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Hope Stoddard

An Eye for an Eye: Blindness in the Grimms' Fairy Tales

Fairy tales present a spectrum of disability representation throughout centuries of their canon, yet scholarship on the subject remains limited. *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability and Making Space* by Amanda Leduc concentrates on a personal exploration of disability and fairy tale canon from the Grimms, Hans Christian-Anderson, and Disney. Ann Schmiesing's book *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales* gives an overview with an excellent and multifaceted series of investigations into the whole of the Grimms' canon. Rather than undertake the entirety of the Grimms' work or the range of disabilities represented, I will focus on the role of blindness through two of their most well-known works: "Cinderella" and "Rapunzel". Two lesser-known tales, "The Two Wanderers" and "The White Bride and the Black Bride" will provide additional support. Using these as my primary texts, I examine the interconnection between blindness, punishment, and social roles of the 19th century. I will look at the Grimms' larger project of using blindness to correct behavior while encouraging conformity among those who fall outside the standard of a white patriarchal Christian system. The Grimms reinforce the power structures of the 19th century by revising the stories they collected to include racist color symbolism and promote gendered expectations. These intersecting pieces form the strategy the Grimms deploy in their religious fervor. Blindness becomes the central theme in an overarching project in their fairy tale work that uses suffering as a form of holy revelation and permanent punishment towards the wicked.

As a model of social consciousness, fairy tales reflect a collective and collaborative effort within communities to communicate and entertain. Fairy tales stem from the oral tradition, detailing fears, insecurities, humor, and communal emotions and beliefs. Fairy tales reflect the

voice of the people who pass them down, so they rarely have a single author responsible for their creation. In the 16th century, Straparola and Basile made headway with some of the first printed versions of Italian tales. In the 17th century, Charles Perrault wrote his wildly popular fairy tale collection and became commonly accepted by fairy tale scholars as the father of the fairy tale form. At the same time, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont and Madame d'Aulnoy were cultivating their literary canon; the former was interested in specific social etiquette, and the latter in creating models of capable and intelligent feminine character representations. Ravit Raufman and Haim Weinberg wrote in their psychoanalytical study of the topic, "Two Forms of Blindness in the Social Unconscious as Expressed in Literary Texts", that "Fairy-tales, as a relatively collective genre, which cannot be attributed to one single author (or even to a certain society), are rather considered as a collective group form, and may echo and reflect issues relevant to the social/collective unconscious" (160). After the move from the oral tradition into the literary space, the Grimm brothers follow their predecessors by collecting stories from primarily working-class individuals in Germany. The gathered stories came from those in the lower-class social sphere and working women. Maria Tatar remarks in *The Classic Fairy Tales* that "many of the most expansive informants consulted by the Grimms were women—family friends, servants and acquaintances who had at their disposal a rich repertoire of folklore" (xvii). Fairy tales have no single origin or author, often coming from feminine voices about ordinary people living through extraordinary events. The Grimms published seven editions of their collection in the original German, each undergoing revision to further their project. In the hands of the Grimms, these tales are the vehicle for spreading their conservative religious beliefs, supporting a system that uplifts a white masculine, able-bodied ideal and subjugates those who cannot meet that standard.

The tales selected for this study come from two sources, an 1853 English translation from London publisher Addey and Company and a contemporary translation from Maria Tatar, a Professor of Folklore & Mythology and Germanic Languages & Literature at Harvard University. This is to show the subtle social influences on translation and how it affects the Grimms' project. Tatar's translation is a truer example of the Grimms' work and project, specifically for "Cinderella". The 1853 translator, uncredited in the publication, writes a preface explaining that they "omitted about a dozen short pieces to which English mothers might object, and for good and satisfactory reasons have altered, in a slight way, four other stories" (iv). It is vital to recognize where translation honors the original intent and where it makes diversions to pacify its readers' moral outrage. The Grimms themselves engage in this act, even as the first English translations went a step further. Their revisions remove scandalous topics such as sex and pregnancy and begin to reflect a specific political position about racial hierarchy and gender dynamics through a Christian framework. The Grimms use disability and racist color symbolism in this project, inserting them into tales that previously did not include blindness or Blackness. Anna Wing Bo Tso's article "Losing Sight, Gaining Insight: Blindness and the Romantic Vision in Grimm's 'Rapunzel'" explains that "the prince's blindness and his suffering were the Grimm Brothers' creation. In the earlier versions of "Rapunzel", no one is blind, and there is no prince" (140). This is not the only inclusion of blindness coming directly from the Grimms. Though different versions of Cinderella indicate brutal punishments for her stepsisters, the Grimms' infliction of blindness is their creation. They also insert a literal black-and-white dichotomy into the tales. Schmiesing's "Blackness in the Grimms' Fairy Tales" points out that "The White Bride and the Black Bride" had "no references to whiteness or blackness, and the aunt neither blinds nor deafens the other characters" (216) in its earliest iterations. The relationship between

