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Redirecting the Disney Rants
The Real Angst Fueling the Negative Obsession with Disney Tales

Laura Randle

“We just try to make a good picture. And then the professors come along and tell us what we do.”  – Walt Disney, Time, 1937

The Disney Company, in becoming a monolith symbol of American pop culture, consumerism, and escapism, has earned itself plenty of fans and also plenty of enemies—particularly among folk and fairy tale scholars. They have adopted Disney as a scapegoat for perpetuated economic, ideological, and gender problems in Western culture. Kay Stone, in her influential article, “Things Disney Never Told Us” (1975), complains that Disney dilutes classic fairy tale heroines into docile, character-less puppets of a male world. Since 1995, Jack Zipes has been accusing Disney of being a self-interested, patriarchal pervert who “violates” the purer literary tradition of fairy tales in order to exploit their mass-market appeal (352). Even recent and more accommodating scholars such as Jessica Tiffin, who avoid condemning Disney outright, maintain a consistent tone of lament for the “usurped” tradition of fairy tales (218). With varying degrees of intensity, this lamentation is something most Disney
critics seem to share. Throughout their remarks there is the sense that something precious and pure has been lost; the vehemence with which critics vivisection Disney and his films through historicism, feminism, and other paradigms suggests that this action is emotional as well as academic.

However, most criticism of Disney is inconsistent when it celebrates previous versions of the fairy tales as the “true” or at least “truer” approach to fairy tales (most notably versions from Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm). Disney often approaches fairy tales in ways that only reflect the tropes established by earlier writers, meaning that his is merely an extension of the tradition they already formed. Renewal of issues such as Disney’s editorial right to connect his films to the literary and oral traditions, to alter characters, events, or themes in the tale, and to market the tales towards women and children are common in these critiques. All arguments are ultimately connected to the question of Disney’s authorial legitimacy. This issue is important because authorship of the tales, like ownership, is “ultimately a question of control” (Haase 361). The debate of authorship is ultimately a discussion of who should have control over the tales and who those authors are controlling with the tales. In my estimation, critics and mourners of the Disney legacy are overanalyzing problems with consumerism, chauvinism, and even cultural homogenization but sensing a larger issue that does require attention. At the heart of the problem, the critics are rebelling against the over-consistency of a public that is willing to forget a varied history in favor of a simplified present. Critics are asking: what right does Disney have to portray the tales as he did? And has his influence negatively affected the fairy tale tradition? Without protecting Disney unconditionally, as he has been guilty of self-promotion and some gender stereotyping, I will attempt to defend Disney’s role in preserving fairy tale history. I will dissect the decades of debate over Disney’s films and authorial legitimacy and redirect them towards a more productive discussion about the past and future of fairy tales. Disney’s legacy of fairy tales should not be idolized, but it should not be dismantled either. He has cleared a new space for fairy tale scholarship and discussion that can include the most elite academics and the most simple fans. Disney’s legacy is not perfect, but it is a valuable piece of fairy tale history, and it is invaluable for future fairy tale scholarship.
First Critique: Usurpation of the Literary and Oral Traditions

Many of Disney’s critics are initially peeved with Disney’s fairy tale films because they appropriate the literary and oral traditions to imply that the film is the fairy tale, thus displacing (and encouraging the audience to disregard) many older versions of the tales. Of Walt’s early animated “Puss in Boots,” Zipes says Walt “did not especially care whether one knew the original Perrault text of Puss in Boots or some other popular version. It is also unclear which text he actually knew. However, what is clear is that [Walt] sought to replace all versions with his animated version” (343). Tiffin says likewise, in comparing Dreamworks’ playful parody Shrek to Disney’s adapted fairy tales, that Shrek, “retains a more affectionate and respectful attitude to the genre than does Disney’s wholesale appropriation and mixing” (225). Both of these claims are well argued, but the underlying reverence for “original” fairy tales is misplaced at best (Haase 354). In this respect, both scholars succumb to Haase’s “folk voice” temptation:

Because [folk tales and fairy tales] had their genesis in an oral tradition, we are tempted to imagine their original tellers as simple folk endowed with infallible wisdom and, in some cases, divine inspiration. As consequence of that belief, tampering with the classic texts of Perrault of the Brothers Grimm is considered by some to be tantamount to sacrilege . . . While this religious or quasi-religious reverence is certainly appealing and even reassuring, it is dangerously misleading. (353-4)

