In the following essay, Lieberman analyzes the traditional fairy tales collected in Lang's The Blue Fairy Book in terms of the sexual roles, behavior, and psychology of women.

In a review of children's stories for a Christmas issue of The New York Review of Books, Alison Lurie praised traditional fairy and folk tales as one of the few sorts of classic children's literature of which a radical feminist would approve. ... These stories suggest a society in which women are as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class. Gretel, not Hansel, defeats the Witch; and for every clever youngest son there is a youngest daughter equally resourceful. The contrast is greatest in maturity, where women are often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine comes most frequently from a fairy godmother or wise woman, and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother. ... To prepare children for women's liberation, therefore, and to protect them against Future Shock, you had better buy at least one collection of fairy tales. ... ¹

Radical feminists, apparently, bought neither Ms. Lurie's ideas nor the collections of fairy tales. It is hard to see how children could be "prepared" for women's liberation by reading fairy tales; an analysis of those fairy tales that children actually read indicates instead that they serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles.

Ms. Lurie has now repeated her argument in a recent article, in which she objects to the opinion that feminists actually have of such stories as "Cinderella" and "Snow White":

It is true that some of the tales we know best, those that have been popularized by Disney, have this sort of heroine. But from the point of view of European folklore they are a very unrepresentative selection. They reflect the taste of the refined literary men who edited the first popular collections of fairy tales for children during the Victorian era. Andrew Lang, for instance, chose the tales in his Blue Fairy Book (first published in 1889) from among literally thousands known to him as a folklorist; and he chose them ... partly for their moral lesson. Folk tales recorded in the field by scholars are full of everything Lang leaves out: sex, death, low humor, and female initiative.
other more recent collections of tales—as well as in Lang's later collections—there are more active heroines. ...  

No one would disagree with Ms. Lurie that Andrew Lang was very selective in choosing his tales, but to a feminist who wishes to understand the acculturation of women, this is beside the point. Only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected masses of children in our culture. Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White are mythic figures who have replaced the old Greek and Norse gods, goddesses, and heroes for most children. The "folk tales recorded in the field by scholars," to which Ms. Lurie refers, or even Andrew Lang's later collections, are so relatively unknown that they cannot seriously be considered in a study of the meaning of fairy tales to women.

In this light, *The Blue Fairy Book* is a very fruitful book to analyze, for it contains many of the most famous stories, and has perhaps been the best-known and hence most influential collection of tales. It was compiled by Andrew Lang and first published by Longman's Green, and Co. in London in 1889. It was followed by *The Red Fairy Book*, and then [*The Green Fairy Book*], and then by many others, [*The Yellow Fairy Book*], [*The Brown Fairy Book*], [*The Rose Fairy Book*], [*The Violet Fairy Book*], etc. In the preface to *The Green Fairy Book*, in 1892, Lang noted that the stories were made not only to amuse children, but also to teach them. He pointed out that many of the stories have a moral, although, he wrote, "we think more as we read them of the diversion than of the lesson." The distinction that Lang drew between diversions and lessons is misleading, for children do not categorize their reading as diverting or instructive, but as interesting or boring. If we are concerned, then, about what our children are being taught, we must pay particular attention to those stories that are so beguiling that children think more as they read them "of the diversion than of the lesson"; perhaps literature is suggestive in direct proportion to its ability to divert. We know that children are socialized or culturally conditioned by movies, television programs, and the stories they read or hear, and we have begun to wonder at the influence that children's stories and entertainments had upon us, though we cannot now measure the extent of that influence.

Generations of children have read the popular fairy books, and in doing so may have absorbed far more from them than merely the outlines of the various stories. What is the precise effect that the story of "Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs" has upon a child? Not only do children find out what happens to the various princes and princesses, wood-cutters, witches, and children of their favorite tales, but they also learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances. Among other things, these tales present a picture of sexual roles, behavior, and psychology, and a way of predicting outcome or fate according to sex, which is important because of the intense interest that children take in "endings"; they always want to know how things will "turn out." A close examination of the treatment of girls and women in fairy tales reveals certain patterns which are keenly interesting not only in themselves, but also as material which has undoubtedly played a major contribution in forming the sexual role concept of children, and in suggesting to them the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person's chances of success in various endeavors. It is now being questioned whether those traits that have been characterized as feminine have a biological or a cultural basis: discarding the assumptions of the past, we are asking what is inherent in our nature, and what has become ours through the gentle but forcible process of acculturation. Many feminists accept nothing as a "given" about the nature of female personality; nearly all the work on that vast subject is yet to be done. In considering the possibility that gender has a cultural character and origin we need to examine the primary channels of acculturation. Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls. An analysis of the women in *The Blue Fairy Book* presents a picture that does not accord with Ms. Lurie's hypothesis.

