Feminist Criticism on World Fairy Tales: Looking into the Portrayal and Empowerment of Women in Classical and Modern Fairy Tales

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ENGL 2338

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19 April 2018

Abstract

Women have taken strides in advancing their voice in the fairy tale literary canon. Fairy tale writers attribute female characters with new characteristics of beautiful, intelligent, and power figures, as opposed to the patriarchal position of submissive and passive women eager to marry and serve the role of mother and wife in the home. The subversion of patriarchal values has always been the goal of female writers since the translation into French of the first written tales in seventeenth-century France; however, the extent in which female writers redefine the female character was limited by the development of feminist literary criticism. The majority of French tales were written by seven notable female writers in seventeenth-century French *salons*, yet the literary canon focuses on the tales retold and created by the nine male authors. As a result, women continue to criticize the role of the patriarchy on the portrayal of women in fairy tales and develop additional ways in which they can undermine patriarchal values and empower women. The portrayal women between seventeenth-century France and modern tales, such as those in Hanan al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights*, vary in the display of beauty and morality (a connection from patriarchal interpretations), but resemble each other in the portrayal of strong, intelligent women and the compromise to empower women through accepting their sexuality and social roles, social rules that story-telling women control.

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According to T.F. Thiselton-Dyer in *Folk-Lore of Women as Illustrated by Legendary and Traditionary Tales*, "the power of woman's beauty over man, however, has always been proverbial all over the world" (25). There is an old, common saying from the East which says, "A good-looking woman in a house is the foe of all the plain ones" (Thiselton-Dyer 25-26). The beauty of a "good-looking woman" attracts a man and is her power to bring him into her house. When a woman embraces her role in the home, she is then able to empower herself through the restrictions allotted to women by the patriarchal society that confines her. This pattern of female empowerment exists in fairy tales written by female authors. Specifically, I have chosen works by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1651-1705) and Hanan Al-Shaykh (b.1945) to demonstrate the consistency of ways in which women empower themselves in the fairy tale literary canon through cultures of male dominance present throughout the world.

As the most prominent female writers during the Fairy Tale literary period in seventeenth-century France, D'Aulnoy follows the pattern of purpose of tales suggested by the first recorder of the oral tradition. Giambattista Basil (1575-1632), writer of *The Pentamerone,* or *Tale of Tales* (1634-36), is known for making "profound social criticisms" targeted for "the entertainment and conversation in the sophisticated courts and academics" (Canepa xiii, i). When him and another Italian contemporary writer, Strapola, had their tales translated into French, there was a serge of emotionally charged fairy tales promoting or perverting patriarchal values within the hierarchal system of French aristocracy.

The writing and discussions on "matters of cultural and artistic interests" took place in *salons* commonly hosted in the parlor rooms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century female

writers (Hallett 18). The community of fairy tale writers consisted of seven female writers and nine male writers. Although the women are responsible for two-thirds of the tales written during the period, the literary canon consists dominantly of the men's original and variations of stories (Seifert 54). The male authors, such as Perrault, promoted female submission, oppression, and passivity through creating female roles reflective of the women's roles in French society. He presented his characters—Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and the like—as "silent, passive, without ambition, and eager to marry" (Nanda). The result of blending female roles in fairy tales and reality creates an image of how children, particularly pubescent girls, should behave in order to achieve the prescribed end-goal of marrying and taking on the role of wife and mother within the household (Rowe 344). However, the female writers of the time subvert the patriarchal portrayal of women through creating strong female leads with voices for activity instead of silent passivity, goals and power beyond the constraints of marriage instead of lack of ambition and eagerness to marry. The tradition of describing female characters as such carries on to the modern world, but has transitioned into strong, independent, and intelligent women; yet the stories like these are still the ones written by women.

The deep-seeded discrepancy between male and female authorship and portrayal of women derives from adamancy of interpreting and expressing the patriarchal values. As a result of institutionalized female gender roles, women authors have created a pressurized discord between the need to "preserve patriarchal values" and "accommodate changing mores" of rising female independence (Rowe 358). Thus, some women, exampled here by D'Aulnoy and Al-Shaykh, compromise the psychological dilemma through empowering their female counterparts. Female characters accept their domestic roles, using their sexuality and beauty to bring men into their homes where social restrictions ironically allow for female power that neutralizes the male

dominance. By allowing d'Aulnoy to represent classical European female authors and Hanan Al-Shaykh to represent modern Middle Eastern female authors, their convergence demonstrates the universality, both culturally and chronologically, in the portrayal and empowerment of women in the world fairy tale literary canon.

Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy and Classical European Fairy Tales

Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy began the fairy tale movement when she coined the term *Contes de fées*, or fairy tales, to describe her collection of writing in seventeenth-century France. In 1690, She published the first French fairy tale— "L'isle de la félicité"—in her *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Duglas*, and initiated the fairy tale movement that lasted approximately from 1690-1715. In his essay, "Feminist Approaches to Seventeenth-Century *Contes de fees*, Lewis C. Seifert emphasizes the fact that "a woman—and not Perrault—initiated the vogue of fairy-tale writing" (56). Despite her initial and persistent involvement during the period, D'Aulnoy and other female fairy tale writers did not receive the same publicity and acceptance as male authors like Perrault. Instead, Seifert argues that, "Feminist criticism…is owed a great deal of the credit for the revival of interest in seventeenth-century French fairy tales" (53). Modern feminism promotes the formation of feminist criticism for D'Aulnoy and her contemporaries to gain the attention they deserve. As a result, feminist scholars, like Karen Rowe have reconceptualized the female-authored tales to regard them "not as pseudo-masculine appropriators of folkloric tradition, but as reappropriators of female art of tale-telling" (Haase 18). The female writers, represented in a metonymic metaphor by d'Aulnoy, found ways to hide strong, beautiful, intelligent women in their tales through artful descriptions, metaphors, and characterization. Particularly in "La Chat Blanche," or "The White Cat," the princess in her cat form, is small and delicate in a representation of the aristocratic view-point of the lower class.

However, she is truly an art form as a result of d'Aulnoy's descriptions and extension of conceptual metaphors. In my essay "Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Analyze the Evaluation of Seventeenth-Century France in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *The White Cat*," I demonstrate the equality d'Aulnoy promotes between lower- and upper-class levels of society through her conceptual metaphors. However, d'Aulnoy also comments on the portrayal and power of female characters. In the two-part tale—with a frame story and embedded story, women are the main characters, actively participating, inviting and luring men and women alike into their homes whereupon they gain power through social constrictions.

For the French tales, social restriction is the promotion of domestic women in both society and fairy tales (Rowe 342). Women are expected to marry and live with a man, so female authors do just that in their stories, sans the male dependency. Without a male figure in the household, women have liberty as to what happens in their house. In seventeenth-century France, this includes the *salons* where writers—men and women—congregated to discuss literature, art, and other progressive topics in the academies. The women had the power to choose who they invited into their homes and gained the power to control the topics discussed in civility. D'Aulnoy reflects this trend in "The White Cat" through White Cat inviting in the youngest prince and choosing his entertainment based on real social events.

The king, the youngest prince's father, arranges for a competition between him and his two older brothers for a chance to win the crown. The father sends the three brothers on three journeys within a time-span of three years. Each son has an equal opportunity to find and return in exactly one year with the object of the king's desires—the tiniest, smartest dog, the finest cloth, and the most beautiful woman to take as a bride at their coronation, should they win.

During his journey, the youngest prince discovers White Cat's castle and enters in curiosity. White Cat welcomes him, befriends him, and entertains him for a year, during which, she hosts a mock battle between the Cat Army and Rat Army. Ending with the Cat General eating the Rat General, White Cat comments on their dependency of rats for food and there is little need to waste their resource. The battle takes place in that water, as "[her] cats may hesitate since they are afraid of water; they would have too great an advantage, and one must make things as even as possible" (Douglas). The playfulness in her tone suggests the entertaining value of battle and mocks the same naval battles King Louis XIV hosted at Versailles (Bloom). D'Aulnoy reflects an aspect and topic of *salon* discussion in her story to criticize the king's and aristocracy's haughty splendor, yet she also demonstrates how the master of the house, in this case a woman—White Cat—controls what happens in her house, and for White Cat, her kingdom.