While Disney should not be considered with quasi-religious reverence either, but it is a mistake to imply that older versions of the fairy tales should be honored simply because they are old. As closer examination shows, Walt’s films continued Perrault’s and the Grimms’ influence more than he antagonized it. However, part of this critique is true: Walt encouraged his audiences to receive his films as a natural extension of the literary and oral transmission of fairy tales and as a fitting replacement to those tales. Of the thirteen films produced during his lifetime, seven begin with an overt visual anchor into the literary tradition through use of a storybook introduction. To emphasize the importance of this, the book is typically heavily decorated with jewels or gold leaves and sits alone on a pedestal surrounded by velvet curtains and elaborate décor. When the camera approaches, the book opens spontaneously to
reveal illuminated and illustrated pages that frame the story as it comes to life. These techniques link the film to the folk tradition behind fairy tales and also “claim for the film the historical status of literature—[especially] in its association with literacy and education, [which is] higher than that of the oral tale” (Tiffin 185). Thus, the storybook legitimizes the tale by invoking both the invisible hand of the folk and the educated background of the literate upper class. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is an excellent example of this. While many of the other films rely on a narrator to read the text to the audience, Snow White demands literary engagement from the audience before the tale begins by showing the text without including a narrator. By distancing the book from any kind of direct human presence, the film becomes an extension of the book in a literal sense, implying that those watching the film are also participating in the literary experience.

Walt also strives to show roots for the film in oral history by adopting the omniscient fairytale narrator. With only two exceptions, all of Walt’s early, animated features rely on an educated, mature narrator or folk singer to introduce the tale. These narrators function in relation to the oral tradition in similar ways as the storybook with the literary tradition: first, they legitimize the tale by tying it back to the folk; and second, they elevate the tale through association with an educated, sophisticated, and usually European voice. The narrator also forecasts the safe resolution of the tale and tempers the authoritative presence of the storybook. Audiences can feel like they are reading as they watch the pages turn in tandem with narration without actually reading the text. For many, this triggers nostalgic memories of being read to as a child and ties the film to the viewer’s personal history with oral tales. Because nostalgia tends to exert a subtle authority over a person’s feelings towards what is “better” or “worse,” Walt’s nostalgic narrator presence at the beginning of each tale reinforces the feeling that his version of the tale is the best, oldest, and most accurate version of the text even if the viewer knows theoretically that it is not. Of course, since much of Walt’s intended audience was children, their foreknowledge of other fairy tale versions would be limited, thus ensuring that Walt’s version would be accepted as the version of the tale. Additionally, verbal tags such as “Once upon a time,” “legend has it,” and “this story has happened before and will happen again,” assert the folk connection and frame the tale in simple, familiar ways that forecast the predictability of the story and emphasize its age and authority. This comforting and empowering narration combined
with the authoritative and majestic storybook establish Walt’s fairy tale (and fairytalesque) films as part of the respected literary and oral traditions.

In this sense, it’s easy to see evidence for the common complaint that Disney’s name has, in Zipes’s words, “effaced” the names of Hans Christian Anderson, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm (De-Disneyfying). But usurping the literary and oral traditions in order to establish a teller’s own authority and to place the new version of the tale as the version was a common practice among both oral and literary tellers long before Disney. While Disney’s film versions have obscured the referenced tales for many viewers, the older tellers that Zipes and other critics privilege instead are equally (if not more) guilty of the same offense. Perrault, for example, writing amidst women who published fairy tales as a means to advocate gender equality, wrote Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe [Tales of Long Ago with Morals] with a distinctly a-feminist slant. Though his tales were certainly influenced by—and perhaps directly taken from—the women around him, his tales make no attempt to acknowledge their already-established fairy tale authorship (Windling). As an additional insult, he chose to tell his tales through a misshapen old peasant woman, Mother Goose, whom Perrault ironically frames as the originator of fairy tales. Even assuming that Perrault’s claims of collecting the stories from a folk teller are true, he still, like Disney, usurps the authorship of the original stories and replaces them with his own versions, obscuring any traceable line back to a specific teller.

