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Female Gender Stereotypes and Inequality within Ursula Vernon's Jackalope Wives and David K. Yeh's Cottage Country

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Cover Page Footnote

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The genre of fairy tales allows women a medium to communicate and subtly pass on advice surrounding topics deemed inappropriate within society. However, in doing so the basic structure of fairy tales has become a means to perpetuate gendered stereotypes, which lead to depictions of women that focus on physical attributes, weak personality traits or as voiceless/absent minor characters. Ursula Vernon's *Jackalope Wives* as well as David K. Yeh's *Cottage Country* exemplify the ways modern fairy tales conform to and reject previous notions of what it means to be a woman within fantasy.

Vernon attempts to challenge the gendered stereotype of women being depicted as “weaklings, [who are] insecure, emotional, and at times troublesome creatures” (Siddiqui 2010) through illustrating a dichotomy between old and modern women in fantasy. Vernon (2014) preserves previous ideologies of women in fantasy by emphasizing her characters, the “jackalope wives [as] shy... beautiful creatures” solely admired for their physical appearances. Being the lovers of “jackrabbits and antelope bucks” (Vernon 2014), the jackalope wives are intentionally depicted as having “faces like no mortal woman” (Vernon 2014), suggesting their beauty is beyond the obtainment of human females. Siddiqui (2010) proposes that “the physical description [of women] is so exaggerated that the female characters emerge superhuman”, suggesting an implication of impossible standards and expectations for women outside of the text. Not only is the tale of the jackalope wives based on their appearances, the context from which their name emerges suggests their sole presence within the tale is to be submissive creatures who wanted to be caught by young men. By depriving the women of autonomous names, Vernon situates the female characters as existing only for the temptation of men.

Furthermore, the jackalope wives are an excellent example of Vernon accentuating the fairy tale tradition of “beautiful good girls [...] suffer[ing] from poverty or magic or some other problem inflicted upon them [subjecting them to a form of] helplessness” (Siddiqui 2010). However, Vernon contradicts the typical “message that women are the greatest enemies of women” (Siddiqui 2010) and utilizes man as the force that is inflicting the suffering upon the jackalope wife. Rather than an evil step mother, wicked witch of the west or evil queen pushing the plot, men become the dominant force driving the magic to turn bad. Through “saying they were gonna catch them a jackalope wife” (Vernon 2014), men subjected the wives to the helplessness of being caught between two worlds or ripped from one they never intended to leave. The pitting of helplessness against oppression emphasizes Vernon's attempts to “explore possibilities of liberating women from the passiveness of many classical tales” (Crowley and Pennington 2010, 299). Through creating the example of the gendered power struggle most prominent before the “women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s” (Crowley and Pennington 2010, 299), Vernon is able to reflect upon women's issues that are still present within society today and begin priming the tale for its defiance of gendered stereotypes.

Through illustrating the jackalope wives as ideal fairy tale women, Vernon provides a strong basis from which she shatters historical perceptions of women by bringing forth the strong, independent heroine, Maggie Harkin. Maggie, once a jackalope wife exhibiting the same demeaning traits, is depicted in a role which is typically described as “male characters who are physically strong, good natured, helpful and smart” (Siddiqui 2010). Maggie's transformative position as a wise woman could only have been obtained through her own self-sacrifice of attempting to burn her jackalope skin, to be a part of the human world with her “new husband

and a little bitty baby girl” (Vernon 2014). Siddiqui (2010) challenges Vernon’s use of self-sacrifice by suggesting that “female characters and the notion of sacrifice go together” flawlessly throughout fairy tale history. Vernon confronts Siddiqui’s (2010) correlation between self-sacrifice and women by emphasizing the importance of Maggie’s choice. Vernon (2014) argues that the correlation is “different when you got a choice” as the female characters are not merely conforming to their expected roles but rather are exhibiting autonomous thought. Not only does the sacrifice reward Maggie with the opportunity for autonomous thought, it provides her with “an active voice [where she is] an individual self” (Crowley and Pennington 2010, 307). Maggie’s transition to heroine status raises significant attention towards the notion of women being required to work for the same status that men are granted. Vernon emphasizes the inequality of gender within fairy tales by forcing Maggie to earn her hero status, where she must combat her own internal temptations to revert back into a jackalope wife. The significance of Maggie’s unique hero journey is an interesting attempt to connect Vernon’s fantastical world with issues prominent within the mundane sphere. Through situating choice and challenges within the journey, Vernon empowers female readers to maximize their full potential in relation to autonomy. Although complications will always arise for females, Vernon disassembles oppression, supporting women to acknowledge their own ability to alter personal journeys through decision making.

