

“Mirror, Mirror on the wall / Who Is the Freest of Them All?”: portrayals of Princesses in Grimms’ Fairy Tales and Contemporary Children’s Literature¹

Espelho meu, espelho meu, há alguém mais livre do que eu?": retratos de princesas nos contos dos irmãos Grimm e na literatura contemporânea para crianças

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Abstract. The Brothers Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* seems to have promoted patriarchal bourgeois values as part of the socialization process in the nineteenth century, modelling children’s gender identity and behaviour over time. Taking into account, under the hegemonic representations of gender, that female identity becomes associated with a set of values and behaviours, this article presents an analysis of some portrayals of princesses in contemporary children’s literature published in Portugal, by relating those portrayals with two well-known Grimms’ fairy tales: “Little Snow-White” and “Little Briar-Rose”. Our aim is to find out in what ways those images of princesses of the twenty-first century are substantially different from those conveyed by Grimms’ fairy tales, analysing their emancipatory potential. Finally, we wish to apprehend which ideologies underpin those portrayals and to verify if they effectively lead to a new world vision by depicting women as real free human beings.

Resumo. Os *Contos da Criança e do Lar*, dos Irmãos Grimm, parecem ter estado ao serviço da promoção de valores patriarcais e da socialização das crianças, modelando a sua identidade e comportamento ao longo dos tempos. Considerando que, no âmbito das representações hegemónicas de género, a identidade feminina surge associada a um conjunto de valores e condutas, visa-se analisar as representações de princesas em alguns contos de potencial recepção infantil, relacionando esses retratos com as protagonistas de dois dos contos mais conhecidos dos Grimm: “Branca de Neve” e “A Bela Adormecida”. O nosso objectivo principal é descobrir de que forma essas figurações de princesas do século XXI são substancialmente diferentes das transmitidas pelos contos de fadas, analisando o seu potencial emancipatório. Finalmente, pretende-se compreender quais as ideologias que sustentam essas representações e verificar se estas efectivamente veiculam uma nova visão de mundo, representando as mulheres como seres humanos verdadeiramente livres.

Keywords: *Fairy tales; Children’s literature; Social roles; Gender identity; Princesses.*

Palavras-chave: *Contos de fadas; Literatura Infantil; Papéis Sociais; Género; Princesas.*

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1 - Introduction

Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, first published in 1812, have a "historical function within a socialisation process which forms taste, mores, values, and habits" (Zipes, 1986: 2), and have exercised a deep influence on children and adults at least since then all over the world. In fact, *Grimms' Tales* seem to have promoted patriarchal bourgeois values as part of the socialization process in the nineteenth century (Zipes, 1986; Zipes, 1988; Tatar, 1987; Bottigheimer, 1987; Bacchilega, 1997). These narratives, as believed by feminist critics, "contained sexist and racist attitudes and served a socialisation process which placed great emphasis on passivity, industry and self-sacrifice for girls and on activity, competition and accumulation of wealth for boys" (Zipes, 1988: 46) modelling children's gender identity and behaviour over time.

Despite being a controversial issue, several scholars have analysed the role of fairy tale in a context of sociocultural discourse about gender, namely scholarly research explicitly devoted to feminist issues in fairy tales in the 1970s. Feminist criticism "was principally concerned with the genre's representation of the gender identity and behaviour of children in particular" and its consequences for children's education (Haase, 2004: 3). According to feminist research, fairy tales present "dependent and hard-working girls" (Bacchilega, 1997: 6) and characterize women as "míticas, inexpresivas, ocupadas únicamente en su propia belleza, decididamente ineptas e incapaces de nada" (Belotti 1980, as cited by Colomer, 1998: 54). Thus, those narratives which continue to play an important role in the production of gender all over the world and over the centuries offer "narrow and damaging role-models for young readers" (Stone, 1987, as cited by Bacchilega, 1997: 9). From a feminist approach, fairy tales have not only been considered to serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles, but also to form female attitudes towards the self, men, marriage and society (Rowe, 1986), since these tales present "a picture of social roles, behavior, and psychology" (Lieberman, 1972: 384).

