Fairy Tales en pointe: Fairy Brides, Ballerinas, and Ballets that Made the Tale

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Fairy Tales *en pointe*: Fairy Brides, Ballerinas, & Ballets that Made the Tale

Jacqueline Nichole Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Fairy Tales en pointe: Fairy Brides, Ballerinas, & Ballets that Made the Tale

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The relationship between ballet and fairy tale is by no means a new or unique discovery—to either dance history or literary studies. However, aside from relatively brief mentions of ballets as examples of fairy-tale adaptation, ballet’s relevance to fairy-tale studies has been somewhat undervalued. While scholars often relegate ballet to a smaller part in fairy tale’s influence through the performing arts, fairy-tale ballet deserves to have its own, independent academic conversation because ballet contributes uniquely to both fairy-tale history and canon. Ballet can be credited with both giving new life to an old tale and creating a brand new one through an amalgamation of formalistic fairy-tale motifs and figures—particularly when it comes to female figures.

Through an analysis of nineteenth-century Romanticism, fairy-tale form, and the narratives created by three of the most famous fairy bride ballets—La Sylphide, Giselle, and Swan Lake—we can distinguish how Romantic ballet affects fairy-tale studies because of the special conditions this “feminized” art placed on narrative and character. The pervasion of the fairy bride character and motif in ballet indicates a potentially unique tale type, and these three fairy brides together reveal a different dimension to our view of female fairy-tale characters by actively shaping their own stories according to Romantic values that place them outside of traditional fairy-tale roles. Thus, fairy-tale ballets significantly substantiate Romantic imagination beyond the bounds of literary form, and therefore both emphasize and nuance the fairy-tale female paradigm by making unique contributions to the fairy-tale canon.

Keywords: Romanticism, nineteenth century, fairy tale, ballet, La Sylphide, Giselle, Swan Lake, dance history, supernatural, fairy bride, feminist, paradigm, fairy-tale canon
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Fairy Tales en pointe: Fairy Brides, Ballerinas, & Ballets that Made the Tale

There is a place where “once upon a time” comes to life without words. Here, instead of pages and painted pictures, there are colorful costumes, elaborate music, and the art of classical ballet that finally discovered a truly kindred spirit in the fairy tale. From the early nineteenth century through today, fairy-tale ballets have occupied a prominent position onstage. What better place could there be to tell stories that rely on wonder and imagination, than in a form of dance that appears equally fairylike? Any one ballet represents a convergence of music, dance, and storytelling—an incredibly artful achievement in itself, and even more so in animating these tales of enchantment and fantasy, of a living tradition that is as fluid and interpretable as the dancing itself.

The relationship between ballet and fairy tale is by no means a new or unique discovery—to either dance history or literary studies. Romantic and fairy-tale ballets have emerged as an integral part of dance history since the early nineteenth century: Richard G. Kraus and Sarah Chapman credit Romanticism in the arts and ballets such as La Sylphide (1832) and Giselle (1841) with ushering in and closing out the “Golden Age” of ballet in Europe (80). Works like these showcase how Romanticism and fairy tale affected other art forms during this time period. When these two disciplines come together we can also see clearly how dance history affects our literary theory and canon.

However, aside from relatively brief mentions of ballets as examples of fairy-tale adaptation, ballet’s relevance to fairy-tale studies has been somewhat undervalued. So far, fairy-tale scholars acknowledge ballet’s fairytale-ness but rarely elect to discuss ballet’s influence in fairy-tale studies independently of other performing arts, such as opera or film studies; this potentially intimates that ballet’s contribution is less significant or unique than that of other art
forms. For example, Suzanne Rahn, in the singular entry on ballet in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, asserts a “fundamental affinity” between fairy tale and ballet with an approach that is both historical and aesthetic. Marina Warner reaffirms Rahn’s central claim, stating that “*The Firebird* and *Giselle* are original dramatic works in their own right. Yet they are also essentially fairy tales” (159). However, Warner’s discussion of the fairy-tale ballet’s contribution to the history of fairy tale is quite brief and quickly progresses to a much more detailed discussion of other performing arts and film adaptation.

While scholars often relegate ballet to a smaller part in fairy tale’s influence through the performing arts, fairy-tale ballet deserves to have its own, independent academic conversation because ballet contributes uniquely to both fairy-tale history and canon. The tales behind several of ballet’s most beloved fairy-tale masterpieces endure today both within and without the theater. Consequently, these masterpieces can be organized into two relative categories based upon the conditions of this question: was the tale the reason for the ballet, or the ballet the reason for the tale?

On one hand, Charles Perrault’s versions of the tales *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* made the ballets of the same names. These adaptations vary so little from the source texts—which remain too famous to surpass—that they were *made*, in both the “created” and “remembered” sense of the word, by the popularity of a literary version of the same narrative. On the other hand, some of these ballets *made* the tale itself; that is, those productions such as *Giselle* (1841) and *Swan Lake* (1877) quite literally made, or created from an array of folkloric source material, the stories of undying love and unwitting betrayal that we know today. Whether the creator of the ballet was inspired by another fairy tale or cultural legend becomes irrelevant to a tale told and retold onstage because the ballet is the means by which such unique narratives
were not only created, but known and loved. The relationship between fairy tale and ballet is one of collaboration, of perpetuation, of rebirth. Ballet can be credited with both giving new life to an old tale and creating a brand new one through an amalgamation of formalistic fairy-tale motifs and figures—particularly when it comes to female figures.

According to Kraus & Chapman, it was during the 1830s and 40s—the “Golden Age”—that ballet became dominated by the female ballerina and her abilities in response to Romantic ideals of emotion and ethereality (80). This “feminization” also translated to the fairy-tale characters these ballerinas represented onstage, which in turn brings forth another dimension to the often-maligned female cast of the fairy-tale canon. For Romantic choreographers, only the complexity of the female form and persona could capture such mystical and fairylike figures as sylphs and wilis, the very essence of the “fairy bride” motif that truly brought the Romantic imagination onto the ballet stage.