A hundred years later, the Grimms did the same thing as Perrault when they established the fairy tale tradition among the Germanic states. Though they did travel and transcribe many tales from common peasants, their most prolific contributors were aristocratic women who had emigrated from France (and were familiar with Perrault’s tales). Even after they transcribed these tales, the brothers extensively edited and sometimes even wrote their own tales. They then published the tales as originating from the generalized German peasant folk (instead of French expatriates), invoking the authority of the peasants’ oral tradition fairy tales in the Germanic states to legitimize their versions as the versions of the tales. Besides the fact that Walt actually credited other authors for their previous versions of the tales, his method of adopting, adapting, and republishing the tales as his own was already an entrenched tradition for fairy tale tellers.

If the charges against Disney’s “usurpation” of the oral and literary fairy tale traditions are to be taken seriously, then the entire history of folk
and fairy tales must be extensively reexamined to remove any writers or collectors who have misrepresented their claims to tale-telling authority. But this is nonsense. To discard or diminish the tremendous influence of Perrault and the Grimms due to their questionable presentation ethics would be absurd. But this also is not an issue that should discredit Disney’s versions of the tales. The traditional invocation of the folk voice is part of the fairy tale tradition; thus, Walt’s decision to continue this tradition should not be viewed as scandalous or unexpected. If anything, Walt’s decision to anchor his films in the literary and oral traditions, and the subsequent popularity of those films, has initiated the emergence of a new “folk” through whom fairy tales will be passed and retold in the future. This presents many exciting possibilities for future fairy tale scholarship.

Second Critique: Marginalized Female Voice

Disney’s characterizations of women are a popular sore spot for both professional and casual critics. Because Walt’s characterizations highlight passive and attractive or aggressive and ugly female characters, he is often villainized as a patriarchal chauvinist who is responsible for perpetuating unrealistic and unhealthy expectations of women and also a destroyer of older portrayals of dynamic fairy tale women. This criticism has some basis, but it is often used to reach hypocritical, dead-end conclusions about what it means for the future of fairy tales. To adequately examine the accusations together, they first must be taken apart.

The claim that Walt’s films perpetuate unhealthy and unrealistic expectations for women is usually based on two elements: first, the relative inactivity of heroines as compared to the male figures idolizes females as objects; and second, the dramatized conflict between beautiful young women, and older more aggressive matriarchs vilifies age, ambition, and intellect in women. Acknowledging the literary precedent for passive heroines in the Grimms’ tales as “uninspiring,” Kay Stone calls Disney’s heroines by comparison, “barely alive” (“What Disney Never” 44). To her, Disney is uniquely to blame for both emphasizing the passive heroine and “shift[ing] the delicate balance of the traditional tales” to be about romance rather than self-discovery (Someday 34). Zipes addresses the same issues (the passive woman and the aggressive matriarch) in complaining of the outdated “patriarchal notions” that Disney films resurrect
and reinforce (348). Both Stone and Zipes also show preference for older male fairy tale authors such as Perrault and the Grimms.

Both critiques and those like them are flawed. Like the tradition of assuming the oral and literary traditions, the passive-woman stereotype and the marriage-motivated ending were already strong themes in fairy tale texts. Also, the films’ wild popularity domestically and internationally implies a high degree of receptivity for such themes already (i.e. these ideas were not being force-fed to a proactive feminist public—the public was already receptive to such ideas). Additionally, Walt grew up hearing passive-heroine fairy tales in the time after WWI that reasserted conservative, traditional gender roles in an attempt to reestablish previous societal norms. It is likely that he thought that his films asserted women’s individuality as caring, moral individuals rather than sex objects, as was common in the early days of animation. Modern disappointment that Walt did not create more proactive female role models for women living in the latter half of the century is unreasonable. Moreover, Disney films since Walt’s death have featured progressively more proactive and independent female characters that consistently find public acceptance. These recent films with more powerful heroines, however, do not fit as well into the history of fairy tale literature as Walt was referencing, nor do they reflect well the values and stereotypes that saturated his home.