White Cat also holds power over the youngest prince through their friendship. The prince becomes dependent on the White Cat to help him with his journeys and obtain the objects his father commanded. Essentially d'Aulnoy inverses the role of female dependency on men, where now there is a male dependency on a woman. Each time the year runs up, she presents him with a gift worthy of earning his fathers' grace. D'Aulnoy takes time and precision in describing these objects as a way to demonstrate art. In my essay mentioned previously, d'Aulnoy designs the conceptual metaphor ART IS A CONTAINER WITHIN A CONTAINER. Her representation of art shows how something small is an art, through a different school of literary criticism. D'Aulnoy reconfigures the lower class and its smallness as an art, displaying the importance and beauty of the object. In a feminist criticism, through understanding the White Cat as a woman, and her descriptions of herself as small, delicate, and undeserving, we can see how smallness can also

refer to women through the eyes of men—how they treated women as inferior, ideally serving in passive behaviors. That way, now if a woman is small, she is a piece of art work, and in her art, becomes empowered in beauty within the French aristocrats who value beauty and art, holding it up to great standards (Bloom). As such, D'Aulnoy exhibits in both the objects and White Cat, the beauty of art and smallness, and said beauty empowers the objects through the cultural understanding of the power of feminine beauty to lure men into marriage and their homes (Thiselton-Dyer).

D'Aulnoy's presentation of the White Cat shows how beauty is good, despite the negative connotations associated with beauty. In Thiselton-Dyer's *Folklore of Women,* he describes the attributes of women's beauty within the context of folk and fairy tales. He notes how beauty is continuously deemed negative in an array of examples from a selection of representative time periods and cultures. Female beauty is unfortunate, unlucky, and "fatal to long life" (17). Beauty is misfortunate in its temperament and association to morality. Even in tales where women who are able to use magic are still sinful due to the negative connotation of magic and visible faked beauty. Traditionally, beauty is a representation of the soul: "a lovely face was the outward indication that a person so adorned was gifted with an equally beautiful soul within…and a lofty soul could not dwell in an ugly casket" (Thiselton-Dyer 23-24). Therefore, immoral women are ugly, inside and out, and moral women are beautiful, inside and out. If an ugly woman turns herself beautiful, she is still ugly and sinful. Even when women accept their beauty, men view them as "silly or vain"—both negative connotations attributed to beautiful women (25). When d'Aulnoy associates White Cat's beauty with art, she reverses the connotations of beauty and promotes the acceptance of a new kind of beauty. Instead of beauty retaining negative connotations and female empowerment of embracing their beauty, d'Aulnoy

bestows positive connotations that the French society associates with art. Therefore, the female character's embracement of her own beauty at the end of the story, when she is returned into human form and exhibits her true beautiful nature, maintains the good and positive tone which allows d'Aulnoy to express one way in which women can gain power under the patriarchy—through expression of beauty as allowed through the culture, for France in particular, it's Art.

Hanan Al-Shaykh and Modern Middle Eastern Fairy Tales

Art too plays a role in the retelling of *One Thousand and One Nights*, but this kind of art is universal and begins with the oral tradition of storytelling. Karen Rowe in her essay, "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," demonstrates how the power of storytelling belongs to women throughout the history of its tradition, beginning with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and exploring the "lineage of women as tale-tellers in a history that stretches from Philomela and Scheherazade to the raconteurs of French *veillées* and salons, to English peasants, governesses, and novelists, and to the German *Spinnerinnien* and the Brothers Grimm" (Rowe, Bottingheimer 53-54). Women have a longstanding tradition of storytelling, which brings up the question of how much control do women have in a world they create if they redefine the social rules. The answer: women have always been in control, just hidden under the radar of male perception.