Certain premises and patterns emerge at once, of which only the stereotyped figure of the wicked step-mother has received much general notice. The beauty-contest is a constant and primary device in many of the stories. Where there are several daughters in a family, or several unrelated girls in a story, the prettiest is invariably
singled out and designated for reward, or first for punishment and later for reward. Beautiful girls are never ignored; they may be oppressed at first by wicked figures, as the jealous Queen persecutes Snow-White, but ultimately they are chosen for reward. Two fundamental conventions are associated here: the special destiny of the youngest child when there are several children in a family (this holds true for youngest brothers as well as for youngest sisters, as long as the siblings are of the same sex), and the focus on beauty as a girl's most valuable asset, perhaps her only valuable asset. Good-temper and meekness are so regularly associated with beauty, and ill-temper with ugliness, that this in itself must influence children's expectations. The most famous example of this associational pattern occurs in "Cinderella," with the opposition of the ugly, cruel, bad-tempered older sisters to the younger, beautiful, sweet Cinderella, but in The Blue Fairy Book it also occurs in many other stories, such as "Beauty and the Beast" and "Toads and Diamonds." Even when there is no series of sisters (in "Snow-White and Rose-Red" both girls are beautiful and sweet) the beautiful single daughter is nearly always noted for her docility, gentleness, and good temper.

This pattern, and the concomitant one of reward distribution, probably acts to promote jealousy and divisiveness among girls. The stories reflect an intensely competitive spirit: they are frequently about contests, for which there can be only one winner because there is only one prize. Girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky. If a child identifies with the beauty, she may learn to be suspicious of ugly girls, who are portrayed as cruel, sly, and unscrupulous in these stories; if she identifies with the plain girls, she may learn to be suspicious and jealous of pretty girls, beauty being a gift of fate, not something that can be attained. There are no examples of a crossed-pattern, that is, of plain but good-tempered girls. It is a psychological truth that as children, and as women, girls fear homeliness (even attractive girls are frequently convinced that they are plain), and this fear is a major source of anxiety, diffidence, and convictions of inadequacy and inferiority among women. It is probably also a source of envy and discord among them. Girls may be predisposed to imagine that there is a link between the lovable face and the lovable character, and to fear, if plain themselves, that they will also prove to be unpleasant, thus using the patterns to set up self-fulfilling prophecies.

The immediate and predictable result of being beautiful is being chosen, this word having profound importance to a girl. The beautiful girl does not have to do anything to merit being chosen; she does not have to show pluck, resourcefulness, or wit; she is chosen because she is beautiful. Prince Hyacinth chooses the Dear Little Princess for his bride from among the portraits of many princesses that are shown to him because she is the prettiest; the bear chooses the beautiful youngest daughter in "East of the Sun & West of the Moon"; at least twenty kings compete to win Bellissima in "The Yellow Dwarf"; the prince who penetrates the jungle of thorns and briars to find the Sleeping Beauty does so because he had heard about her loveliness; Cinderella instantly captivates her prince during a ball that amounts to a beauty contest; the old king in "The White Cat" says he will designate as his heir whichever of his sons brings home the loveliest princess, thereby creating a beauty contest as a hurdle to inheriting his crown; the prince in "The Water-Lily or The Gold-Spinners" rescues and marries the youngest and fairest of the three enslaved maidens; the King falls in love with Goldilocks because of her beauty; the enchanted sheep dies for love of the beautiful Miranda in "The Wonderful Sheep"; Prince Darling pursues Celia because she is beautiful; the young king in "Trusty John" demands the Princess of the Golden Roof for her beauty, and so on. This is a principal factor contributing to the passivity of most of the females in these stories (even those few heroines who are given some sort of active role are usually passive in another part of the story). Since the heroines are chosen for their beauty (en sol), not for anything they do (pour sol), they seem to exist passively until they are seen by the hero, or described to him. They wait, are chosen, and are rewarded.

Marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it is the reward for girls, or sometimes their punishment. (This is almost equally true for boys, although the boy who wins the hand of the princess gets power as well as a pretty wife, because the princess is often part of a package deal including half or all of a kingdom). While it would be futile and anachronistic to suppose that these tales could or should have depicted alternate options or rewards for heroines or heroes, we must still observe that marriage dominates them, and note what they show as leading to marriage, and as resulting from it. Poor boys play an active role in winning kingdoms and princesses; Espen Cinderlad, the despised and youngest of the three brothers in so many Norwegian folk tales,
wins the Princess on the Glass Hill by riding up a veritable hill of glass. Poor girls are chosen by princes because they have been seen by them.

Marriage is associated with getting rich: it will be seen that the reward basis in fairy and folk tales is overwhelmingly mercenary. Good, poor, and pretty girls always win rich and handsome princes, never merely handsome, good, but poor men. (If the heroine or hero is already rich, she or he may marry someone of equal rank and wealth, as in "The White Cat," "Trusty John," "The Sleeping Beauty," etc.; if poor, she or he marries someone richer.) Since girls are chosen for their beauty, it is easy for a child to infer that beauty leads to wealth, that being chosen means getting rich. Beauty has an obviously commercial advantage even in stories in which marriage appears to be a punishment rather than a reward: "Bluebeard," in which the suitor is wealthy though ugly, and the stories in which a girl is wooed by a beast, such as "Beauty and the Beast," "East of the Sun & West of the Moon," and "The Black Bull of Norroway."

The bear in "East of the Sun & West of the Moon" promises to enrich the whole family of a poor husbandman if they will give him the beautiful youngest daughter. Although the girl at first refuses to go, her beauty is seen as the family's sole asset, and she is sold, like a commodity, to the bear (the family does not know that he is a prince under an enchantment). "Beauty and the Beast" is similar to this part of "East of the Sun," and the Snow-White of "Snow-White and Rose-Red" also becomes rich upon marrying an enchanted prince who had been a bear.4 Cinderella may be the best-known story of this type.

Apart from the princesses who are served out as prizes in competitions (to the lad who can ride up a glass hill, or slay a giant, or answer three riddles, or bring back some rarity), won by lucky fellows like Espen Cinderlad, a few girls in The Blue Fairy Book find themselves chosen as brides for mercantile reasons, such as the girl in "Toads and Diamonds" who was rewarded by a fairy so that flowers and jewels dropped from her mouth whenever she spoke. In "Rumpelstiltzkin," the little dwarf helps the poor miller's daughter to spin straw into gold for three successive nights, so that the King thinks to himself, "She's only a miller's daughter, it's true ... but I couldn't find a richer wife if I were to search the whole world over," consequently making her his queen.5 The system of rewards in fairy tales, then, equates these three factors: being beautiful, being chosen, and getting rich.

Alison Lurie suggests that perhaps fairy tales are the first real women's literature, that they are literally old wives' tales: "Throughout Europe ... the story-tellers from whom the Grimm Brothers and their followers heard them were most often women; in some areas they were all women." She wonders if the stories do not reflect a matriarchal society in which women held power, and she mentions Gretel as an example of an active, resourceful young heroine (I will set aside the problem of the power of older women for the moment). An examination of the best-known stories shows that active resourceful girls are in fact rare; most of the heroines are passive, submissive, and helpless. In the story of "Hansel and Gretel" it is true that Gretel pushes the witch into the oven; Hansel is locked up in the stable, where the witch has been fattening him. At the beginning of the story, however, when the children overhear their parents' plan to lose them in the forest, we read that "Gretel wept bitterly and spoke to Hansel: 'Now it's all up with us.' 'No, no, Gretel,' said Hansel, 'I'll be able to find a way of escape, no fear.'" (p. 251) It is Hansel who devises the plan of gathering pebbles and dropping them on the path as they are led into the forest. "Later, in the dark forest, Gretel began to cry, and said: 'How are we ever to get out of the wood?' But Hansel comforted her. 'Wait a bit,' he said, 'till the moon is up, and then we'll find our way sure enough.' And when the full moon had risen he took his sister by the hand and followed the pebbles, which shone like new threepenny bits, and showed them the path." (p. 252)

After they get home, they overhear their parents scheming to lose them again. Gretel weeps again, and again Hansel consoles her. Gretel does perform the decisive action at the end, but for the first half of the story she is the frightened little sister, looking to her brother for comfort and help.