Still, the issue of appropriate female representation in fairy tales is an important issue for fairy tale scholars and should not be dismissed based on the popularity of current stereotypes. But in order to adequately address gender misrepresentation, scholars and critics will need to go farther than Perrault and the Grimms and back to the time when women were also fairy tale authors and not just puppets for male authors. By addressing the issue of female authorship instead of lamenting older male-centric tales, critics would also resolve their second complaint: how Walt has destroyed or corrupted the dynamic female heroines of “original” fairy tales.

At the end of the seventeenth century, we find the first written fairy tale texts and they were written by a woman. Marie d’Aulnoy wrote fairy tales for her French salons and transcribed many of them in her collection Les Contes de Fées (“The Fairy Tales”). Her tales are rich with dynamic, proactive, and politically volatile female characters. Through her characters, d’Aulnoy shows her dissatisfaction with women’s roles by casting powerful, confident women in heroic roles. The tales were meant to entertain her salons and to vent her political and social frustrations with other women who felt similarly (Windling). As
Critic Anne Duggan analyzes in d’Aulnoy’s “The Bee and the Orange Tree,” the tales also attempt to equalize gender positions by redefining the “natural” role of women as an intellectual, emotional, and physical partner to man. Though Stone’s feminist critique of Disney fairy tales decries marriage’s “moralistic” role in fairy tales (37), d’Aulnoy (who could be considered the original fairy tale feminist) and her fellow salonnières “argued particularly for love, tenderness, and intellectual compatibility with the sexes” (Windling). In this respect, Disney’s renditions are closer to the original fairy tale tradition (from women) than to the later male-centric tradition because they emphasize each heroine’s individuality, her preference in suitors, and her romantic involvement. Often, Walt’s heroines (though less physically active) eclipse the Princes in character dimension, and they are always allowed to show personal preference for her suitor.10

Because d’Aulnoy was a woman and because her representations of women in fairy tales were uncomfortable for members of the educated male elite, her tales were forgotten in favor of her male contemporary, Perrault.11 In addition to being an educated man and therefore more socially acceptable for publication, Perrault also revised the role of fairy tale heroine to be less assertive, more subservient, and more willing to be objectified than the women of d’Aulnoy’s tales. Both d’Aulnoy and Perrault use marriage as a final goal for their characters, but there is a marked difference in the quality of the female-male partnerships of d’Aulnoy and the prize-like marriages of Perrault. In analyzing the broader context of female representation by female authors and female representation by male authors, we see that Walt’s representations of women and marriage actually seem closer to the original female protagonists of fairy tales than Perrault’s objectified heroines.

Ironically, it is Perrault and the Grimms (who followed Perrault’s authorial example) that Walt credits in his films, and it is to this tradition of male-centric storytelling that he attempts to align himself. Although his female characters may have been more proactive and independent than the characters from male fairy tale predecessors, Walt’s films are still heavily aligned with the male-centric fairy tale tradition. Of his films, only Cinderella features a female narrator. Of those produced after his death, all but a few in recent years have featured male narrators, singers, or characters to introduce the stories.12 (Not coincidentally, the shift back towards female narration has paralleled Disney’s changing criteria for heroines. As the company adapts to incorporate more of the female voice, the heroines become more diverse and complex.) This
involvement or absence of women’s authorial legacy in the tales has earned Walt and the Disney Company many scathing reviews, but it is consistent with the history of male fairy tale authorship as established by Perrault and the Grimms. This living paradox in Walt and the Disney Company’s films seems to be what many critics sense when they seethe at Disney’s misrepresentations of women. To be sure, attention to details such as these has helped motivate more careful attention to female character development in Disney films. However, to celebrate the Grimms or Perrault as better or more female-friendly is hypocritical. Older forms of sexism are still sexist.

Criticism of Disney’s fairy tale heroines can and should lead to a productive reexamination of women in fairy tale history. Because many women recognize the one-dimensionality of Disney’s heroines and because questioning Disney’s perspective would not delegitimize would-be fairy tale feminist scholars (as questioning the authority of the Grimms or Perrault might do), Disney’s portrayals of women could actually spur a greater interest and greater effort to rediscover the role of women in fairy tale history. Their role in the creation, transmission, and popularization of fairy tales is still largely unknown. Disney’s films, however, have introduced thousands of women to question the role of women in fairy tales, the appropriateness of marriage as a goal, and the future portrayal of female fairy tale characters. If these criticisms are used as a basis for investigating women in fairy tales instead of a lamentation for the older (but still male-centric) fairy tale tradition, the landscape of fairy tale scholarship could change completely, creating a new and more complex context in which to study fairy tales in the future.