Through an analysis of nineteenth-century Romanticism, fairy-tale form, and the narratives created by three of the most famous fairy bride ballets—*La Sylphide*, *Giselle*, and *Swan Lake*—we can distinguish how Romantic ballet affects fairy-tale studies because of the special conditions this “feminized” art placed on narrative and character. The pervasion of the fairy bride character and motif in ballet indicates a potentially unique tale type, and these three fairy brides together reveal a different dimension to our view of female fairy-tale characters by actively shaping their own stories according to Romantic values that place them outside of traditional fairy-tale roles. Thus, fairy-tale ballets significantly substantiate Romantic imagination beyond the bounds of literary form, and therefore both emphasize and nuance the fairy-tale female paradigm by making unique contributions to the fairy-tale canon.

**Fairy Tale’s “Romance” with Ballet**
It is a truth mutually agreed upon among folklore scholars that fairy tale has strong ties to
the oral tradition. Telling stories by word of mouth over and over changes and builds upon them
until every version becomes an adaptation. The performing arts have a unique way of honoring
this tradition in their adaptation of fairy tales because every time an opera is sung or ballet is
danced, there may be new costumes and sets, plus restaging according to the directors’ artistic
license; these often subtle, but constant adaptations add yet another layer to the ‘palimpsest’ that
Christine Jones invokes in the introduction to her critical translation of Charles Perrault’s fairy
tales, *Mother Goose Refigured*. Though Jones refers specifically to Cinderella in this instance,
the term is easily applied to all fairy tales which are, as Jones puts it, “made of so many versions
of identity layered up in printed, oral, and visual media” (3). Like most fairy tale adaptations and
even folkloric tale types, ballet narratives emerge through many performances—a concept to be
addressed further in the next section—which collect relevant elements that recur in various
versions influenced by both visual and written sources.

Ballet, as primarily a visual medium, does not seem to have much to do with the written
word at first glance; however, classical ballets are grounded in a *libretto*, or a short text provided
to the choreographers, directors, and audience that introduces the characters and articulates the
storyline of the ballet. Considering the influence of both adaptation and reception in fairy-tale
studies, primary documents of the libretto for an original ballet are less representative of the
narrative than a combination of sources would be.¹ The narrative might be traced through not
only records of various libretti, but also through surviving choreography and the summaries and
analyses of ballet storylines which, in the nineteenth century, customarily appeared in
newspaper reviews of the performances (see Appendix 4 in *La Sylphide: Paris 1832 and
Beyond*).²
Dance historians such as Susan Banes assure us that “authenticity is difficult, if not impossible, to verify in dance history” (8) because it is common for choreography to be both passed down and changed throughout time without necessarily leaving a written paper trail; dance is “notoriously badly documented prior to the [relatively] recent invention of inexpensive videotaping technologies” (7). The narrative conveyed through the libretto and through the choreography can be subtly altered between choreographers. For example, August Burnonville’s Dutch libretto of La Sylphide emphasizes the human characters James and Effie more than Filipo Taglioni’s “original” libretto for the same ballet (La Sylphide: 1832 and beyond). Subsequent productions of this ballet may also alter the characterization however the choreographer sees fit, regardless of the “original” libretto. Ultimately, the libretto alone cannot answer for what the ballet narrative actually is, and must be studied alongside other performance records to capture the story identified by specific recurring elements and features.

Thus, the narratives of ballets become what fairy tales often are: palimpsests, amalgamations, stories that change subtly with each telling/performance, yet they often maintain specific tale types or motifs. Why fairy tales are so often the inspiration for ballet, at least since the early nineteenth century, becomes a matter for the art of storytelling and the finer details of theoretical thought and feeling in Europe during the Romantic era. The way that a Romantic ballet conveys its narrative is not only formally compatible with fairy tale, but thematically and aesthetically as well. Features such as simplicity, ambiguity, the appeal of the ethereal, and pursuit of the unattainable—even the contrast of the fairy bride’s ill-fated love and some “happily ever after” alternative endings which were created to appeal to children—bind ballet and fairy tales together in keeping with Romantic ideals and imagination.

*Telling Stories with Ballet*
Simply put, there is a “fundamental affinity” (Rahn) between ballet and fairy tale that intertwines the two art forms exquisitely. Like literary fairy tale, ballet relies on repetition and simplicity to convey a highly formalized narrative through character action. During the eighteenth century, ballet evolved to become a much more storytelling art form through the incorporation and subsequent streamlining of pantomime; pantomime in combination with dancing and music inherently requires a simplified plot in order to tell a full story to the audience, even with their access to a libretto. “Simplified,” in this sense, indicates a plot based in the present, since past and future events would be unnecessarily difficult to differentiate from the present action without narration. Personification also figures prominently in fairy tale and in ballet, as characters often take forms that are not human or cannot speak and dancers must rely on visual gestures, hand positions, and stage sets to convey narrative. Both performing and enjoying a balletic performance require interpretation and imagination beyond what is presented in the libretto or choreography—much the same way that literary fairy tales are often best appreciated for their own ambiguity.

While its indefinability remains one of the distinctive characteristics of the genre, *fairy tale* is best delineated in this conceptual framework with the assistance of fairy-tale historian Marina Warner. Warner describes the fairy tale as a short, familiar narrative that has been or can be made and remade out of well-known elements of plot, character, motif, and image that invariably build an enchanted reality that lends itself to “acts of imagination” (xxi). The term that comes to mind is *basic fantasy*—a simple framework upon which we may and must imagine, grown out of what we have experienced and what we can dream up, stories that represent more than the sum of their parts. Beyond the necessary simplicity in characterization and narrative
structure, it is this element of fantasy that fairy tale shares so artfully with ballet, or more specifically with what dance historians call Romantic ballet.