Even so, Gretel is one of the most active of the girls, but her company is small. The heroines of the very similar "East of the Sun" and "The Black Bull of Norroway" are initially passive, but then undertake difficult quests when they lose their men. The heroine of "East of the Sun" succumbs to curiosity (the common trap for women: this
story is derived from the myth of Cupid and Psyche), and attempts to look at her bear-lover during the night, and the second heroine forgets to remain motionless while her bull-lover fights with the devil (good girls sit still). The lovers disappear when their commands are broken. The girls travel to the ends of the earth seeking them, but they cannot make themselves seen or recognized by their men until the last moment. The Master-maid, in a story whose conclusion resembles these other two, is concealed in a backroom of a giant's house. A prince, looking for adventure, comes to serve the giant, who gives him tasks that are impossible to accomplish. The Master-maid knows the giant's secrets and tells the prince how to do the impossible chores. She knows what to do, but does not act herself. When the giant tells her to kill the prince, she helps the prince to run away, escaping with him. Without her advice the escape would be impossible, yet apparently she had never attempted to run away herself, but had been waiting in the back room for a prince-escort to show up.

Most of the heroines in The Blue Fairy Book, however, are entirely passive, submissive, and helpless. This is most obviously true of the Sleeping Beauty, who lies asleep, in the ultimate state of passivity, waiting for a brave prince to awaken and save her. (She is like the Snow-White of "Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs," who lies in a death-like sleep, her beauty being visible through her glass coffin, until a prince comes along and falls in love with her.) When the prince does penetrate the tangle of thorns and brambles, enters the castle, finds her chamber, and awakens her, the princess opens her eyes and says, "Is it you, my Prince? You have waited a long while." (p. 59) This is not the end of the story, although it is the most famous part. The Sleeping Beauty, who was, while enchanted, the archetype of the passive, waiting beauty, retains this character in the second part, when she is awake. She marries the prince, and has two children who look savory to her mother-in-law, an Ogress with a taste for human flesh. While her son is away on a hunting trip the Ogress Queen orders the cook to kill and serve for dinner first one child and then the other. The cook hides the children, serving first a roast lamb and then a kid, instead. When the Ogress demands that her daughter-in-law be killed next, the cook tells her the Queen-mother's orders. The young Queen folds up at once: "Do it; do it" (said she, stretching out her neck). 'Execute your orders, and then I shall go and see my children ... whom I so much and so tenderly loved.'" (p. 62) The compassionate cook, however, decides to hide her too, and the young King returns in time to save them all from the Ogress' wrath and impending disaster.

Cinderella plays as passive a role in her story. After leaving her slipper at the ball she has nothing more to do but stay home and wait. The prince has commanded that the slipper be carried to every house in the kingdom, and that it be tried on the foot of every woman. Cinderella can remain quietly at home; the prince's servant will come to her house and will discover her identity. Cinderella's male counterpart, Espen Cinderlad, the hero of a great many Norwegian folk tales, plays a very different role. Although he is the youngest of the three brothers, as Cinderella is the youngest sister, he is a Cinderlad by choice. His brothers may ridicule and despise him, but no one forces him to sit by the fire and poke in the ashes all day; he elects to do so. All the while, he knows that he is the cleverest of the three, and eventually he leaves the fireside and wins a princess and half a kingdom by undertaking some adventure or winning a contest.

The Princess on the Glass Hill is the prototype of female passivity. The whole story is in the title; the Princess has been perched somehow on top of a glass hill, and thus made virtually inaccessible. There she sits, a waiting prize for whatever man can ride a horse up the glassy slope. So many of the heroines of fairy stories, including the well-known Rapunzel, are locked up in towers, locked into a magic sleep, imprisoned by giants, or otherwise enslaved, and waiting to be rescued by a passing prince, that the helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale.