Children are socialized or culturally conditioned by film, television programmes, and also by the stories they read or hear and, therefore, we should be concerned about how gender roles portrayed in tales affect the development of children (Lieberman, 1972; Münder, 2002). Since most children grow up listening to and reading fairy tales, and through these tales they "learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances" (Lieberman, 1972: 385), it is important, from a feminist approach, to analyze the impact that those narratives can still have, especially on young girls.

Female representations in fairy tales constitute a social control mechanism with a very specific goal: a civilizational-pedagogic project for children, especially girls, as Silvestre (2011) highlighted. In the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, women are often portrayed

in ways that seem stifling by today's standards (Münder, 2002), however this situation, according to this author, does not mean that the Brothers Grimm disrespected women, but their depiction reflected their traditional views. Indeed, Münder (2002:11) questions if "the female characters the Brothers Grimm depicted were based on the standards of bourgeois Germany or if the brothers wanted to encourage an idealized female model they thought for which their society should strive".

Bettelheim (2003) takes a psychoanalytical approach to those narratives and contests the fact that some scholars point out that fairy tales present sexual stereotyping. According to this author, both the male and the female heroes are projections of two different figures of two aspects (artificially) separated by the same process which everyone must undergo during growth. He also affirms that children know that, whatever the sex, the story refers to their own problems. However, Bottigheimer (1987: 168) emphasizes that Grimms' Tales effectively present a consistent vision of gender differences and that "a pattern of radically different moral expectations for girls and for boys" emerges from the tales.

Taking into account, under the hegemonic representations of gender, that female identity becomes associated with a set of values and behaviours, we intend to analyse and compare portrayals of princesses in Grimms' tales and contemporary Portuguese children's literature. By analysing the way characters are constructed in "Little Snow-White" and "Little Briar-Rose", from Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* and *A Princesa que queria ser rei*² (Monteiro, 2007), *A Princesa baixinha*³ (Masimi, 2003) and *A Princesa da Chuva*⁴ (Soares, 2007), our aim is to find out in what ways those images of princesses of the twenty-first century are substantially different from those conveyed by Grimms' tales, analysing their emancipatory potential. Finally, we wish to find out which ideologies underpin those portrayals and to verify if they effectively lead to a new world vision by depicting women as real free human beings.

2 - The princesses of Grimms' tales and contemporary children's literature: the power of beauty, the power of speech and the power of freedom

Our aim in this paper, therefore, is to analyse portrayals of princesses in Grimms' tales and contemporary children's literature, based on three elements that, from our point of view, shape the characters and allow us to understand their relationship with men and to realize their place in the world: beauty, speech and freedom. According to Münder (2002: 37),

² *The Princess Who Wanted to Be King.*

³ *The Short Princess.*

⁴ *The Rain Princess.*

women in fairy tales may belong to two categories: the good, meaning beautiful, naïve, and virtuous women who are also passive and weak, or to the wicked and ugly women who not only do unkind things but are also strong and act on their own behalf and not according to patriarchal standards.

The Grimms' Princesses addressed in this paper, Snow-White ("Little Snow-White") and Briar-Rose ("Little Briar-Rose"), belong to the first category: they are both beautiful girls. Snow-White was even more beautiful than the queen, "she was as beautiful as the day⁵" and her beauty is the motive for great admiration by men (the huntsman, the seven dwarfs and the prince), and the object of envy by women (her stepmother). Briar-Rose was also such a very pretty girl that her father was full of joy and the King's son was also motivated to get through the thorny hedge. She was so beautiful that, when the prince finds this lovely princess asleep, "he could not turn his eyes away".

In fairy tales, feminine beauty is considered one of the greatest values of female subjects, since "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" (Lieberman, 1972: 385). As Lieberman (1972: 386) also sustains, "the immediate and predictable result of being beautiful is being chosen [...] The beautiful girl does not have to do anything to merit being chosen", so that beauty is the main factor contributing to the passivity of most female characters, according to this author.