**Evoking Romanticism**

In the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, European intellectual thought was teeming with sensation and imagination under the Romanticist movement. Literature and the arts developed a sense of deep contemplation and idealization of the past that encouraged the passionate and fantastical. Warner characterizes the ascendancy of fairy tale as a result of the Romantic vision of nationalist culture and childhood, deftly interwoven with rose-colored nostalgia: “Nineteenth-century [fairy-tale] collectors set out to capture the national imagination of their country, but time has revealed them to have been unwitting internationalists” (65). Fairy-tale collections became anthologies of cross-cultural history and beautifully illustrated volumes of visual interpretation that connected childhood and nostalgia to a wider world. Warner explains, “The Romantic vision of childhood led to the triumph of the imagination” (103).

Examining the import of this “triumph of imagination” must reasonably fall within the domain of the Romantic theorists and philosophers—the great thinkers of the era that would set the tone for the next century of art and ideas.

Several philosophers in Germany during the 1790s, such as Johan Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, viewed fairy tales seriously thanks in no small part to the concept of bildung. This term refers to the notion, instilled by Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and other early German Romanticist treatises, that it was possible and desirable to have an art or aesthetically-influenced education (Ross 3). This notion is justified in part by the ability of art to transform the self-conception, to transform the natural condition of man by overcoming it (Schiller 4)—which resonates innately with the need in fairy tale for something magical or
transformative to occur in order to reverse the circumstances. An aesthetic education stimulates the imagination in seeking truth in beauty (Schiller 13) and in the words of the iconic Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge “it [aesthetic education] requires deeper feeling, and a stronger imagination, than belong to most of those, to whom reasoning and fluent expressions have been as a trade learnt in boyhood” (Biographia Literaria 264, emphasis added). Thus, triumphing over reason, imagination became integral to the idealism of art and aesthetic, not just childhood, in the Romantic movement. As Jack Zipes claims, “All the Romantic writers argued for taking imagination more seriously. They aimed at making the line between the fantastic and the realistic disappear to show the unlimited potential of the human being for self-realization” (449). As agents of transformation and the otherworldly, fantasy and wonder are therefore likely manifestations of this imagination in fairy tales.

Since fairy-tale ballet was creating original stories by attempting to evoke the Romantic imagination onstage, what then are the conditions for fantasy and wonder in this era? What do they look like to the Romanticist? In his Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia, the philosopher Novalis often correlated imagination and poetics with the fairy tale. He determines that in a true fairy tale everything must be marvelous—mysterious and unconnected—everything must be animated. . . . The whole of Nature must be interwoven in a wondrous manner with the entire spirit world. . . . The world of fairy tales is the absolutely opposite world to the world of truth (history)—and for this reason so remarkably similar to it. (34) Novalis’s conditions for fairy tales and wonder center around the elusive and ethereal, that which is intangible and beyond everyday possibility, making enchantment something beautiful but unattainable. Such thinkers with such ideas would not only influence the ideology of an entire era of artists and philosophers, but also introduce new and unique objectives to well-established
art forms—fundamentally altering the aesthetics of artistic creation. It was into this surreal world that Romantic ballet was born.

The roots of classical ballet originated in Italy, and it became a solidified art form during the seventeenth century at French courts; it is considered to have come to fruition in Russia’s Imperial School of Ballet in the late nineteenth century (Kraus & Chapman 68). Classic is often used as an umbrella term intended to distinguish formalized ballet from contemporary ballet, a modern (twenty-first century) interpretation which experiments with breaking the fundamental, ideal lines and positions, among other significant elements of the classical style. Romantic ballet is a term used consistently by dance historians referring specifically to the result of changes to the style that was applied to the classical form during the nineteenth century—changes made in an attempt to capture aesthetic ideals of supernatural lightness and fantasy, tragic love and the pursuit of the unattainable.5 Romantic ballet marks a more nuanced approach to choreography and narrative, and also, quite notably, the popularization of dancing en pointe in order to enhance the “ethereal lightness” so desired by Romantic choreographers (Clarke & Crisp 64). There were other innovations introduced by Romantic ballet, such as the creation of the calf-length, loose tutu designed to emphasize the dancer’s airiness (O’Brien 33), but none was so central as the ballerina padding her shoes in order to rise up and dance on (or at least very near) the tips of her toes solely for the sake of that pleasing aesthetic developed by the famed Italian ballerina Marie Taglioni (Clarke & Crisp 65). The inception of this remarkable enhancement in classical ballet drew its inspiration from a figure exceptionally well-suited to the Romantic imagination—the fairy bride legend—and neither ballet nor the fairy-tale canon would ever be the same.

The Fairy Bride Motif: What Makes a Ballet into a Fairy Tale
Elements of the balletic fairy bride are troublesome to identify because the definition of a fairy bride depends so heavily upon the performances of the ballets which feature her. According to Rahn, “This [fairy bride] motif underwent every possible variation,” most often forming tragic plots marked by poignant loss, but occasionally with a humanizing element that allowed for happier endings. While the circumstances of her development remain somewhat fluctuating and retrospective, the balletic fairy bride is most consistently characterized as a supernatural female who is somehow foiled or doomed in her pursuit of romance—or in a lover’s pursuit of her. The fairy bride’s narrative is often distinguished, or resolved, by separation from her mortal mate due to betrayal, unnatural death, and/or existence in different realms. When ballet brought dance and fairy tale together, the combination consistently emphasized this fairy bride character over and over again to a point that these ballets began to resemble a unique tale type.

Robert A. Georges asserts that “the constructs folklorists call tale type and motif have always been central to their inquiries. From the inception of their discipline, they have focused principally on narratives, identifying as folktales or traditional tales those stories whose tellings over time and/or through space are documentable” (203). Subsequently, Georges’s discussion of the influence of motif and tale type in folkloristics determines that these methods of classification grow out of the way regular people live and talk about their lives. He claims that “the stories people tell are not concrete entities. They are individuals’ idiosyncratic characterizations of ‘happenings’” (206). Thus, we “conceptualize” the stories that we pass along with specific details because that is what “happenings” are—an explicit, therefore specific and detailed, account of “what happened” (206–7). Tale types and motifs account for variation and adaptation as stories are retold, which creates recognizable narratives that scholars can categorize
by the specific details in their content. Focusing on narrative is essential to understanding how a ballet, in contrast with a literary source, qualifies as an original fairy tale.

