairy-tale web, girls and women are still valued and rewarded for their beauty. Sadly, makeovers exemplify magic and transformation in both big-budget films and games for girls. Beauty is often combined with girl power, which celebrates girls' confidence and assertiveness, but does not impact gendered or other power dynamics. And this beauty is still associated with blonde hair, light complexion, hourglass figure, and daintiness. Competition among women is another persistent feature in mainstream fairy tales that is ideologically harmful. There are certainly other aspects of fairy tales that could and do offer possibilities and hope in today's world, but they are not the ones we commonly associate with the genre. I am thinking of how connected fairy-tale protagonists often are with nonhuman life forms and natural elements, and how that connection is presented as reciprocity and with respect. Another aspect of fairy tales that can help in times of heightened conflict and loss is the fairy-tale protagonists' coming into their own super-powers, making use of their own resources, to face their fears or tormentors and to escape their unjust condition. Your question about whether oppressive fairy-tale patterns overpower contemporary attempts to transform them is excellent and demands constant attention. Even when the fairy tale's heroine has close bonds with flora or fauna, they are often catering to her – and only her; also self-reliance and courage are valorized in the protagonist but not the villain. What I'm getting at is the pervasive power of individualism in fairy tales: privileging one individual in the story makes fairy tales highly relatable, at the same time that it limits the possibilities for large-scale social change.

There is still a conviction among many readers and some scholars that fairy-tale heroines before the era of feminist reinterpretations of tradition were always passive, had no agency, and did not decide about their fate. In readers' and viewers' memory function only – or almost exclusively – names of men who created fairy tales, primarily Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, Andersen, and Disney. Anne, as the author of the monograph *Salonnières, Furies, and Fairies: The Politics of Gender and Cultural Change in Absolutist France* as well as the co-author (together with Julie L. J. Koehler, Shandi Lynne Wagner, and Adrion Dula) of the volume *Women Writing Wonder: An Anthology of Subversive Nineteenth-Century British, French, and German Fairy Tales*, could you address these beliefs? What characterized the work of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century fairy-tale female writers? Why do we know so little about them?

Anne Duggan: The early modern fairy tale in Italy and France emerged from courtly and salon culture where elite women enjoyed a certain level of empowerment, and the French women writers of the 1690s used the genre to talk about feminist issues, which were being discussed more broadly in French society since the beginning of the century. For instance, in 1622 Marie de Gournay published *The Equality of Men and Women*; Madeleine de Scudéry's earliest feminist treatise was *The Illustrious Women* from 1642 and her works throughout the rest of the century include discussions of women's rights; the male writer whom Simone de Beauvoir cites in *The Second Sex* published in 1949, François Poulain de la Barre, produced *Of the Equality between the Two Sexes*, among other feminist texts, in 1676. This is the climate out of which early modern French fairy tales emerged. One of my scholarly objectives is to repair the wrongs of not fully taking into account the role European women have played in the constitution of the European fairy-tale tradition and the ways in which they used the genre to feminist ends, including to criticize arranged marriage, abusive monarchs, patriarchy, and – in the case of the German writer Elisabeth Ebeling – racism. It is also important to recognize that Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile – the two Italian writers who inspired d'Aulnoy, Charlotte Rose Caumont de La Force, and other female and male French fairy-tale writers – created many an enterprising heroine in their tales. In turn, the nineteenth-century German women writers were inspired by d'Aulnoy, as was the important nineteenth-century Czech writer Božena Němcová, a feminist and socialist writer, who adapted d'Aulnoy tales in her works. Filled with enterprising heroines, her tales were regularly anthologized throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and into the twentieth century in English, French, and German, as well as Italian, Spanish, and Czech.

So why do we associate fairy-tale female characters with passive, objectified girls and women?

Anne Duggan: I really think Walt Disney Studios has played an enormous role in defining for the general public – not only in the US but also within the global mainstream – what a fairy tale is, who writes them, and for what reason. The trilogy Perrault-Grimms-Andersen is really a twentieth-century phenomenon, which provides a limited conception of the history of the genre in Western Europe. And with respect to Grimm and Andersen tales, Disney tends to select those with more passive heroines. The Grimms' "The Fitcher's Bird," for instance, is hardly about a damsel in distress. Given the range of female character-types and of the adaptations across media, I wonder if, in the nineteenth-century France or Germany or England, readers would have necessarily associated female fairy-tale characters with passive, objectified girls and women to the same degree as we do today. Again, I believe Disney has greatly shaped our conception of the fairy tale, including the association of the genre with the passive princess, and its global impact has arguably contributed to the narrowing of the field of fairy-tale texts readily available to the general public.