The Princess in the book *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) was not the girl their parents were expecting. Since she was born, she was different from other children: she was very hairy and everybody was astonished at her appearance. Black eyes, long, very long hair, and an extraordinary child who did not do what girls were supposed to and what princesses usually do: she did not learn to play the piano, to embroider or to stay by the window waiting for her destiny. People, including the queen, thought that the princess was ugly, and the king considered her rather unfeminine (children usually called her "Horse" princesses) but the Princess fascinated everybody who looked at her. According to the narrator, this fascination occurred because she was extremely pretty, with a unique beauty, which was wild and closer to nature, much more feminine than other girls, despite her dark skin, bushy eyebrows, long eyelashes, fuzzy and unruly hair and hairy legs.

A Princesa baixinha (Masimi, 2003) and *A Princesa da Chuva* (Soares, 2007) are both pretty and kind princesses, but the former is a short princess (height is indicated by people of her kingdom as an attribute to be a real princess, as well as elegance) and whenever the latter is, the rain begins to pour down, because of the spell a fairy cast on her, as

⁵ Translations by Margaret Hunt in *Household Tales by the Brothers Grimm*, 1884.

revenge for urinating in her lap. So, these princesses are not physically perfect girls such as those presented in traditional fairy tales, namely in *Little Snow-White* and *Little Briar-Rose*, and the patterns of beauty presented are diverse.

Regarding the voice of women in fairy tales, we note that they are not generally allowed to speak up or give their opinion. In fact, in a patriarchal society, women are expected to be subservient. As a subversive power which leads women to a real and complete existence, i.e. as an instrument of affirmation of identity and personal will, the power of speech is not valued in female characters. Snow-White is sent into the forest and after being poisoned, she lies in silence in her glass coffin waiting for a brave prince to awaken and save her. Briar-Rose sleeps for a hundred years waiting for a prince who will rescue her. According to Bacchilega (1997: 35), “Snow-White rarely has a voice of her own, and when she does speak, she merely accepts things as they are”, namely the role of a housemaid proposed by the dwarfs – “The dwarfs said, ‘If you will take care of our house, cook, make the beds, wash, sew, and knit, and if you will keep everything neat and clean, you can stay with us and you shall want for nothing.’ ‘Yes,’ said Snow-white, ‘with all my heart,’ and she stayed with them”. In *Grimms’ Tales*, silence is almost exclusively female; we witnessed the persistent denial of the female voice, as speech is only allowed to those who dominate the world (Bacchilega, 1997).

In the contemporary tales analysed in this paper, princesses have their own voices and their own wills. *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) is not a silent (or silenced) girl, quite the contrary. From the beginning of the action, this girl not only does what she wants but also expresses her thoughts aloud. These attitudes shocked her parents and the king thinks that she is too authoritative. Indeed, aged thirteen, the Princess shows a willingness to assume the Kingdom at sixteen, demanding her right to become “King” (not “Queen”), a boy’s legacy and a gender-oriented word. Endowed with a strong personality, she is not submissive and she believes in her strength and despises laws and traditions: she contests her father; she thinks that she is more capable of keeping order than the king; she effectively struggles for justice and for her place on the throne and in society. *A Princesa baixinha* (Masimi, 2003) and *A Princesa da Chuva* (Soares, 2007), as active girls, make their own decisions too and do not correspond to the “model” of *Grimms’* princesses. Both of them have the power to speak, they do not allow themselves to be silenced and they do not keep quiet, demanding their freedom to exist through speech as real human beings.

The way those princesses make their own choices is substantially different from what occurred in *Grimms’ Tales*. Snow-White and Briar-Rose marry the prince that rescued them; they were chosen and they do not contest their destiny. Marriage is their reward, even if they were not allowed to select their partner. As Lieberman (1972: 386) stresses, “Marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it is the reward

for girls” and those narratives “transmit clear warnings to rebellious females: resistance to the cultural imperative to wed constitutes so severe a threat to the social fabric that they will be compelled to submit.” (Rowe, 1986: 217). In Grimms’ Tales, disobedience of heroines is punished. As Bacchilega (1997: 94) underlines:

Obedience is necessary for females but not for males. Girls and women are regularly punished in Grimms’ Tales and the punishment itself often seems to take precedence over the transgression that is supposed to have occasioned it, as an apparent inner drive to incriminate females. At the same time, the text systematically exonerates males from guilt and repeatedly returns them to customary and acceptable paths.