Fairy-tale narratives are not restricted by tale type nor literary forms, just as a ballet narrative is not restricted by the original libretto. No matter where the inspiration for the ballet came from—be it a Scottish legend (Guest, “The Genesis” 5) or the Tchaikovsky family’s retelling of German folk tales (Homans 282)—its notoriety and the way that we continue to retell the narrative stems from the specific ballet itself. These ballets told unique, but still highly formalized, narratives that were or have become separate from other folkloristic sources, and in a fashion that truly makes these ballets even more qualified for fairy-tale status, we can recognize them by their own motifs.

When applied to literature or the arts, the term *motif* denotes not just a repeated feature or pattern, but a distinctive feature or pattern. According to folklorist Stith Thompson, co-namesake of the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Index of folktale types, “While the term *motif* is used very loosely to include any of the elements going into a traditional tale, it must be remembered that in order to become a real part of tradition an element must have something about it that will make people remember and repeat it. It must be more than commonplace” (753). Thompson exemplifies this concept by contrasting “a mother” with “a cruel mother”: the former being “commonplace” and therefore not qualifying as a motif, while the latter becomes a more likely candidate “because she is at least thought to be unusual” (753). Therefore, motifs deal in the details of a composition whose very “unusualness” make the story memorable and can even dominate or guide the expression of ideas—specific details like a supernatural lost love that help classify a ballet as “fairy bride” versus “living toy” or “folk tale.”
These are three of the most popular motifs in Romantic ballet (Rahn), but the fairy bride motif is of particular interest to the addition of unique narratives to the fairy-tale canon; this motif is significant enough to draw attention to its lack of a fitting ATU identification type. Through this motif we not only get new tales for our canon, but also ballet as the female-centric art form we know today—for it is the fairy brides who were first burdened with the task of embodying Romantic ideals onstage, and in so doing set the standard for a new dimension to the fairy-tale canon’s female paradigm.

**Ballets that Made the Tale**

*La Sylphide*

Fairy bride ballets first swept the stage with Filipo Taglioni’s *La Sylphide* in 1832. Based on the Scottish legend of a fisherman whose wife is swept away by a male sprite, *La Sylphide* reverses the characters’ genders and depicts the travails of a Scottish farmer’s forbidden romance with an ethereal sylph who is doomed to a tragic end by an evil witch. A majority of the ballet’s action involves the farmer, James, pursuing the sylph to no avail; he follows her away from his own home, his own wedding, to her forest realm where he remains grounded by his own mortality, and she flitting just beyond his reach. Though it appears to have a clear origin text in Charles Nodier’s *Trilby, ou le Lutin de Argaïl*, noted dance historian Ivor Guest claims the ballet “was no less original because of this derivation” (“The Genesis” 5). Furthermore, considering the ballet through a folkloristic lens, reversing the genders and romanticizing details of the sylph’s character sets this ballet apart from the legend by placing it within the bounds of a formalistic fairy tale. The narrative actually has less to do with representing the Scottish legend than with using the fairy bride motif to portray the mystical beauty of nature and tragic pursuit of the ideal that so fascinated many Romantics.
For instance, in his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge presents a concept of transformation and development in nature that indicates we have the potential within us to overcome (see Coleridge 328). Speaking of poets, and by extension all artists, Coleridge claims, “they, and they only, can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol, that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar” (328). The symbolism of the transformation of the caterpillar into the air-sylph strikes a pointed chord with not only the imagery, but the aesthetic aims of *La Sylphide*. Previous forms of ballet were more earthbound, achieving mere—though still remarkable—mimicry of magic. In order to achieve the desired ethereal aesthetic of flight, Taglioni moved beyond even the effects of dancing *en pointe* and placed some of his sylph dancers in harnesses attached to wires. These wires allowed the dancers to physically overcome gravity, to literally fly through the air and float above the ground. This transformation of the dance form to accommodate the aesthetic of the story—the wonder of the fairy tale—mirrors the transformation of imagination which Coleridge discusses.

Yet, that transformation still represents even more than artistic imagination. As a fairy tale, this ballet signifies a pivotal moment in dance history and literary canon. According to Kraus & Chapman, “Such devices [suspension wires] were useful not only because of the ethereal roles they played, but as a symbol of the spiritual and exalted role which the Romantic ballet gave to women” (80). These adjectives seem to indicate a role similar to the “Angel in the House,” the popular Victorian image of the perfect, domestic, purified wife. However, for women in Romantic ballet, “spiritual” and “exalted” often had as much, or more, to do with the ballerina’s supernatural and centralized character onstage as with moral superiority and the pedestal of self-sacrificing perfection perpetuated by nineteenth-century gender roles. For
characters like the sylph to add a beneficial dimension to the typical role fairy tale usually gives to women, roles like that which Steven Swann Jones calls the “innocent persecuted heroine” (67), we must consider them from the point of view of Romantic ideology and a significant shift in the ballerina’s influence over her role in the ballet narrative, and even in ballet history.

Dance historians and critics often give Marie Taglioni (1804–1884), the choreographer’s daughter for whom he created the role of the sylph, much credit for dispensing with the spectacular, acrobatic-focused style of eighteenth-century ballet in favor of more airy, otherworldly movement. The role of the sylph in La Sylphide was greatly influenced by the characterization that Marie Taglioni brought to the stage with not only her reputation as an innocent, chaste dancer, but also her innovative style that capitalized on this kind of delicacy and vulnerability. She demonstrated how the Romantic aesthetic might be achieved, and consequently she was the first to portray the iconic image that most modern admirers associate with ballerinas; in the words of dance historian Jennifer Homans, Marie Taglioni was “the pink-tights-and-toe-shoes ballerina of girlish dreams—and feminist nightmares” (135).

