

Hidden Voices: Recovering Women's Voices in Folk Tales

The Aims of the Research

This research aims to explore how women's voices have been silenced through history, specifically in the genre of folk tales and oral tradition. I looked at different examples of how women were the ones to contribute to the circulation of, as well as how women were portrayed in these tales.

Background to the research

Throughout history, marginalized voices have been left out of the story. Whether they are left out completely or changed to fit the narrative, these voices deserve to be heard. We are starting to see an increase in uncovering these stories in history books, but not as much in fictional stories. The idea for this project came from a discussion of the origins of *The Great Gatsby*. Many historians claim that it was Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, who wrote the novel but, being a woman, her husband took the credit and penned his name to the novel. This led to wondering what other well known stories, specifically folk tales, have been stolen from women.

One problem that has been identified in this area is the value placed on "the old wives' tales" throughout history. Lynn Abrams discusses this in her article "Story-Telling, Women's Authority and the 'Old Wife's Tale': 'The Story of the Bottle of Medicine.'" This article talks about how the telling of stories by women have been perceived as "nonsense" in the past, when really, those stories can give us a deeper understanding of history. Abrams focuses mainly on a story told by Mary Manson about her family. Her family was from Shetland, a town that really was held up by the female population due

to the men being sent off to war and work. This particular story tells of a time her mother and cousin went on a journey to find a solution for a sick family member. Through this story, Abrams hopes to focus on “the gap between generalized representations and personal interpretations of the past” (95).

Abrams also hopes to answer the following questions: 1. Is it possible to determine if this story were true? If not, how does that impact the impact behind the story? 2. How does gender play into the role of the narrator? What can this account tell us about how women interpret their experiences and history?

Judith Inggs also has addressed this issue in her article “Weak or Wily? Girls’ Voices in Tellings and Retellings of African Folktales for Children.” This article focuses primarily on the power of female voices specifically in African folktales. Oftentimes, female voices get lost in translation or left out purposefully. Inggs is sure to explain how translations and retellings can be heavily influenced by the interpretation of not only the person telling the story, but also by the translator or rewriter, as well as by society at large.

Inggs also brings up the complications of translation and how “both rewriters and translators inevitably feed their own attitudes and beliefs into their writing” (347). When working with translated works, it is important to keep in mind the variety of influences that have impacted this one story.

One place where gaps still exist in this research is in the amount of influence Anglo-Saxon culture has had on how we understand texts and what is being done to get to the truth. Eric Bryan talks about this in his analysis of the Icelandic folk tale “The Elf Woman” in his article titled “Icelandic Folklore and the Cultural Memory of Religious

Change". In this analysis, he explains how the elf woman represents everything anti-Christian while her husband and his father represent the Christian world, righting the wrongs of Europe and Scandinavia. Bryan claims that by doing this, they have "helped forge our understanding of gender roles in Norse conversion and Christianization" (48). When it comes to situations like "The Elf Woman", it is challenging to discern what is the true meaning of the story and what did it turn into through years of translation and religious control. While there are many examples of ancient stories being used to further an agenda, there isn't much in the way of discovering the truth.

While this isn't exactly a gap in research, Lorinda Cramer and Andrew Witcomb discuss in "'Hidden from View?': An Analysis of the Integration of Women's History and Women's Voices into Australia's Social History Exhibitions" that this act of discovering the true meaning of stories is a relatively new effort on a larger scale. The historians Witcomb and Cramer focus on, started their research in the 1980's. One example is Elizabeth Willis, the Curator of Special Projects in the mid-1980's. She saw a need to "highlight women's presence, activities and actions in all aspects of the display, not simply in the "token" area devoted specifically to women's history" (132). The freshness of this project is the driving force behind this research.

Research Problem

This research will focus primarily on women's voices throughout history and in fictional stories. These stories have infiltrated into our everyday life, but are we truly interpreting them the way they are meant to be? This research will strive to answer the following questions:

1. How have female voices been covered up in stories, primarily folk tales, through history?
2. What efforts have been made to give the women of history and folklore their voices back?

These questions are important to investigate because we live in a society that puts men above women. A common theme in literature and history is the white-washing the facts, as well as viewing them from the masculine perspective. In the past few years, politicians have made an even stronger effort to suppress the truth behind these stories. While what is currently in the news focuses on racism and racial disparity, it opens up the door for all voices to be recovered.

As indicated in “‘Hidden from View’?: An Analysis of the Integration of Women’s History and Women’s Voices into Australia’s Social History Exhibitions” these questions have only begun to be answered in the very recent past. While there may be other research on the same or similar topics, there is always more to uncover.

Research Approach

Due to the nature of this research, most of the data will be collected using primary and secondary sources including but not limited to diaries and letters, written texts, and other research articles.

The first step will be to identify specific folk tales and stories that do not amplify female voices. This will provide a stepping stone for the remaining research. By first selecting the content, it will be easier to continue onto the next steps.

Next steps in the research consist of

1. Researching the cultural implications of the folktale. When did it originate? What societal factors could play into its perception? This step is important because as Eric Bryan explained, many religious influences can change the interpretation of the story.
2. Research how women were perceived in the communities where the stories came from. Bryan and Abrams both explain how in different communities, many women held a higher status due to economic factors and social acceptance. However that is not reflected in the stories.
3. Look into past and present efforts to bring women's voices to the forefront of history. This research will involve looking into specific instances of historians working to understand and revive those stories.
4. Analyze the data these searches have provided and determine the bigger picture. Are there similarities? Conflicting findings?
5. Formulate conclusions for the research.

The Broader Significance

In a world where women are seen as the weaker sex by society and the media, being able to flip the script on whose voice is heard is incredibly important. Projects like these are popping up more and more, but in the concept of time, it is very new research. As the world moves forward, it is important to not only recover those voices that were lost through time, but to amplify and listen to the voices of women moving forward.

The work doesn't stop there, though. This research covers only a small sample of stories that deserve to be told. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants, people of color, and so many more have experienced the same covering up of their

truths. By starting here, we are opening the door to more discovery and a broader acceptance of the lives and experiences that got us here.

Works Cited

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