In the interesting story of "The Goose-Girl," an old Queen sends off her beautiful daughter, accompanied by a maid, to be married to a distant prince. The Queen gives her daughter a rag stained with three drops of her own blood. During the journey the maid brusquely refuses to bring the Princess a drink of water, saying "I don't mean to be your servant any longer." The intimidated Princess only murmurs, "Oh! heaven, what am I to do?" (p. 266) This continues, the maid growing ruder, the Princess meeker, until she loses the rag, whereupon the maid rejoices, knowing that she now has full power over the girl, "for in losing the drops of blood the Princess had become weak and powerless." (p. 268) The maid commands the Princess to change clothes and horses with her,
and never to speak to anyone about what has happened. The possession of the rag had assured the Princess' social status; without it she becomes déclassée, and while her behavior was no less meek and docile before losing the rag than afterwards, there is no formal role reversal until she loses it. Upon their arrival the maid presents herself as the Prince's bride, while the Princess is given the job of goose-girl. At length, due solely to the intervention of others, the secret is discovered, the maid killed, and the goose-girl married to the Prince.

The heroine of "Felicia and the Pot of Pinks" is equally submissive to ill-treatment. After their father's death, her brother forbids her to sit on his chairs:

Felicia, who was very gentle, said nothing, but stood up crying quietly; while Bruno, for that was her brother's name, sat comfortably by the fire. Presently, when suppertime came, Bruno had a delicious egg, and he threw the shell to Felicia, saying: 'There, that is all I can give you; if you don't like it, go out and catch frogs; there are plenty of them in the marsh close by.' Felicia did not answer but she cried more bitterly than ever, and went away to her own little room. (p. 148)

The underlying associational pattern of these stories links the figures of the victimized girl and the interesting girl; it is always the interesting girl, the special girl, who is in trouble. It needs to be asked whether a child's absorption of the associational patterns found in these myths and legends may not sensitize the personality, rendering it susceptible to melodramatic self-conceptions and expectations. Because victimized girls like Felicia, the Goose-girl, and Cinderella are invariably rescued and rewarded, indeed glorified, children learn that suffering goodness can afford to remain meek, and need not and perhaps should not strive to defend itself, for if it did so perhaps the fairy godmother would not turn up for once, to set things right at the end. Moreover, the special thrill of persecution, bordering at once upon self-pity and self-righteousness, would have to be surrendered. Submissive, meek, passive female behavior is suggested and rewarded by the action of these stories.

Many of the girls are not merely passive, however; they are frequently victims and even martyrs as well. The Cinderella story is not simply a rags-to-riches tale. Cinderella is no Horatio Alger; her name is partly synonymous with female martyrdom. Her ugly older sisters, who are jealous of her beauty, keep her dressed in rags and hidden at home. They order her to do all the meanest housework. Cinderella bears this ill-treatment meekly: she is the patient sufferer, an object of pity. When the older sisters go off to the ball she bursts into tears; it is only the sound of her weeping that arouses her fairy godmother. Ultimately, her loneliness and her suffering are sentimentalized and become an integral part of her glamor. "Cinderella" and the other stories of this type show children that the girl who is singled out for rejection and bad treatment, and who submits to her lot, weeping but never running away, has a special compensatory destiny awaiting her. One of the pleasures provided by these stories is that the child-reader is free to indulge in pity, to be sorry for the heroine. The girl in tears is invariably the heroine; that is one of the ways the child can identify the heroine, for no one mistakenly feels sorry for the ugly older sisters, or for any of the villains or villainesses. When these characters suffer, they are only receiving their "just deserts." The child who dreams of being a Cinderella dreams perforce not only of being chosen and elevated by a prince, but also of being a glamorous sufferer or victim. What these stories convey is that women in distress are interesting. Fairy stories provide children with a concentrated early introduction to the archetype of the suffering heroine, who is currently alive (though not so well) under the name of Jenny Cavilleri.

The girl who marries Blue Beard is a prime example of the helpless damsel-victim, desperately waiting for a rescuer. She knows that her husband will not hesitate to murder her, because she has seen the corpses of his other murdered wives in the forbidden closet. The enraged Blue Beard announces that he will cut off her head; he gives her fifteen minutes to say her prayers, after which he bellows for her so loudly that the house trembles:

The distressed wife came down, and threw herself at his feet, all in tears, with her hair about her shoulders. 'This signifies nothing,' said Blue Beard: 'you must die'; then, taking hold of her hair with one hand, and lifting up the sword with the other, he was going to take off her head. The poor lady, turning about to him, and looking at him with dying eyes, desired him to afford her one little moment
to recollect herself. 'No, no,' said he, 'recommend thyself to God,' and was just about to strike. ...(p. 295)

"At this very instant," as the story continues, her brothers rush in and save her.

