Beasts, Brides, and Brutality: The Intersection of Animalism and Gender in European Fairy Tales

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Abstract
This thesis, a comparative study of published fairy tale collections across three nations and three centuries, argues that fairy tales were, in their time, highly charged ideological interventions in period debates about gender, class, and nation. In this thesis I recover not just the historical context of each collection but also the circumstances of production for their print publication. The variables that form the basis of this comparison include: whether stories in a given volume were collected from informants or invented by a single author; the level of attachment of the collector to nationalist movements; and the layers of editorial mediation between informants/writers and the printed editions made from their work. The primary cases are stories of animal transformation, in which the strict boundaries of human and animal are effaced, and the rules of gender are exaggerated or reimagined.

The collections compared in this thesis come from three nations between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries: the Brothers Grimm in Germany; Laura Gonzenbach, a German in Sicily; and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy in France. I analyze gender and class themes in the tales, such as the treatment of the female body, the aging of women, the depiction of subaltern creatures, and animal transformations, in light of contemporaneous political and social changes affecting the status of women in Germany, Italy, and France.

By combining paradigms from three fields—fairy tale studies, animal studies, and gender studies—this thesis offers several findings about the relationship between gender and animalism that were previously unknown to the scholarship. First, when the printed tale is substantially edited or polished for print, or when collectors acted to advance nationalist movements, the following properties are more likely to occur: stricter policing of female propriety; greater restrictions on female agency in the narratives; and harsher punishments for transgressive women. Second, when collections are produced by women, relatively free of masculine intervention, we can expect greater freedom of female character action, even when produced in a less female-friendly early period.

Although they originated as politically charged texts, fairy tales today are typically read ahistorically and therefore lose their original moral and political investments that they held in their time. By examining the burden that nationalist agendas put on women by limiting female characters’ agency within fairy tales, I am able to recover the original engagements of published fairy tale collections, offering an argument about the period-specific ideological work done by fairy tales that we do not find in the scholarship.

Recommended Citation

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Searching for some fascinating fairy tales for kids? MomJunction brings an exhaustive list of famous fairy tales that your kids will love. You may choose the fairy tales way or any other way that you deem fit to take your children through a fantasy world and also teach a few virtues. If you love reading out or your kids like to read fairy tales, then scroll down as MomJunction brings you 21 interesting fairy tale stories for kids. These short fairy tales for children can be enjoyed either during their play time, leisure or when it is time for bed. 21 Fascinating Fairy Tales For Children. 1. The Little Girl and the Winter Whirlwinds: Image: iStock. One year, the wicked Winter Witch decides that earth can have only one season and so many of the primal and cautionary elements within fairy tales are addressed or subverted by Angela Carter in The Bloody Chamber, a 1979 collection of stories inspired by folk tales. Stories about animal brides and grooms gave way in the 20th century, she writes, to stories about “beasts like King Kong and Godzilla, along with aliens from other planets”—modern manifestations of fears about the “other.” In part this was because the industrial revolution gave humans more distance from animals, making them a less powerful presence and source of anxiety. The characters of Russian fairy tales inhabit a spectacular Magical Kingdom where they never get bored. They’re eternally engaged in all kinds of trials and tribulations – to do the bidding of the king, win themselves a beautiful wife, save their land or defend their loved ones from evil beasts. 1) Baba Yaga is one of the most frequently encountered characters in fairy tales. She’s most often found as the owner of a wooden hut on chicken legs, or as the guardian of the way into a wild wood. The Bog Hag appears in fairy tales as an ugly old woman clad in seaweed. Her jobs are to frighten those who wander through the marshes, lure travelers into quicksand and steal small children. The House Hag is quite different – she lives quietly in her house and rarely shows herself to people.