In paradoxical contrast to this stereotype, the French libretto for La Sylphide from 1832 depicts the death of the sylph in some thought-provoking dialogue. James wraps his elusive lover in the enchanted scarf that the witch assured him would bind the sylph to the earth instead of the air. The sylph’s wings drop off, a fatal blow to this supernatural creature, and as she lies dying in James’s arms, the libretto supplies her with these words: “in taking away my freedom you have robbed me of my life” (La Sylphide Appendix 2). Though the narrative would ultimately be portrayed wordlessly onstage, these are the words that the librettists gave to the choreographer, who would decide how to have his ballerina bring the sylph to her tragic death at the hands of the one she loved. La Sylphide deviates significantly from its apparent source text, becoming an
original work in itself, in order to place the female in the position to be “robbed” of her freedom. In conjunction with Taglioni’s delicate, vulnerable image, this seems like an unremarkable contribution to the fairy-tale female paradigm, or the mindset with which we observe and analyze female fairy-tale characters in the canon. Yet, the sylph equates her freedom, her control over her own actions, with her life, which is not a typical correlation for a fairy tale to make between power and existence. To canonize the ballet’s narrative as an original fairy tale emphasizes a female fairy-tale character who exists outside the role humanity tries to design for her, without resorting to evil as many female fairy-tale characters often do (see Warner 25).

The female lead in this ballet represents the Romantic ideal: she cannot be brought down into the mortal sphere, she is unattainable, and thus she dies when her mortal lover tries to bring her down to his level. Rather than seeing her as another fairy-tale victim, like Little Red Riding Hood, we now see her as ethereal, utterly romantic, and impossible—above the dull human male striving to achieve more than his condition allows. This inspires us not to see women and romance—or even beauty—in just one way, but as an open-ended inquiry related to the aesthetic experience. Marie Taglioni developed a style to dance a role that a male dancer could not embody; the Romantics extolled vulnerability and tragedy because such a state encourages the ability to see more beauty and elevated emotion in the world, a veritable gift possessed traditionally by women—whom the ballet shows to be flawed and perfected beyond this world, not just victimized.

As the first Romantic ballet and the first of the fairy bride motif, *La Sylphide* set the precedent for how the Romantic imagination could be portrayed through dance (see Rahn); Taglioni’s performance revolutionized the role of the ballerina in that new aesthetic which continues through today. Thus, *La Sylphide* provided the model after which several of the most
treasured works in the ballet repertoire were patterned, particularly the other two most prominent fairy brides, Giselle and Odette.

Giselle

First performed on 28 June 1841, a mere decade after the resounding success of La Sylphide, Giselle became the heir to La Sylphide’s Romantic legacy (Kirstein 150–1). Choreographers Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot brought to life the libretto created by Théophile Gautier and Vernoy de St. Georges for Giselle, ou le Wilis, a tragedy which employs the fairy bride motif to explore love, betrayal, death, and revenge. Betrayed by the lies of her lover, Count Albrecht, the peasant maiden Giselle goes mad and dies a tragic death. She arises as one of the wilis, vengeful spirits of unmarried maidens who dance to death any man that crosses their path. That night as Albrecht comes to mourn at Giselle’s grave, Myrtha, the wili queen, orders Giselle to take her vengeance upon him, but in an act of truly undying love, Giselle pleads for mercy for her lover—guiding him to (temporary) safety and dancing with him until the sun rises and the wilis must all return to their graves.

In keeping with ideals of Romantic transformation, we return to Novalis’s conditions for fairy tales and wonder: “A significant feature of many fairy tales, is that if the impossible becomes possible—then immediately something else impossible also unexpectedly becomes possible—that if man overcomes himself, he simultaneously overcomes Nature—and wonder occurs, granting him the opposite pleasure in the very moment the opposite displeasure becomes pleasurable” (120). By overcoming her heartbreak, and the thirst for revenge that drives the wilis, Giselle achieves this transformation of the displeasurable into the pleasurable. The broken-hearted damsel arises in miserable suspension between life and death, but by forgiving Albrecht and pleading for his life, Giselle’s soul is granted peace in the form of a bed of flowers while the
other *wili* retreat to dark crags and hiding places, doomed to continue on in their perpetual unrest.

Despite the influence of the *wili* figure in its creation, and similar tragedies written for the “madwoman” onstage (Homans 169), *Giselle* contributes a unique narrative to the fairy-tale canon that opens ballet further to the basic fantasy of the fairy tale. Marina Warner describes *Giselle* as an “original dramatic work” that is “essentially [a] fairy tale” (159) and Gautier attributes his creation of the libretto to his fascination with Victor Hugo’s poem “Fantôme” and Heine of the Slavic’s *wili* figure (Homans 166). Since Gautier fell deeply in unrequited love with Carlotta Grisi, the ballerina who premiered as Giselle, she also played no small part in inspiring *Giselle*’s libretto (169) much like Taglioni did for her father in creating the role of the sylph in *La Sylphide*. *Giselle*’s tale of heartbreak and redemption was only created and popularized thanks to the art of dance in its attempt to capture the ethereality of Romantic transformation by overcoming and reaching a higher potential. Once again, a fairy bride ballet creates an original narrative that becomes more than just a “sad story” when we study it as a fairy tale.