It is worth noticing that the one Greek legend that Lang included in The Blue Fairy Book is the Perseus story, which Lang entitled "The Terrible Head." It features two utterly helpless women, the first being Danae, who is put into a chest with her infant son, Perseus, and thrown out to sea, to drown or starve or drift away. Fortunately the chest comes to land, and Danae and her baby are saved. At the conclusion of the story, as the grown-up Perseus is flying home with the Gorgon's head, he looks down and sees "a beautiful girl chained to a stake at the high-water mark of the sea. The girl was so frightened or so tired that she was only prevented from falling by the iron chain about her waist, and there she hung, as if she were dead." (p. 190) Perseus learns that she has been left there as a sacrifice to a sea-monster; he cuts her free, kills the monster, and carries her off as his bride.

Few other rescues are as dramatic as that of Blue Beard's wife or of Andromeda, but the device of the rescue itself is constantly used. The sexes of the rescuer and the person in danger are almost as constantly predictable; men come along to rescue women who are in danger of death, or are enslaved, imprisoned, abused, or plunged into an enchanted sleep which resembles death. Two well-known stories that were not included in The Blue Fairy Book, "Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Rapunzel," are notable examples of this type: Snow-White is saved from a sleep which everyone assumes is death by the arrival of a handsome prince; Rapunzel, locked up in a tower by a cruel witch, is found and initially rescued by her prince.

Whatever the condition of younger women in fairy tales, Alison Lurie claims that the older women in the tales are often more active and powerful than men. It is true that some older women in fairy tales have power, but of what kind? In order to understand the meaning of women's power in fairy tales, we must examine the nature, the value, and the use of their power.

There are only a few powerful good women in The Blue Fairy Book, and they are nearly all fairies: the tiny, jolly, ugly old fairy in "Prince Hyacinth," the stately fairies in "Prince Darling," "Toads and Diamonds," and "Felicia," and of course Cinderella's fairy godmother. They are rarely on the scene; they only appear in order to save young people in distress, and then they're off again. These good fairies have gender only in a technical sense; to children, they probably appear as women only in the sense that dwarfs and wizards appear as men. They are not human beings, they are asexual, and many of them are old. They are not examples of powerful women with whom children can identify as role models; they do not provide meaningful alternatives to the stereotype of the younger, passive heroine. A girl may hope to become a princess, but can she ever become a fairy?

Powerful, bad, older women appear to outnumber powerful, good ones. A certain number of these are also not fully human; they are fairies, witches, trolls, or Ogresses. It is generally implied that such females are wicked because of their race: thus the young king in "The Sleeping Beauty" fears his mother while he loves her, "for she was of the race of the Ogres, and the King (his father) would never have married her had it not been for her vast riches; it was even whispered about the Court that she had Ogreish inclinations, and that, whenever she saw little children passing by, she had all the difficulty in the world to avoid falling upon them." (p. 60) Either extra-human race or extreme ugliness is often associated with female wickedness, and in such a way as to suggest that they explain the wickedness. The evil Fairy of the Desert in "The Yellow Dwarf" is described as a "tall old woman, whose ugliness was even more surprising than her extreme old age." (p. 39) The sheep-king in "The Wonderful Sheep" tells Miranda that he was transformed into a sheep by a fairy "whom I had known as long as I could remember, and whose ugliness had always horrified me." (p. 223) The bear-prince in "East of the Sun" is under a spell cast by a troll-hag, and the fairy who considers herself slighted by the Sleeping Beauty's parents is described as being old: the original illustration for Lang's book shows her to be an ugly old crone, whereas the other fairies are young and lovely.
In the case of wicked but human women, it is also implied that being ill-favored is corollary to being ill-natured, as with Cinderella's step-mother and step-sisters. Cinderella is pretty and sweet, like her dead mother. The step-mother is proud and haughty, and her two daughters by her former husband are like her, so that their ill-temper appears to be genetic, or at least transmitted by the mother. The circumstances in "Toads and Diamonds" are similar: the old widow has two daughters, of whom the eldest resembles her mother "in face and humour. ... They were both so disagreeable and so proud that there was no living with them. The youngest, who was the very picture of her father for courtesy and sweetness of temper, was withal one of the most beautiful girls ever seen." (p. 274)