When women are the primary story tellers, they reveal secrets of their lives and what they've experienced. They offer solutions to social constraints when bowing to the male ego and domineering power under the patriarchy. The female voice breaks the silence and divulges the tribulations women suffer in life— "betrayal, rape, and maternal sorrow" for example (Rowe, Bottingheimer 55). The beginning voices "speak at one level to a total culture but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the

tales" (Rowe, Bottingheimer 57). Therefore, perhaps when male authors intervene, as Antoine Galland does from 1704-17 in his translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* Arabic tale to the *Arabian Nights Entertainment* for the French audience, it causes a contradiction within the narrative framework. When Galland added stories such as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "Aladdin," or "Sinbad," he perpetuated a male voice to dominate female voiced revelations through Scheherazade's embedded stories (Rowe, Bottingheimer 58). His tales were reinstituted into the Arabic culture as if they were the original oral tales, thereby prompting Hanan al-Shaykh to create a collection focused on reviving the original tales focused on strong female characters and the cruelty against women, "who are constantly being accused of adultery and then murdered or beat up" (al-Shaykh x). Al-Shaykh revitalizes the "fear and admiration for triumphant female" that "is intrinsic to the complex soul of the original" (xi). Female writers and female characters use the universal trend of storytelling to empower women in revealing the nasty truths behind feminine behavior and experience.

Al-Shaykh and all the writers before her use humor and detailed magic to create a playful and light atmosphere of entertainment (Al-Shaykh x). Virtually, the tone becomes a macroscale metaphor for beauty of women as well. Where French fairy tale writers used art to show the significance and goodness of beauty, denying the male attributed negative attributes, but ironically maintaining the association of beauty and morality; writers of *One Thousand and One Nights* shows how even a beautiful woman can have a dark past or violence and jealousy. Even still, al-Shaykh does not attribute morality to beauty. She creates all female characters equally beautiful and expresses how ugly, violence, jealousy, and other negative oppressive experiences fuel women with power. However, just as the French writers, al-Shaykh demonstrates how

women take advantage of the circumstances outlined in a patriarchal society and empower themselves within the home.

In the Islamic context, there are two social rules—*hisbah* and *zarf* (Al-Musawi). *Hisbah* is a system of rights and responsibilities. It deals with a range of topics from taxation and market control to moral issues. Similarly, *zarf* is pleasant and gentle etiquette, which includes how men treat women in the home, and how the state presides over individual matters. *One Thousand and One Nights* demonstrates *hisbah* through the use of storytelling to save lives. If a person tells their story well, their life is in the judgement of the person requesting the story. It is a barter system of sort: uncovering the truth through the mode of entertainment for your life. Storytelling for lives is prevalent in both the frame story of Shahrazad and the embedded stories but proves significant in Shahrazad and the embedded story "The Porter and the Three Ladies."

In the story of Shahrazad and king Shahrayar, the king's wife cheats on him with a slave. The king then exacts revenge, believing all women to be evil, and proposes he will take a new wife, every day, sleep with her, and kill her in the morning so that she may not have the chance to hurt him. Shahrazad steps up to delay execution of any more women. Using her experience in "the great texts of philosophy, medicine, literature, poetry, and history," Shahrazad tells the king stories every night that last into the day, making them so compelling, he must allow her to live another day in order to hear how the story ends (Al-Shaykh 8).

Shahrazad is able to save all other women through her self-sacrifice—a female trait favored by the patriarch. Shahrazad is also "delicate of bearing and graceful of manners" (Al-Shaykh 8). In other versions of the story, Shahrazad encompasses the full patriarchal values of women. Not only is she self-sacrificing, delicate, and graceful (a representation of femininity), but she also bears three sons for the king. The king falls in love with her, and Shahrazad takes on

the mother and wife-hood men expect of women (Rowe, Bottingheimer 55 and Rowe, Hallett 350). However, Al-Shaykh removes Shahrazad's mother and wifehood, opting to keep Shahrazad in "the realm of invisibility and magic" (al-Shaykh x). The removal of some characteristics that please men invites emphasis on the woman as a storyteller and empowerment through telling. If women are storytellers, as they are in history and *One Thousand and One Nights*, and can ask for stories from other people, as in *One Thousand and One Nights*, then women have the power to choose whether someone lives or dies. That is ultimate power.

Also, within the tales, is the concept of *zarf*, or etiquette. *Zarf* in its Islamic context controls the state and men. The state is prohibited from interfering with individual homes, unless a complaint is filed. Similarly, if a guest is asked to behave a certain way before he enters a home, he must follow the directions. As such, the women, who by the patriarchy belong in the house, have power inside the house on how men behave equalizing the power men have outside in the markets (Al-Musawi 32). The ladies in the story "The Porter and the Three Ladies" take advantage of *zarf* and control their seven male guests throughout the embedded story and shared stories.