translation, revision, and inclusion is integral in how readers received the Grimms' work and their larger political project. The Grimms did not introduce disability or Blackness as a form of radical representation; they included them to promote the dominant social order of the 19th century.

There is a long-standing history of fairy tales as vessels for teaching certain morals and encouraging specific social behaviors. And in the 19th century, the rise of eugenics turned the human body into a moral issue. As the “normal”¹ body becomes a cultural model for acceptable and proper existence, so too does the division between an abled body and a disabled body appear more distinct in narratives. Fairy tales were no exception to the growing fixation on the human body and ability. Schmiesing states that the Grimms’ tales describe some “characters as physically ‘regular’ or ‘ordinary’ (*ordentlich*) and others as physically ‘different’ (*anders*)—descriptions that express normalcy and abnormalcy”. Furthermore, she remarks quite astutely that “the fact that fairy tales so frequently depict a protagonist’s restoration to able-bodiedness is itself an enforcement of normalcy; within the ideal realm of the fairy tale, able-bodiedness (or the restoration of able-bodiedness) becomes the norm” (18). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains the cultural construction of “the normate” in the introduction to *Extraordinary Bodies* that “the term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can

¹ Lennard J. Davis’s *The Disabilities Studies Reader* notes that the concept of “normal” and words around it entered the English lexicon around 1840, and the contemporary meaning of “norm” in 1855. The “normal body” is a eugenicist concept where anything outside the norm is deviant. The word normal is in quotations here to signify that this is a social construction, as Davis’s research asserts.

represent themselves as definitive human beings” and “is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). The normate, for this study, is the narrative construction that reinforces the socio-political and religious ideals the Grimms introduced to the tales. Garland-Thomson continues her exploration of the normate by making a direct reference to Cinderella by stating that “one testimony to the power of the normate subject position is that people often try to fit its description in the same way that Cinderella’s stepsisters attempted to squeeze their feet into her glass slipper” (8). This metaphor becomes startling when applied to the Grimms’ “Cinderella” as the stepsisters do not merely squeeze their feet into the slipper. The stepmother disfigures their feet with scissors to attempt to fit in the shoe.

The Grimms’ work threads color symbolism in a narrative that vilifies Blackness and Black skin in both “Cinderella” and “The White Bride and the Black Bride”. They equate Black skin and “black hearts” with impurity, ugliness, and corruption. According to Schmiesing, the Grimms said of their color symbolism in “The White Bride and the Black Bride” that the tale has a “simple opposition of blackness and whiteness for ugliness and beauty, sin and purity” (216). In that tale, an angel disguised as a beggar curses the wicked mother/daughter duo with skin “as black as night” and blesses the virtuous stepdaughter protagonist with skin “as white and fair as a sunbeam” (629) describing her as so beautiful her portrait entrances a king, implying that Black skin is not only a mark of immorality but “ugliness”. Blackness is a literal curse from an angel, an emissary of God, lowering the mother and daughter below the acceptable standard of feminine beauty, forcing their exterior to match their interior. It makes them undesirable in their community as family members and for the Black-skinned daughter in marriage. “Cinderella” expands this concept by reversing the symbolism and using Blackness as not an ugly physical

impairment but an inner quality to be exposed. The Grimms do not describe their stepsisters as outwardly unattractive. The 1853 translation introduces them as “beautiful and fair in the face, but treacherous and wicked at heart” (Grimm 108). Tatar translates this sentence with two critical differences; that the stepsisters were “beautiful and white, but whose hearts were foul and black” (148). The London 19th translation equates Blackness to wickedness, interchanging them without distinction at the same time as “white” with “fair”. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of “fair” means “Beautiful, agreeable” or “Beautiful to the eye; of attractive appearance; good-looking”, and even in its obsolete definitions, it mentions color only in terms of “unblemished” objects “free from dirt or stains; clean, fresh” or “of paper: unused, blank” (OED.com). Yet, the 19th-century translator has no qualms with replacing “white” with “fair” and “black” with “wicked” because those terms were, at the time, equivalent. Between the stepsisters' inner Blackness and the mother/daughter villains' outer Blackness, the Grimms' tales perform the cultural work of presenting Blackness as a physical and moral inferiority imposed by God.