Third Critique: Fairy Tales for Children

Perhaps the least acknowledged complaint against Walt is his decision to cater his films to children (and the company has mostly continued this tradition). Because authorship is essentially an issue of control and because children are the most impressionable audience, criticism of Disney fairy tales is often a complaint about Disney’s control over the upcoming generation. This claim receives the least specific attention, but it is at the heart of critics’ contention against Disney authorship of fairy tales. This is why, in 1995, Zipes describes Disney’s influence as “a stranglehold,” a “violation,” and an “attack.” This rape-associated language is common for vehement Disney critics and it shows that
their abhorrence for Disney is rooted in his and the company’s control over the tales and their young audiences.13 Gentler critics such as Tiffin similarly criticize Disney’s “appropriation of childhood innocence” and see this decision as a product of shallow corporate goals (207).

In an attempt to weaken Disney’s credibility with fairy tales and young audiences, fairy tales’ adult-based past is often emphasized to the extreme. Zipes, in addressing a college audience in 2010, claims that “fairy tales never originated for children. Adults told tales to communicate important information and metaphor was highly significant in disseminating knowledge. Fairy tale was never, never a genre for children.” While his statement about adults may be true to some extent, both declamations about children are emphatically false. Such unequivocal emphasis casts severe doubt on his entire perception of the issue. Firstly, little to nothing can be declared in absolutes about oral culture before fairy tale publication; and secondly, from the records of fairy tales that are accessible to modern scholars, it is clear that the connection between children and fairy tales has been assumed from the beginning. Though all tales may not have been intended for children, Perrault’s invocation of “mothers and children,” Villiers’ attempts to infantilize fairy tales based on children’s interest in them, the Grimms titular reference to “Kinder,”14 and even the child-centric illustrations that accompanied fairy tale anthologies from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries prove the longstanding and widespread connection between children and fairy tales.15 Walt’s departure from the overall fairy tale tradition was not his decision to market his films to children but to cater primarily to children. Instead of framing or editing the tales as adult entertainment that was also appropriate for children as the Grimms did, Walt recast the tales to be especially for children. Combined with the accessibility of his medium and the modern ease of dissemination, this decision gave him unprecedented power over child audiences.

Though an association with children was not new for fairy tales, this is certainly the area in which Walt differed most dramatically from his literary (and film) predecessors. Usually, critics blame this on Walt’s supposedly greedy designs to exploit an untapped market. While this may be a prime reason for the Disney Company’s decision to continue catering to the children’s market, for Walt it was almost certainly not a money-motivated decision. His films consistently drove the company to the brink of bankruptcy as he challenged the artistic, technical, and storytelling abilities of his employees. Even after the company began gaining popular attention, Walt continued to spend lavishly in
order to create the most technologically and artistically elaborate films that he could. From this behavior as well as his other statements and attitudes about children and his fascination with fairy and folk lore, it is clear that Walt's decision to cater especially to younger audiences came from a combination of his personal identification with their needs and desires in a modern world and his recognition of the fairy tale as a historically child-inclusive medium. His resounding and sustained success in this area also shows that Walt's ability to associate and empathize with children differentiated him from competitors who harbored greater interest in only the financial potential of the market.

Conclusion: A New Future for Fairy Tales

Regardless of the fairy tale's origin, Walt and the Disney Company's success granted his tales incredible influence over upcoming generations. For decades now, children have identified and resonated with Disney films, grown up, and passed on their affection to their own children. With new releases consistently coming from the Disney Company, this multi-generational soft-spot for Disney has unified Western cultures’—especially America’s—perception of fairy and folk tales. Few children in America today are unfamiliar with the Disney fairy tales and even those who do not remember specifics of the films, or perhaps have not even seen the films, recognize Disney’s characters and stories. This is an astonishing and fascinating development in the history of a medium that has been historically so fractured and diverse.