Jennifer Homans claims that *Giselle* was “never quite [a] traged[y]” compared to similar productions of the era, since Giselle’s character was “cardboard and there is no moral dilemma at issue” in the ballet (170). However, treating the narrative as a fairy tale and bringing it into conversation with fairy-tale conventions opens up both the narrative and the character to the nuancing benefits of building on a basic fantasy. For instance, the exact conditions of Giselle’s death have long been a point of debate among dance historians, dividing them into two camps: frantic suicide at sword-point or overwhelmed by a broken heart (Smith 68–9). This debate stems from the two different libretti that Gautier wrote, subtle changes in the text rendering monumental disparities in subsequent performances and critical analyses. However, what matters
most to the narrative is that Giselle always dies, regardless of the means, as a result of her reaction to the revelation that Albrecht is *not* a peasant of equal standing with herself, but a count betrothed to a beautiful princess. Giselle’s emotional turmoil over his betrayal drives her into a frantic madness, the very picture of a “damsel in distress” with a delicate constitution—a weak physical heart in addition to her emotional one (Smith 76). Yet the resolution of the narrative in Act II provides a fascinating juxtaposition to the expectations we have of a fairy-tale female trope like the damsel in distress, even to the figure of the “madwoman” in other popular tragedies at the time. While most of society believed that insanity afflicted women primarily because of their natural susceptibility to the shortcoming of “overpowering feelings,” French Romantics such as Gautier viewed this condition as a strength that allowed women “special access to poetry, beauty, and the much-coveted mysteries of the imagination” (Homans 169). This access to imagination and transformation encourage us to build on the base that the ballet narrative lays.

Is a damsel in distress, who died over a broken heart, meant to overcome death not only without the aid of a male character, but rather in spite of him? In this sense, the character gains a complexity through the Romantic point of view and the fairy tale-ness of the narrative that is definitely more than “cardboard,” and not unlike the titular character in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* who also suffered a ghostly fate. When Giselle’s pleas for mercy for Albrecht do not move Myrtha, Giselle knows that she cannot resist the power of the *wili* queen. She begs Albrecht to take refuge behind the cross on her gravestone, a powerful emblem of spiritual protection, while Myrtha’s command forces Giselle to seduce him with dance. Albrecht cannot withstand her seduction for long, and he joins her dance of death until dawn. As a fairy tale, there is no need for the narrative to explicitly explain how Albrecht is miraculously
saved by the return of the sun, but Giselle’s bittersweet farewell from her bed of flowers indicates that her attempt to protect Albrecht stalled the wilis long enough for the sun to send them away. The stark difference between Giselle’s resting place and the retreats of the other wilis suggest that she has earned peace by overcoming the wilis vengeful nature through her own love and strength of character. In some versions, her final act is to bid Albrecht to marry her rival, his royal fiancée.

Giselle may not accurately represent twenty-first century feminist values or ideals—self-sacrifice and domesticity heavily influence her character—but she and the other fairy brides also do not strictly adhere to the oft-disparaged fairy-tale stereotypes, such as the innocent, persecuted heroine or the damsel in distress. They do encourage us to add our own layers of complexity to their basic fantasy in order to fully comprehend their strengths and weaknesses. Romanticism onstage invites audiences to look differently at women and their roles in narrative; Giselle is surrounded by women who represent ill intentions like the witches and wicked stepmothers of the classic fairy tale, yet she is driven to action by positive intentions: love and forgiveness. Inviting the audience to fill in the gaps in the development of narrative and character is one of the strengths of the fairy-tale genre, and presenting females that encourage us to make positive interpretations instead of negative ones, especially amidst other females who carry on the tradition of female-dominated evil like Myrtha and the wilis, gives new breadth and complexity to the female paradigm of the canon.

This type of role provides female characters an alternative to picking up the sword and becoming more like male characters in order to gain power and strength. Giselle’s departure from both the “evil” and “passive” expectations the fairy-tale genre places on women is not just a result of a Romantic aesthetic, but an opportunity to expand our interpretation of female
characters’ representation and value to modern fairy-tale studies. The fairy bride’s staying power has proven itself over the centuries in many forms—including that of arguably the most famous ballet of all time: Swan Lake.

Swan Lake

Despite more than thirty years between their premieres, Swan Lake (Le Lac des Cygnes) functions much the same way as Giselle in its storytelling within the same motif. The Swan Queen Odette awaits her prince, Siegfried, to rescue her from the curse of an evil sorcerer that keeps her imprisoned in the form of a swan. When Siegfried mistakenly pledges his love to Odile, the black swan, Odette is struck down by the betrayal. She forgives him, but ultimately she and Siegfried throw themselves into the lake in order to escape the clutches of the sorcerer. Thanks to this original tale and others featuring “swan maiden” figures, swans have become a great symbol of transformation. Returning once more to his discussion on the Romantic transformation of fairy tales, Novalis concludes, “Perhaps a similar transformation would take place if man began to cherish the affliction in the world. . . . Enthusiasm for illnesses and pain. Death—an intimate union of loving beings” (120). This ballet anthropomorphizes romanticized devotion and tragedy, which trigger physical transformations into and out of the swan form that is subject to the whim of dark magic and emotional anguish. The deaths of Odette and Siegfried unite them as their sacrifice for eternal love destroys the sorcerer, and both their physical and circumstantial transformations are complete.

Swan Lake is an excellent example of what fame and the Romantic movement did for making a new fairy tale out of a ballet. When Swan Lake first premiered at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, Russia, in 1877, it was assumed that the music of famed composer Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky and the choreography of the prolific, though somewhat controversial, Julius
Reisinger would produce a fantastical experience that audiences would adore. In reality, the choreography was considered unremarkable and the narrative too complicated; therefore, *Swan Lake* was a poorly evaluated performance until it was removed from the Moscow repertoire in 1883 (Wiley 60–1). However, in 1895, the ballet premiered again, this time with much better critical reception to the new choreography from Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, as well as a libretto that greatly simplified the story into the version we know today. We expect the black swan’s interference, the prince’s unwitting betrayal, and the tragic, romanticized ending that the restaged version initiated because this version went on to become the primary source of most classical reproductions, including Nicholas Sergeyev’s revival in 1934 and Balanchine’s in 1951 (Kirstein 179).11