It is not enough to reveal immorality--the narrative must also punish the sinners, dissuading readers from following the same path. The Grimms use blindness to show that the wicked have taken their eyes from God. Cinderella performs the narrative function of the ideal feminine Christian figure: obedient, humble, and faithful. When Cinderella's biological mother dies, she says: ““My dear child, be pious and good, and then the good God will always protect you”” (Grimm 108). Cinderella sustains terrible abuse from her stepsisters and stepmother but is still obedient to their demands. Doves, a symbolic animal in Christianity, assist her in tasks, help her achieve her happy ending, and represent the hand of God throughout the tale. Despite being the titular character and performing perfectly within 19th-century expectations for femininity, the

last lines are not about her but focus on her stepsisters instead. The 19th-century translation says: “The wedding was celebrated with great festivities, and the two sisters were smitten with blindness as a punishment for their wickedness” (114). This is where the translators diverge significantly from the Grimms’ intent. The Grimms were not content with a single line about punishing them for their behavior. They were much more explicit:

On the day of the wedding to the prince, the two false sisters came and tried to be charming and share in Cinderella’s good fortune. When the couple went to church, the elder sister was on the right, the younger on the left side: the doves pecked one eye from each one. Later, when they left the church, the elder sister was on the left, the younger on the right, The doves pecked the other eye from each one. And so they were punished for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives (Tatar 127).

Tatar’s translation reveals that their blindness is not an abstract affliction—it is brutal, calculated, and comes from the same doves that assisted Cinderella. The sisters are permitted to see the wedding, each with one eye, before leaving the church when the doves peck the other eye out. Their blindness is not absolute until they see the fruits of Cinderella’s inner beauty and goodness. For the Grimms’, the impetus is correcting the stepsisters for not performing the same level of feminine obedience and Christian goodness. Hans-Jörg Uther in the “Disability” entry in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales & Fairy Tales* states that “permanent or temporary physical disability (including blindness) may be inflicted on humans in the form of miraculous punishments. This may occur, for example, when moral and ethical norms have been flouted” (269). The Grimms’ final lines highlight moral and ethical misbehavior. In “The White Bride and the Black Bride”, the Black-skinned mother inflicts blindness and deafness on the other characters to insert her Black-skinned daughter in the place of the white-skinned protagonist. The

temporary blindness she imposes on white characters implies that disability is suffering that goodness can overcome. Blackness, though not a disability, is a physical signifier that illustrates the inability to carry the same virtues as whiteness. The Grimms weave race, disability, and undesirable feminine traits into a larger narrative around the “non-norm”, or objectionable behavioral and physical qualities. Permanent blindness is a punishment for the wicked, and temporary blindness is a form of suffering that builds moral righteousness but eventually gives way to the “normate”; the abled, ideal body.

The Grimms’ “Rapunzel” reflects further on the role of blindness as a form of suffering to overcome. The tale of Rapunzel is famous for the iconic line “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let your hair down” (58), and the role of blindness in the story is forgotten within vague recollections about a princess in a tower. In the Grimms’ version, Rapunzel is the child of peasants. While her mother was pregnant with her, she became overwhelmed with craving her neighbor’s “rapunzel”, a leafy green vegetable. The neighbor revealed to be an enchantress named Mother Gothel, lets him live in exchange for their unborn baby. This child is locked in the tower to be discovered by a prince, who woos Rapunzel and plans to help her escape imprisonment. Mother Gothel discovers this and sends Rapunzel away with their unborn children. The prince throws himself from the tower, becoming blind in the process. Tso reads “Rapunzel” as promoting German Romanticism, asserting that it is “a fairy tale concerning a male giving up his over-reliance on reason and rationality, gradually learning to embrace irrationality, intuition and the Romantic vision” (142). She argues that “while the loss of one’s vision may bring suffering, the over-reliance on sight and reason is possibly a more debilitating ‘blindness’ to the creativity and imagination of the human mind. The loss of sight in “Rapunzel” is therefore not a punishment or a deformity, but an awakening—a way to enter the Romantic Vision more deeply” (143). While I