Powerful good women are nearly always fairies, and they are remote: they come only when desperately needed. Whether human or extra-human, those women who are either partially or thoroughly evil are generally shown as active, ambitious, strong-willed and, most often, ugly. They are jealous of any woman more beautiful than they, which is not surprising in view of the power deriving from beauty in fairy tales. In "Cinderella" the domineering step-mother and step-sisters contrast with the passive heroine. The odious step-mother wants power, and successfully makes her will prevail in the house; we are told that Cinderella bore her ill-treatment patiently, "and dared not tell her father, who would have rattled her off; for his wife governed him entirely." The wicked maid in "The Goose-Girl" is not described as being either fair or ugly (except that the Princess appears to be fairer than the maid at the end), but like the other female villains she is jealous of beauty and greedy for wealth. She decides to usurp the Princess' place, and being evil she is also strong and determined, and initially successful. Being powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly.

The moral value of activity thus becomes sex-linked. The boy who sets out to seek his fortune, like Dick Whittington, Jack the Giant-Killer, or Espen Cinderlad, is a stock figure and, provided that he has a kind heart, is assured of success. What is praiseworthy in males, however, is rejected in females; the counterpart of the energetic, aspiring boy is the scheming, ambitious woman. Some heroines show a kind of strength in their ability to endure, but they do not actively seek to change their lot. (The only exceptions to this rule are in the stories that appear to derive from the myth of Cupid and Psyche: "East of the Sun" and "The Black Bull of Norroway," in which the heroines seek their lost lovers. We may speculate whether the pre-Christian origin of these stories diminishes the stress placed on female passivity and acceptance, but this is purely conjectural.) We can remark that these stories reflect a bias against the active, ambitious, "pushy" woman, and have probably also served to instill this bias in young readers. They establish a dichotomy between those women who are gentle, passive, and fair, and those who are active, wicked, and ugly. Women who are powerful and good are never human; those women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive.

While character depiction in fairy tales is, to be sure, meagre, and we can usually group characters according to temperamental type (beautiful and sweet, or ugly and evil), there are a couple of girls who are not portrayed as being either perfectly admirable or as wicked. The princesses in "The Yellow Dwarf," "Goldilocks," and "Trusty John" are described as being spoiled, vain, and wilful: the problem is that they refuse to marry anyone. The Queen in "The Yellow Dwarf" expostulates with her daughter:

'Bellissima,' she said, 'I do wish you would not be so proud. What makes you despise all these nice kings? I wish you to marry one of them, and you do not try to please me.'I am so happy,' Bellissima answered: 'do leave me in peace, madam. I don't want to care for anyone.'But you would be very happy with any of these princes,' said the Queen, 'and I shall be very angry if you fall in love with anyone who is not worthy of you.'But the Princess thought so much of herself that she did not consider any one of her lovers clever or handsome enough for her; and her mother, who was getting really angry at her determination not to be married, began to wish that she had not allowed her to have her own way so much. (p. 31)

Princess Goldilocks similarly refuses to consider marriage, although she is not as adamant as Bellissima. The princess in the Grimms' story, "King Thrushbeard," which is not included in this collection, behaves like Bellissima; her angry father declares that he will give her to the very next comer, whatever his rank: the next man to enter the
castle being a beggar, the king marries his daughter to him. This princess suffers poverty with her beggar-
husband, until he reveals himself as one of the suitor kings she had rejected. Bellissima is punished more
severely; indeed, her story is remarkable because it is one of the rare examples outside of H. C. Andersen of a
story with a sad ending. Because Bellissima had refused to marry, she is forced by a train of circumstances to
promise to marry the ugly Yellow Dwarf. She tries to avoid this fate by consenting to wed one of her suitors at last,
but the dwarf intervenes at the wedding. Ultimately the dwarf kills the suitor, whom Bellissima had come to love,
and she dies of a broken heart. A kind mermaid transforms the ill-fated lovers into two palm trees.

These princesses are portrayed as reprehensible because they refuse to marry; hence, they are considered
"stuck-up," as children would say. The alternate construction, that they wished to preserve their freedom and their
identity, is denied or disallowed (although Bellissima had said to her mother, "I am so happy, do leave me in
peace, madam.") There is a sense of triumph when a wilful princess submits or is forced to submit to a husband.