So dark and violent is the story this ballet tells that some scholars consider it a tragedy rather than a fairy tale (Homans 286). However, select modern versions provide an alternate “happy” ending in which Siegfried triumphs over the sorcerer and he and Odette, in her human form, are reunited. Adapting dark tales for “happily ever after” in order to appeal more to children is an undisputed hallmark of the modern fairy tale, from whose ranks it would be errant to exclude *Swan Lake*. The simplification of the narrative from 1877 to 1895 highlights the shared features between this ballet and the fairy-tale form, making the story even more suitable for the fairy-tale canon. Though the earliest libretto was authored anonymously, thus no one knows for certain the inspiration for Odette’s tragic romance, *Swan Lake* is only conjectured to have basis in the tale “The Swan’s Pond,” by Johann Karl August Musäus, or possibly elements from some of Richard Wagner’s operas (Wiley 34–7). Some even believe that Tchaikovsky himself may have authored it based on a house ballet12 he wrote for his family, recalled by his niece and nephew (see Wiley 38). Ultimately, the narrative is found to be primarily unique; the
ballet’s enduring fame and familiarity have made it the point of origin for this beloved fairy tale, and made Odette the last of the significant fairy brides.

Odette and her swans are the soul of the *Swan Lake* narrative. Much like Giselle before her, Odette appears surrounded by other female characters who share her plight. Unlike Giselle’s *wilis*, these swans represent support and sympathy, a positive force rather than a negative one. When Odette returns from witnessing Siegfried fall prey to Odile’s trickery, her swan maidens are waiting at the lake for her. They surround her and share in her grief, encouraging her to take comfort in their company and leave her lover’s betrayal behind. The situation seems like any other fairy-tale romance, the delicate heroine falling helplessly at the mercy of the handsome prince who was just duped by an evil entity. However, how this story is told through ballet in this specific era emphasizes the centralized role of the female and encourages us to see more than the delicate heroine in pink tights and a white tutu.

What we must not overlook, concerning not only Marie Taglioni as the sylph or Carlotta Grisi as Giselle but also other ballet starlets and their signature roles, is the inherent centrality of women to the Romantic aesthetic in contrast to the aesthetic of former classical styles. Directly prior to the “Golden Age,” ballet was less the feminine, expressive art form than we may see today that resulted from the trend triggered by *La Sylphide*. By contrast, spectators who attended the ballet during the early to mid-eighteenth century in France and Italy expected a spectacle, an impressive show of athletic ability and dance technique (Homans 138). It follows that even though many of the early ballet stars were female dancers such as Marie Sallé and Françoise Prévost, male dancers were dominant in this type of classical dance because of their strength and acrobatic prowess (Kraus & Chapman 73–4). As Romanticism seeped into the creative minds of Europe, ballet began to desire a new kind of story to tell. Since these stories strived to evoke the
tragic romance and pursuit of the ethereal and unattainable—a beautiful dream that gave respite from the harsh realities that were the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars, and the end of the Age of Reason—the female dancer became more and more prominent due to her ability to dance with increased lightness and delicacy. Male dancers faded into the background, placed in roles which required them to do little more than literally prop up the ballerina during her “brilliant solos” (Kraus & Chapman 80). Essentially, the Romantic aesthetic provoked the art to exchange power for grace, spectacle for sensation, and ballerinas were considered the answer to that indemnity—tending more so than their male counterparts to appear as either “ethereal or thrillingly passionate creatures” (Clarke & Crisp 67). Ballet would henceforth become a “feminized” art, one where women played significant, centralized roles that outshone the men; ballet would now focus on the female dancer in all her glory.14

Odette is one of the most famous roles in all of ballet history, and her representation in relation to other female roles should be significant to the way that we view female characters in the fairy-tale genre. Literary tales cannot portray a female role the same way that a Romantic ballet can: women surrounded constantly by other women, displaying strength and capability in their execution of the choreography, the men standing behind them to enhance their performance. Even if the prince is still the one to stand up to the evil sorcerer, it is difficult to see Siegfried as more important or even more active than Odette because the ballerina who portrayed her was presented in this way as a strong and capable performer, thanks in part to the Romantic imagination and the balletic style of the era.

_Swan Lake_ indicates that the Romantic ballet was still alive and thriving even towards the end of the nineteenth century. As the Romantic Era shifted into the Victorian, the Victorian into the twentieth century, fairy-tale ballets maintained the Romantic aesthetic but moved away from
the fairy bride toward the inspiration of the literary and the folk fairy tale—inspiration that remains strong today. Yet the best known of these ballets are usually obvious adaptations of literary fairy tales, not unique narratives in themselves. It seems that some combination of the fairy bride motif, Romantic imagination, and perhaps even the passing of time itself, possess a key ingredient to creating new fairy tales through ballet and expanding our fairy-tale female paradigm.

The Pointe of Fairy Tale Ballets

The female paradigm is predominantly negative for the typical fairy-tale consumer. Many “classic” fairy tales are often criticized by the masses for perpetuating un-feminist female stereotypes like the “passive heroine” (Haase 37). However, scholars have been debating over the presence, and the consequences, of strong, female fairy-tale characters since the early 1970s (see Haase 15). Since then, feminist criticism of fairy tales has explored the female image, storytellers/women writers, and both popular and critical reception, to name only a few critical categories (see Haase 16–37). In his critical survey of feminist fairy-tale scholarship, Donald Haase advocates for more research devoted to women in fairy tales in other forms of media such as film, video, television, art and illustration. Many interesting studies have emerged in the last two decades within this tradition, and adding ballet to that list has the potential to both emphasize and nuance the female paradigm. Even the history of ballet itself supports this with the “feminization” of the fairy-tale ballerina, a condition which has perpetuated into our own era and demonstrates the staying power of these narratives and the potential influence of the characters in our study of the canon.