agree with Tso's conclusion that his blindness is not a punishment, in the way inflicted upon the stepsisters, to say that it is wholly symbolic of German "Romantic Vision" neglects the reality of blindness as a disability. His suffering as a temporary affliction does not remove his status as physically sightless for many years before being reunited with Rapunzel and their children. I argue it is not a creative revelation that concerns the Grimms but a religious one. Because the prince cannot depend on sight at the end of the tale, he operates on hearing instead. The prince wanders in misery until he hears "a voice that sounded familiar to him, and so he followed it. When he came within sight of the person singing, Rapunzel recognized him. She threw her arms around him and wept. Two of those tears dropped into the prince's eyes, and suddenly he could see as before, with clear eyes" (62). Rapunzel's voice stands in for the voice of God in this scene, leading him out of his suffering and resulting in the restoration of his sight. The prince's suffering teaches him not to rely on himself but to trust in God.

The importance of blindness as a disabling mechanism comes from the Christian framework the Grimms insert into their tales. Why is it that in some, blindness is a form of righteous punishment, but in others, it is something that the virtuous must overcome? The Grimms' work suggests that disability is only permanent for the wicked, but that suffering is essential to piety. The final tale of this study, "The Two Wanderers" contains both types explored in the other stories. This tale is the least subtle of the Grimms' deeply religious narrative project. The merry and optimistic Tailor accompanies the cruel and ill-humored Shoemaker on the way to the royal city. As they take stock of what they need to continue, the Shoemaker over prepares while the Tailor explicitly "put his trust in God and his own luck" (Grimm 483), only taking enough food for a couple of days. The Shoemaker takes advantage of the Tailor twice, offering food in exchange for putting out one of the Tailor's eyes when he finds

him starving. The Tailor warns the Shoemaker as he is about to put out his second eye to “Do what you will, but remember that our God watches every action, and that another hour will come when the wicked dead shall be punished which you have practiced upon me, and which I have never deserved” (484). The Tailor recovers his eyesight after overhearing two crows speak of a way to cure himself by dabbing his eyes in the dew that falls on the ground near the gallows where “hung two poor sinners” (484). This scene is an allusion to the crucifixion of Christ and two criminals, and the dew that washes his eyes is the cleansing baptism required of devout Christians. Similarly, Rapunzel’s marital goodness provides waters with which her prince is baptized and healed. When the Tailor defeats the Shoemaker through faith and good deeds, the two crows who aided the Tailor earlier in the tale “flew down from the heads of the two criminals, and with loud cries peck out the Shoemaker’s eyes” (491) blinding the Shoemaker, much like Cinderella’s stepsisters. The Tailor explicitly trusts the Christian God to provide, while the Shoemaker hoards resources, abuses others’ trust in him, and attempts to ruin the Tailor’s reputation. Blindness is the catalyst for introspection, a time to reflect on God’s dominion, and it is the punishment for those who refuse to see his light.

Amanda Leduc’s fairy tale exploration asks a startlingly important question: “Why, in all of these stories about someone who wants to be something or someone else, was it always the individual who needed to change, and never the world?” (12) An illuminating observation about the way fairy tales work, especially for the Grimms canon. Fairy tales primarily concern themselves with transformation, as Leduc suggests, making it the ideal genre for the Grimms to introduce themes that encourage conformity to a white, masculine, abled-bodied norm. The Grimms treat disability as a moral failing, something that one lacks that God can provide. Schmiesing explains that Wilhelm Grimm lived with physical impairment, and for him

“illness *was* the norm, and able-bodiedness was an ideal that in his view could be bestowed only by God” (8) and his “acceptance of his own bodily impairments and physical decline within a religious framework led him to the view the suffering brought on by such impairments as something that must ultimately be good” (9). The religious framework treated Wilhelm’s body as an object that required fixing, and Christianity promised him a way to achieve the ideal society demanded of him. Blindness represents both physical impairment and points to religion as the answer to the struggles of disability and social deviance. When blindness comes as a punishment to the wicked, nature itself dispenses it through the hand of its creator: the Christian God. The doves that aid Cinderella blind her stepsisters. Similarly, the crows that aid the Tailor blind the Shoemaker. In its more temporary forms, such as the blindness inflicted on the prince in “Rapunzel”, the Tailor in “The Two Wanderers”, and the various good-aligned characters in “The White Bride and the Black Bride”, the healing is a triumph over disability after the characters learn hard lessons. It is a form of sacrifice that induces religious revelation. The Grimms’ work upholds the “normate” ideal by narrativizing blindness to influence the reader into what they believe is the correct and moral standard.

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