Rowe (1986: 218) stresses that “romantic tales effectively sabotage female assertiveness. By punishing exhibitions of feminine force, tales admonish moreover, that any disruptive non-conformity will result in annihilation or social ostracism” and so readers promptly relate themselves to the beautiful and passive protagonist, since their submission to patriarchal rules is always rewarded, leading them to happiness.

The princesses we meet in these contemporary children’s books are very active critical-thinking girls who make decisions even if they are not approved of by parents or society. *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) does not attend dances and does not want to marry, even if it is her parents’ wish. The Queen shows the princess some photos of handsome princes, but the princess stands firm in her decision. The princess does not obey her parents or accept traditions or what she considers as unreasonable laws and in the end she is recognized for her initiative and courageous actions.

In *A Princesa baixinha* (Masimi, 2003) marriage does not appear as an important subject through the story; the narrative highlights the brave actions of the Princess: she decides to do important things and so she makes a journey and faces a dragon, unties bags of flour for a starving village, fights a flock of condors, improves the lives of people in the villages throughout her journey. This issue seems to be the central action of this story, a metaphor of an interior journey that shows this princess and others that, despite her height, she is capable of doing great and marvellous things and make a difference in the lives of others.

A Princesa da Chuva (Soares, 2007) is a very active princess too, as she travels all over the country and, through the rain, enhances the lives of everybody. She decides to run away from home because she realizes that her presence in the palace has ruined everybody’s life: as the King has given all the jewellery and the money to the fairies (they required it in order to bless the little princess) and her presence seemed to attract rain, the development of the kingdom was impaired. Her mother says that with the type of life

she leads, and the fact that it is always raining in her presence, it will be very difficult to find a groom, but the princess seems very pleased with her life and her projects and she does not mention marriage as a primary goal.

After her father denied her the possibility of becoming a King, ordering her to prove she is better than a man, the princess in *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) runs away from the palace and becomes a soldier, fighting in battles, leading the army and, a few years later, saving the kingdom in which her parents live and that had been attacked by enemies. She became a woman warrior, living the life she wants, fighting not only men in the army, but social barriers and cultural prejudices from a male-controlled society.

It is important to notice that heroines from *Grimms' Tales* are not portrayed as real free human beings, because they are expected to obey their parents, traditions, the law, social rules and, in brief, patriarchal ideologies that constrict girls' lives more than a corset and indicate the stipulated way ahead.

3 - Conclusions

In general, heroines in *Grimms' Tales* are meek, passive, submissive and helpless (Lieberman, 1972; Münder, 2002; Bacchilega, 1987) and "just like the women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the women in fairy tales have no chance to live an independent life. They either marry a prince or a king and are thus silenced, or they are punished for taking action" (Münder, 2002: 13). As Lieberman highlights (1972: 384):

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 are undoubtedly played as 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 chance of success in various endeavors.

Rowe (1986: 210) points out that "These tales which glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity". In fact, those narratives value obedience and passivity and the heroines were rewarded, as we have noticed, by marriage with a rich prince who makes these girls happy ever after. So, the girl's function is constrained to activities related to household work (when Snow-White arrives at the dwarfs' house, they accept her if she keeps the house clean, cooks, makes beds, washes, sews, knits, keeps everything clean and orderly) and to maternity, as well.

As Lieberman (1972: 393) emphasizes, active resourceful girls are in fact rare in fairy tales, which

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 have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive.

In the contemporary books we are analysing in this paper, the portrayals of princesses are very different from in *Grimms' Tales*, revealing some sociocultural changes and, mainly, contributing to the questioning of gender stereotypes that, unfortunately, remain in current society. Those gender stereotypes encompass characteristics such as “physical appearance, attitudes, physical abilities, interests, occupations, and serve to rightly guide boys and girls on their path to adulthood” (Salgado, 2008: 47).