Dance historians have also been concerned with how ballerinas are viewed by their own academic studies, as well as by those outside their community. Carol Brown proposes that more
dance histories be written by women in order to combat the image created by those male critics, like Gautier, “who identified themselves as ‘balletomanes’” and have been long considered the authorities on ballet’s “Golden Age” (200). Perhaps providing a space to bring these newer views of dance history together with the fairy-tale female paradigm might open both the academic and the popular communities to a broader view of fairy tales and ballerinas that includes a strong, active role for femininity.

Ballet has been, like fairy tale, faulted for its apparently strict, “overly feminine” image. Plenty of pink, tight bodices, and the overflowing emotion typical of a Romantic ballet does not fit with modern feminist ideals. Case in point, the fairy bride motif depends on a female struggling with a love affair. Dressed in a gauzy tutu and doomed to a tragic end, this is the very incarnation of the dreaded damsel in distress. Curiously, fairy brides like Odette and Giselle perfectly fit the quintessential image by which the general public seems to identify ballet, as if they were responsible for its making; however, the stereotypical fairy brides remain merely an image when they were meant to be a symbol, a foundation upon which to build the embodiment of Romanticism in a feminized art. They are made to be the same kind of basic fantasy that their narratives provide. Hence fairy brides, influenced by the ballerinas who first portrayed and popularized them, can offer women and girls another view of females in fairy tales.

The fairy bride, often surrounded by other females, retains her freedom to choose and her ability to act independent of an evil agenda; even as her tragic situation restricts the options available to her, she can still surprise us with strength and fortitude in the face of an impasse. Were we to study these narratives as unique fairy tales and create an independent discussion for fairy-tale ballet, we might begin to truly grasp the positive nuance that the fairy bride and the ballerina can give to the fairy-tale female paradigm. Ballet fairy tales cannot help but be female-
centric, and this condition may help us look past our stereotypes and use the basic fantasy to make what our current culture needs out of these narratives—such as figuring out how to handle capable, active females by allowing them healthy narrative situations and providing a strong female with a viable alternative to picking up the prince’s sword or joining the evil wilis’ ranks.

Romantic ballet represents an era when the female ballerina reigned. While this discussion of fairy bride ballets is by no means comprehensive, but rather selective, the fairy bride tales that originate from that era represent the same. The prominence and reputation of the ballerina lent that influence to the character she played, often also lending some development to her character that plays with this concept of basic fantasy and imagination. It is Giselle, it is Odette who reigns over her story in a way that the male characters cannot. La Sylphide might appear not to favor this “feminized” condition since the farmer James is still the main protagonist of this ballet, but consider that the sylph herself, the supernatural leading lady of the narrative, is female—which is in opposition to the Scottish legend that inspired the libretto and supplied the primary contribution to the ballet narrative’s separation from that legend. These supernatural females, these fairy brides, may be the symbols of imagination, change, exoticism, and tragedy not just in ballet, but in the fairy-tale canon.

Ballet is still rewriting tales, making enough changes and piecing together enough parts that the new story may very well one day become its own original. Its voice is often wordless, but distinct and powerful. The fairy-tale ballet gave us a new way to experience the reviving of the old and the making of the new; the exquisite combination of the two art forms incarnated onstage the aesthetics and imagination of Romantic thought, forever altering the relationship between dance and wonder. Romantic fairy tale is the stamp by which the masses still identify ballet, and the feminization of that form is just as prevalent now as it was in the nineteenth
century. Happily ever after or far from it, these narratives centralize female characters with the potential for a transformative basic fantasy, achieving the aims of fairy tales the way that Romanticists sought to. The fairy brides died to teach the world about the beauty of tragedy, of imagination and agency; their stories deserve to contribute to our canon and to play their part in nuancing our view of women in fairy tales.
Notes

1. See Marian Smith’s *Dance Chronicle* article “What Killed Giselle?” (1990) for an example of how discrepancies in different published and performed versions can affect our understanding of a ballet narrative.

2. For this study, the ballet narratives have been drawn from secondary documentation of libretti and premiere performances, as well as influenced by summaries of documented historical adaptations and modern performances of adapted choreography retrieved from the NYC Public Library Archives. See notes 6, 9, & 10 for specific sources.

3. French ballet master and choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810) was responsible for ballet reforms in the late 1700s that led to elements which characterize the story ballet, e.g. pantomime, expressing emotion through ballet technique. These reforms paved the way for Romanticism to bring fairy tale and ballet together (see Homans 74–7).

4. Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772–1801), penname Novalis

5. Dance historians often credit Théophile Gautier, famous French poet & dramatic critic, with promoting most prolifically the Romanticization and the “feminization” of ballet in his writings and critiques. Many of the reviews used to trace original performances and the decline of the male dancers’ spotlight in the mid-nineteenth century were created by Gautier (Kraus & Chapman 79).

6. Principal sources for tracing the narrative of *La Sylphide* include summaries & the libretto for *La Sylphide* (translated from French by Marian Smith) in the book *La Sylphide: 1832 and Beyond* (2012).

8. Primary librettist was Adolphe Nourrit, though uncredited for the premiere performance (see Guest, “The Genesis” 7 and La Sylphide Appendix 1).


10. The principal sources for tracing the narrative of *Swan Lake* include the libretti of *Swan Lake* (1877 and 1890 versions) and analysis of primary reception from Roland John Wiley’s *Tchaikovsky’s Ballets* (1985), and summary from Homan’s *Apollo’s Angels*.

11. Most full-length versions of *Swan Lake* now derive from Sergeyev’s choreography (Kirstein 179).

12. House ballets were simple productions performed privately among family and friends, rather than professionally in public.

13. Noverre was first to “fully envision [ballet’s] artistic possibilities” by eliminating restrictive techniques and stage traditions such as obligatory masks for every costume (Kraus & Chapman 75).

14. Critics and audiences became so averse to male dancers that their ranks declined, popularizing *danseuses en travesti*, or women who danced male roles like sailors and soldiers, lending lightness and grace to those characters previously “customarily male” (Kraus & Chapman 81).

15. Introduction to the edition of *Marvels and Tales* that celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of “fairy tale liberation.”
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