_The Blue Fairy Book_ is filled with weddings, but it shows little of married life. It contains thirty stories in which
marriage is a component, but eighteen of these stories literally end with the wedding. Most of the other twelve
show so little of the marital life of the hero or heroine that technically they too may be said to end with marriage.
Only a few of the stories show any part of the married life of young people, or even of old ones. The Sleeping
Beauty is a totally passive wife and mother, and Blue Beard's wife, like the Sleeping Beauty, depends on a man to
rescue her. Whereas the Sleeping Beauty is menaced by her mother-in-law who, being an Ogress, is only half-
human, Blue Beard's wife is endangered by _being_ the wife of her ferocious husband. (Her error may be ascribed
to her having an independent sense of curiosity, or to rash disobedience.) This widely-known story established a
potent myth in which a helpless woman violates her husband's arbitrary command and then is subject to his
savage, implacable fury. It is fully the counterpoise of the other stock marital situation containing a scheming,
overbearing wife and a timid, hen-pecked husband, as in "Cinderella"; moreover, whereas the domineering wife is
always implicitly regarded as abhorrent, the helpless, threatened, passive wife is uncritically viewed and thus
implicitly approved of. As Andromeda, Blue Beard's wife, or the imperiled Pauline, her function is to provide us
with a couple of thrills of a more or less sadistic tincture.

The other peculiar aspect of the depiction of marriage in these stories is that nearly all the young heroes and
heroines are the children of widows or widowers; only five of the thirty-seven stories in the book contain a set of
parents: these include "The Sleeping Beauty," in which the parents leave the castle when the hundred-year
enchantment begins, and the two similar tales of "Little Thumb" and "Hansel and Gretel," in both of which the
parents decide to get rid of their children because they are too poor to feed them. (In "Little Thumb" the husband
persuades his reluctant wife, and in "Hansel and Gretel" the wife persuades her reluctant husband.) Cinderella
has two parents, but the only one who plays a part in the story is her step-mother. In general, the young people of
these stories are described as having only one parent, or none. Although marriage is such a constant event in the
stories, and is central to their reward system, few marriages are indeed shown in fairy tales. Like the White
Queen's rule, there's jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today. The stories can be described as
being preoccupied with marriage without portraying it; as a real condition, it's nearly always off-stage.

In effect, these stories focus upon courtship, which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's
life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself. After
marriage she ceases to be wooed, her consent is no longer sought, she derives her status from her husband, and
her personal identity is thus snuffed out. When fairy tales show courtship as exciting, and conclude with marriage,
and the vague statement that "they lived happily ever after," children may develop a deep-seated desire always to
be courted, since marriage is literally the end of the story.

The controversy about what is biologically determined and what is learned has just begun. These are the
questions now being asked, and not yet answered: to what extent is passivity a biological attribute of females; to
what extent is it culturally determined? Perhaps it will be argued that these stories show archetypal female
behavior, but one may wonder to what extent they reflect female attributes, or to what extent they serve as
training manuals for girls? If one argued that the characteristically passive behavior of female characters in fairy
stories is a reflection of an attribute inherent in female personality, would one also argue, as consistency would require, that the mercantile reward system of fairy stories reflects values that are inherent in human nature? We must consider the possibility that the classical attributes of “femininity” found in these stories are in fact imprinted in children and reinforced by the stories themselves. Analyses of the influence of the most popular children's literature may give us an insight into some of the origins of psycho-sexual identity.

Notes


4. In these stories, the girl who marries a beast must agree to accept and love a beast as a husband; the girl must give herself to a beast in order to get a man. When she is willing to do this, he can shed his frightening, rough appearance and show his gentler form, demonstrating the softening agency of women (as in the story of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester). These heroines have an agentive role, insofar as they are responsible for the literal reformation of the male.


7. Ruth Kelso's *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956) demonstrates that "the moral ideal for the lady is essentially Christian ... as that for the gentleman is essentially pagan. For him the ideal is self-expansion and realization. ... For the lady the direct opposite is prescribed. The eminently Christian virtues of chastity, humility, piety, and patience under suffering and wrong, are the necessary virtues." (p. 36)

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420061033&v=2.1&u=holl83564&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=999fe572d56817b9353373c32de12115

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1420061033