More than any other single factor, I believe Disney’s critics are rebelling against the idea that all fairy tales and folklore can be simplified into neat, one-and-a-half hour, mass-market appropriate films. Critics are anxious over the public’s willingness to forget the rich complexity of fairy tales and their messy past because it signifies the public's willingness to be controlled by recent history. They see Disney as a threat to fairy tales’ history and their influence. But in trying to discredit Walt and his Company, they also overlook one of the most amazing phenomena of fairy tale history: where in the past a unified folk was a myth, today it is a reality. Most of the Western world is familiar with the fairy and folk tale legacy left by Disney. While the authenticity of this legacy is debatable, it is also a ready frame for discussing and studying fairy tales that no other body of scholars in history has enjoyed. Instead of attacking Disney in an attempt to dislodge his influence from the fairy tale, critics might consider
using Disney as a platform to introduce a broader perspective on the tales and their modern applications. If history’s treatment of Perrault and the Grimms is any indication, it is evident that the transmission of fairy and folk tales defies the common rules of ownership and criticism. Massively popular figures such as these are not defamed by minor critics, nor is their influence diminished by copycat competitors—they are only succeeded by the next adapter of the stories. Disney’s influence on fairy tales has left permanent marks, but like all marks on history (including fairy tales) they can be recast and adapted as needs change. The challenge for current fairy tale scholars is not to overcome the Disney influence but to direct it towards the next phase in fairy tale development.
1. To avoid confusion, from this point on I will use “Walt” to mean specifically the man and “Disney” to mean the Walt Disney Company or the man as combined with his company.

2. *Shrek*, a tongue-in-cheek fairytale mash-up that inverts fairy tale tropes even as it fulfills them, was produced by Disney’s rival, Dreamworks Animation Studios, in 2001. It represents one of the more successful attempts at challenging the Disney Co.’s authorial monopoly on fairy tales.

3. I consider here only narrative-based animated films, not hybrids of live-action and animation such as *Mary Poppins*; although, the tropes I discuss often appear in Walt’s other films as well.

4. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

5. Mother Goose as an actual goose is a modern interpretation of the name. For Perrault, this was a nickname for old peasant women whose voices were cracked with age and storytelling and who occasionally “honked” like geese when they spoke.


7. The Fleischer Brothers’ many short films featuring Betty Boop included all of the passivity of Walt’s Snow White while also objectifying her as a mere body. In the Fleischers’ 1933 short film version of *Snow White* featuring Betty, there is no indication that Betty has a single sentient thought. Her sole role is to make cooing sounds of distress or pleasure and to walk or lie prettily in view of the camera.

8. *Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid, Pocahontas, The Huchback of Notre Dame* all feature markedly more unique and confident women (See Zarranz’s “Diswomen Strike Back”). Though hardly the cutting edge of feminist activism, Disney films continue to develop their treatment of complex heroines through *Enchanted, The Princess and the Frog, Tangled, Frozen,* and Disney-Pixar’s *Brave.*

9. Her collection predates Perrault’s of the same year (Windling). Her volume also appears to be the first place where such stories are named “Fairy Tales.”

10. Princesses Snow White, Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*), and Cinderella all exhibit more intellectual dimension than their princes.

11. The educated male elite included critics such as Abbé de Villiers who publicly ridiculed d’Aulnoy and other women authors as “ignorant,” “talentless,” and childish in his essay “Conversations on Fairy Tales and Other Contemporary Works, To Protect against Bad Taste” (294, 296, 310).

13. Maria Jones, for example, describes Disney as “damaging[ing] fairy tales as we know them,” “strip[ping] fairy tales of their meaning,” and “violating the sanctity of [the] tales.”

14. *Kinder und Hausmärchen*: the Grimms consistently used title meaning “Children’s and Household Tales.”

15. The frontispiece to Charles Perrault’s 1697 collection, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe*, featured a quaint fireside scene of an old woman, most likely a servant, surrounded by young children. A sign on the wall directly behind the woman and visually connected to her by her spinning spindle reads: “Mother Goose Tales.” With a few minor alterations to scenery and the woman, the old peasant woman surrounded by children (and sometimes mixed with other adults) became the symbol for the Grimms’ collection and other fairy tale anthologies as well.
Works Cited