Pauline, in your publications, such as your recent book *Reality, Magic, and Other Lies: Fairy-Tale Film Truths*, you often analyze fairy-tale narratives – especially films – from a queer perspective. Do you think that non-heteronormative and transgender heroines, going beyond the socio-cultural solidified 'norms,' schemas, and worldview perspectives, will finally pave the way for marginalized themes to mainstream culture? Is there still a long way to go?

Pauline Greenhill: Redoing for the winter 2022 term Jennifer Orme's and my "Gender in Fairy-Tale Film and Cinematic Folklore" third year undergrad online course (which we talked about in our publication from 2016) meant being really task-oriented in trying to find more academic writing on the topic by BIPOC authors (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour), but also by other minority folks. It's not an easy task. Working on preparing my "Fairy Tales, Disability, and Media: Feminist Perspectives" course also provided some challenges. There is a growing academic literature on disability and fairy tales but not a lot comes from self-identified disabled authors; some may be disabled, but are not willing to come out as such because of recurring prejudice and discrimination (but note exceptions in works by Amanda Leduc, Ann Schmiesing, and Santiago Solis). And BIPOC disabled scholars working on fairy tale – even fewer! Similarly, more work has appeared recently on gender fluidity (see, for example, the first issue of the *Open Cultural Studies* published in 2021) but little or none from people who self-identify as transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary. But Jennifer and I are hoping to write an update to our publication, because in the intervening six years plus, there's been a flowering of scholarship by minority folks from anti-racist and decolonial perspec-

tives. We're also working together on an edited collection which will address justice issues from a variety of perspectives.

Pauline, let me ask you one more question: it has been a decade since *Transgressive Tales: Queering The Grimms,* co-edited by you and Kay Turner, was published. After these ten years, how do you rate the power of queer studies concerning fairy tales – are they practiced often and carefully enough?

Pauline Greenhill: Yes, time flies, and *Transgressive Tales* was a long time in the making – Kay and I had it underway from 1998, and so many things conspired to take us much more time than we had wished. Our work has influenced fairy-tale studies, but we certainly hoped it would go farther than it did. Queer studies, queer theory seems almost retro these days, with gender studies on the ascendant. I'm finding queer readings combined intersectionally with other perspectives – animal studies, disability studies in particular are of interest to me – but I welcome always moves towards interdisciplinarity.

Maya, in your monograph *From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Japanese Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West*, but also in the volume *Re-Orienting the Fairy Tale: Contemporary Adaptations across Cultures* that you co-edited together with Luciana Cardi, you proved how important it is to go beyond the Euro-American perspective in studying fairy tales. Which problems with the colonizing view of fairy tales and the colonizing attitude to fairy tale research still seem to you the most urgent and requiring attention? What would your advice be for those fairy tale scholars who wish to 'decolonize' their research approaches to fairy tales?

Mayako Murai: I think it is important not only to read, discuss, and retell more fairy tales from marginalised cultures – it is such fun! – but also to keep questioning Euro-American-centric perspectives and attitudes still inherent in many disciplines and methodologies. I follow Donald Haase and Cristina Bacchilega's ideas of decolonising approaches to fairy tales (I recommend, for example, respectively "Decolonizing Fairy-Tale Studies" and "Fairy Tales in Site: Wonders of Disorientation, Challenges of Re-Orientation") – reaching out to different narrative traditions with respect, open-mindedness, curiosity, and courage, and also having ongoing conversations with people from different disciplines and sociocultural backgrounds. In doing so, we start recognising our own assumptions, and that is where we start, over and over again.

In your books, articles, and lectures, all of you present recognizable heroines of the mass imagination and those functioning outside the Western cultural mainstream. Could you please tell us about the heroines that are unknown

globally but for some reason significant to you – for example, those important in your local communities or those that especially inspired you?