The three sisters invite the porter and welcome the three dervishes and merchants into their home with the rule that the men must not question about the proceedings of the night. As the party drink and act explicitly sexual, the men wonder why and how the women live without a male presence in the house. At one point in the night, the women bring out two dogs, whip them, and cry over the dogs when they are done. One man steps up to demand an explanation, and as a result of *zarf*, the women threaten all the men's lives: "Were you not men of power and distinction you wouldn't have dared to offend us in this way. So, tell—who are you?" (Al-Shaykh 42). At this moment, the women have complete control. A long-time researcher of the

Islamic context of *One Thousand and One Nights*¸ Muhsin J. Al-Musawi comments, "although these tales are narrated by men and women, there are at times more limits imposed by women to prevent further intrusion or curiosity and to balance men's possible misuse of power" (32). The women employ the *hisbah* empowerment of storytelling in place of a life, where a "good narrative equals good money, and it can buy one's life" and the *zarf* empowerment of control within the household (Al-Musawi 32).

The women within the stories take advantage of the circumstance given to them. They use societies rules to empower themselves through accepting the roles, even playing the part of the ideal patriarchal women, with one exception—they are active. The women are active in storytelling and control within the household. The women are able to lure and invite men into their homes where they can gain the upper hand in their prescribed domain. The female voice within the various versions of the stories rarely disappears, as it explores the dark undertones of lively and magical life.

Although, she maintains the original tones and portrayal of women in an already feminist-charged collection, Al-Shaykh modernizes the volume through a new organization method. Al-Shaykh uses stories typically overlooked as minor characters and bring the women to the forefront. She also changes the central point of the embedded stories. After the frame story and a quick embedded story, "The Fisherman and the Jinn" which offered an allegorical portrayal of the male-female relationship, the central story in which all other stories imbedded is "The Porter and the Three Ladies." Originally titled, "The Three Ladies of Baghdad," al-Shaykh moves the story, and embedded stories, from the market to the household (al-Musawi 35). In doing so, al-Shaykh empowers her female characters because women gain power within the household and when they bring men home. In the market, women virtually have no power: The

Caliph rules the area and determines the segregation between male and female vendors and customers (al-Musawi 36). Both the ruler and the men dominate over the women; however, in the house women have power that equalizes the dominance of male power, thereby creating equality between the sexes and exemplifying true feminism.

Among other attributes, al-Shaykh's retelling of *One Thousand and One Nights* explores ways in which women can gain power through accepting the female role of domestication, in which women can take advantage of the circumstances to give power to themselves. *One Thousand and One Nights* resembles European tales through this sense of empowerment in domestication. The female voice in both Middle Eastern and European tales, as well as classical and modern tales, shows a universal consensus with the patriarchy that women should play a domesticated role in society. However, female writers promote activity and goodness within universal beauty as opposed to passivity and goodness or morality and actions. All types of women are unified under the same constraints of the patriarchy; therefore, the female voice attempts to rectify the male perspective and offer women way to use their relegations to their advantage. Just as the purpose of storytelling to reveal the truth, female writers reveal ways in which women can empower themselves, but do so, through entertaining modes where the men are unaware of how powerful women truly are within their roles.

Conclusion

The female and male writers have the same goal—to get women to accept their role in society; however, the male writers wish to assign passive, submissive, marital traits to domesticate women. The female writers provide ways in which, when women do accept the gender roles, they can empower themselves without leaving the confines. Karen Rowe, a prominent feminist critic of fairy tales, has noted the effect of fairy tales on society and female

psyche. Young women are taught to behave like the princesses, to be good in the eyes of men, and they will be rewarded with their prince. But in the growing realistic society, where women are learning such princes don't exist, male dominancy and dependency is becoming a moot point. However, inferior female gender roles are so ingrained in all societies, it is difficult for women to find a way out, or completely gain independence. Thus, female writers offer a compromise. You can live within the confines of society and still be considered "good" in the male view point, but you can also empower yourself with accepting said role and finding ways to use the system to your benefit. In the domain of classical and modern literary canon, women dominate the fairy tale genre around the world.

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