In fact, *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) especially subverts the traditional role assigned to women in fairy tales and questions the hegemonic gender characteristics, the traditional and preconceived roles of men and women, and their place in society. Throughout the story the Queen and the King question what is feminine or masculine with some irony. They think that the princess is not like other girls, because she is not obedient or submissive, she is very proud, assertive, active, curious, ambitious, self-reliant and independent; she fights for her dreams, she has organizational skills, she is hairy... Although the Queen thinks that her daughter is not feminine because from her point of view qualities outside of their sex are faults, the King questions the traditional and sexist attributes and conveys a world view in which the qualities may belong to both sexes. Lieberman (1972: 395) stresses that since tales served as some sort of “training manuals” for girls, “the classical attributes of ‘femininity’ found in these stories are in fact imprinted on children and reinforced by the stories themselves”, giving us an insight into the origins of psycho-sexual identity.

These contemporary children's books, as we have noticed, present a pattern of beauty that encompasses more than the physical characteristics as was conveyed in traditional fairy tales. They present woman as a complex and multi-faceted human being, enhancing her character traits, such as strength, determination, courage and humanity. Those stories reveal active princesses who contribute to higher levels of wellbeing for the society in which they live: *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) freed the kingdom from the enemy army; *A Princesa baixinha* (Masimi, 2003) liberated villages from scary animals and fed hungry people, and *A Princesa da Chuva* (Soares, 2007) turned the spell into a gift, travelling around the kingdom, providing development, wealth and happiness to people. The princesses are not punished for their actions, but recognized and admired by the kings and the community. In fact, *A Princesa baixinha* (Masimi, 2003)

is considered more courageous than a hundred knights and even braver than her heroic grandfather; *A Princesa da Chuva* (Soares, 2007), an independent and modern girl, in her mother's words, won everybody's admiration when she set the interests of the kingdom and the welfare of the people as a priority in her life; people who discriminate against the princess in *A Princesa que queria ser rei*, (Monteiro, 2007) because of her physical characteristics and her way of life, were so amazed looking at the warrior and saviour princess who freed the kingdom that they did not even lower their heads.

It is worth noticing, as Münder (2002) underlines, that the effect of fairy tales is still present in today's societies. In fact, if we look around, we find traces of these old role models: little girls are called "princess" by their parents, they wear pink clothes with the imprint "Princess"; in "chick lit", adolescent characters dream of finding a "prince" and living happily ever after (Tomé & Bastos, 2011); real princesses continue to fascinate millions of women and are admired as if they were specially blessed with a dream come true. Women continue to wait for the prince, because some day he will come as the popular song from Walt Disney's 1937 animated movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* claims. As time has gone by, "the Brothers Grimm have been looking over our shoulders and make their presence felt" (Zipes, 1988: 45) and Walt Disney's movies have surely had an important role in spreading the Grimms' patriarchal values all over the world. Two hundred years after the first publications of the Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärche*, "we are still influenced by the messages conveyed in the stories, and on that background we create role models that continue to interfere with our children's perceptions of gender roles" (Rowe, 1986: 77), but those messages "tend to repress and constrain children rather than set them free to make their own choices" (Zipes, 1988: 46).

When *A Princesa que queria ser rei* (Monteiro, 2007) arrives at the throne room with a baby in her arms, a newborn (she does not know the sex because it does not matter...), and is about to become queen, the narrator affirms (Monteiro, 2007: 35):

She felt different from everyone else. Better than any woman because she had proven to be like a man, and better than any man, because she was a woman. For the first time in her life, she felt as her father saw her: an invincible warrior.
(personal translation)

These words somehow summarize the struggle for self-sufficiency made by women over the past decades, fighting ideologies and prejudices. Unfortunately, the battle is not over yet because women are still being pushed to assume from their earliest years the traditional social roles that constrict women to household tasks and motherhood, even if they already have a career, and they are still discriminated against based on gender preconceptions. In this context, children's literature plays a central role in questioning gender representations and in promoting equality and freedom.

The contemporary books examined in this paper portray princesses as strong characters who claim all their rights, depicting women as active persons, with a voice and critical thinking, questioning cultural paradigms. They undoubtedly have an important emancipatory potential and will surely contribute to a new world vision, where women can be effectively free and powerful human beings.

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