Cristina Bacchilega: With pleasure, as I hope this will also inspire your readers to return to and appreciate heroines that are important to them but are not part of Disney and other corporate fairy-tale offerings. I grew up as an Anglo-Indian Italian in Italy at a time when people of color were few and exoticized; eventually I came to work in Hawai'i, where I have lived since 1983 as a settler who supports Hawaiian sovereignty. My experiences as a girl and woman in both places have influenced my feminist outlook and which stories I like to retell. Among Italian fairy-tale heroines, I am particularly fond of the princess in a tale from Calabria who, having turned down many royal suitors, made her own husband out of flour, sugar, and water, gave him a red chili pepper mouth, and chanted for six months to bring him to life and gift him with speech. And then there is the little peasant girl in a short tale collected by Giuseppe Pitrè in nineteenth-century Sicily: she ousts a very rich merchant from his shop by presenting a promissory note she found under a chick's feathers and telling the merchant her story without starting with the formulaic "it's been told again and again." Her going off script breaks with conventions and makes change possible, offering her a new and previously unthinkable place in society. Among Indigenous Hawaiian heroines, I like the girl who chooses to become a mermaid at the salt-and-fresh-water pond of Honokawailani in order to live with her merman sweetheart. There is pain in her severed bond with her mother, but also freedom in her transformation; and unlike Hans Christian Andersen's, this Hawaiian mermaid does not identify humans as the apex of all living beings. Hawaiian storytelling and literature are filled with powerful and wondrous heroines, whether they are elemental deities or humans – and I wish their stories enjoyed a wider circulation across the globe as they model different ways of knowing the world and relating to human and nonhuman beings. They are not fairy tales, mind you; rather, they tell the stories of specific places, they tell history in wondrous ways.

Anne Duggan: So I want to preface this by saying that many of d'Aulnoy's heroines were indeed well known and continued to be appreciated well after their first appearance in print in 1697–1698. D'Aulnoy's maiden warrior tale, "Belle-Belle, or the Knight Fortuné," about a cross-dressed woman who performs as well as any male knight, is inspired by "real" women warriors in France during the civil war known as the Fronde (1648–1653); her tale honors the memory of these *femmes fortes* or "strong women," and embodies the feminist spirit of many of her tales. The tale continued to fascinate the public and was adapted to the pantomime stage in nineteenth-century England as well as to board game form. I recently acquired a 1932 Spanish and a 1935 Catalan translation of the tale, both published in Barcelona, showing its enduring appeal. Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's tale, "Marmoisan," also honoring

these *femmes fortes,* is perhaps my favorite among the French maiden war-rior tales, although it wasn't as popular as d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Belle". I also ap-preciate d'Aulnoy's heroine the White Cat, who reigns supremely at the end of the tale, asking for the hero's hand in marriage and granting a kingdom to the hero's father. Importantly, the tale remained popular until the early twen-tieth century in France, England, Spain, and even saw comic-book form in Mexico in the 1960s. We can consider all of these texts early modern femi-nist tales, given their emphasis on the equality of women and men by fore-grounding women's abilities to fight in battles, negotiate treaties, and justly govern a country.

Pauline Greenhill: I'm always pushing Canadian material not only because I'm Canadian but because media made here with funding or tax breaks from the government need to follow expectations around ensuring representation of our multicultural population, which means more Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour in front of and behind the camera. And a lot of Canadian films are secretly so, because Canadian and international creators alike fear that locating a film or series in Canada reduces its audience. (It's fun to spot the distinctive locations in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, or St. John's that are meant to represent places in the US.) But I am particularly inspired by films that are part of a social, cultural, and political movement, but that also sup-port communities directly. I talk in *Reality, Magic and Other Lies* about two films based on the stories of Fred Pellerin and directed by Luc Picard, *Babine* from 2008 and *Ésimésac* from 2012. These stories about Pellerin's home town of Saint-Élie-de-Caxton, Quebec present the weapons of the weak, and how a community pulling together defeats despots and produces justice (even if sometimes only temporarily) – along with magic. Both the title characters in those films are boys, but there are strong female characters throughout.

Anne Duggan: It is important that as fairy-tale scholars we do not keep re-iterating the notion that fairy-tale heroines are inherently passive, without limiting that notion to specific time periods and geographical areas. Such a perspective effaces the many empowering tales by female as well as male writers of earlier centuries. The history of European fairy tales is much more complex than our Disnified view of the genre, which serves as the basis for many twentieth- and twenty-first century feminist revisionist tales. It is im-portant to respond to the current conceptions of and cultural products relat-ed to the genre through this feminist revisionist work. However, it is equally important to recover the voices of women writers who indeed made a sig-nificant impact on the development and evolution of the European fairy tale and who provided generations of readers and theatergoers plenty of empow-ered heroines.

Thank you so much for this inspiring fairy-tale conversation!

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