In addition, Vernon attempts to combat the stereotype in which the “heroine of the tale [must be a] beautiful girl who is sweet and innocent” (Siddiqui 2010). Maggie Harkin defies this ideology as she is depicted as an old widowed woman, far beyond the confines of innocence and purity, having shared time with two husbands and given birth to her daughter Eva. The significance of Vernon presenting Maggie through a more mundane lens is to break the “correlation between beauty and goodness” (Siddiqui 2010) and illustrate to young female readers the flexibility of heroism. *Jackalope Wives* promotes heroism as a trait obtainable by any and all characters willing to acquire a burden of their own and/or others. Vernon abandons the fairy tale tradition of focusing on physical attributes and instead emphasizes internal personality traits and positive emotional qualities (Siddiqui 2010). Through utilizing Maggie as an ideal modern-day woman within fantasy, Vernon provides female readers with a role model who sets new social conventions, expectations, and roles for women.

Throughout *Jackalope Wives* Vernon rejects demeaning portrayals of women, however, she fails to present Maggie as an exclusively autonomous heroine. After critiquing the men of the tale as “pretty and useless” (Vernon 2014), a reference often reserved for women, Vernon proceeds to conform to the notion of women being unable to complete a quest without relying on the presence of man. Early within the tale, Maggie is depicted as being a strong, knowledgeable woman who voluntarily offers to mend the cruel act committed by her grandson. As the narrative proceeds, Maggie is exposed as completing more domesticated tasks of “treat[ing] the [jackalope wife’s] burns” (Vernon 2014), “shelling beans” (Vernon 2014), as well as caring for the betwixt creature. However, Vernon attempts to revive Maggie’s masculine traits of being “strong, dominant, [and] generous” (Siddiqui 2010) by illustrating her “half-carry[ing] the jackalope wife at the end” (Vernon 2014) of their journey. Despite Vernon’s numerous attempts to combat “the way fairy tales define women and analyze gender” (Crowley and Pennington 2010, 299), by resolving the narrative with the Pattern Man’s assistance, she deviates from her feminist approach and therefore confirming the ideology that “men and women act out particular gender

roles [where in the end] men [are] in control [and women fall] submissive” (Crowley and Pennington 2010, 304). Undoubtedly, Vernon’s inability to defy traditional fairy tale structure raises concerns as to whether women within fantasy can break free from traditional constraints and become fully autonomous characters.

Contrasted with Vernon’s attempts to “populate [fairy tales] with more strong female characters than weak, passive ones” (Crowley and Pennington, 310), David K. Yeh utilizes *Cottage Country* to explicitly comply to the gendered stereotypes of women represented as voiceless as well as the “architects of evil design” (Siddiqui 2010). Yeh balances the presence of male and female characters, however only men are gifted with the ability to express themselves through language which stems from the “wishful thinking of a patriarchal society” (Siddiqui 2010). Although introduced through a flashback, Pete’s Memere (grandmother) is denied personal dialogue and merely exists as an extension of his grandfather. Yeh depicts Pete’s Memere’s presence as a shadow, nearly invisibly present within the tale. Siddiqui (2010) suggests Yeh’s attempt to set the female character in the past of the text alludes to the pattern of “women ... not figur[ing] in a number of [fairy tale] stories”. Similar to the jackalope wives, Pete’s Memere is illustrated through Siddiqui’s (2010) interpretations of ideal female fairy tale character as she lacks opinion, presence, and is placed in a domesticated world of “doing her laundry” (Yeh 2016). In agreement with Vernon, Yeh initially demonstrates women from a more traditionally misogynistic perspective, providing a basis from which to break down traditional fairy tale structure and instill thought provoking questions.

Furthermore, although Yeh (2016) suggests not all sidhe—child-like nature spirits, unwanted and orphaned—are female by alluding to the “fairy kings”, Pete’s grandpa quickly attributes stereotypical female traits to the sidhe, provoking the extension of femininity onto the fairies. Yeh (2016) depicts the sidhe as subservient creatures who need to be shown “who’s king of the castle” and are required to be “rule[d] over”. Without conforming to the female expectation of “passively follow[ing] orders” (Siddiqui 2010), the sidhe fairies turn bad and begin to create chaos. Yeh utilizes the female sidhe within the text as a means to perpetuate Siddiqui’s (2010) “mention of female characters who are sorceresses and enchantress[es]” as tormentors “[with]in most fairy tales”. Yeh (2016) further supports this claim by depicting the sidhe as a creature whose “lost their marbles” and were “dangerous and unpredictable”. Complying with the traditional thought of women being mysteriously troublesome creatures, Yeh focuses on building and reinforcing stereotypical thought throughout the text. As a female reader, the tale’s unique approach to feminist thought initially instilled negative emotion which was later diffused and transformed into an understanding perspective. By working with the reader’s emotions, Yeh is granted the ability to reveal the female sidhe as an innocent creature and one to be pitied as well as admired.

Interestingly, although explicitly conforming to a myriad of stereotypical female depictions, Yeh challenges gendered ideologies through his flashback passages. Yeh (2016) outwardly depicts the sidhe’s evil acts to be a result of a lack of control and oppression. However, Pete’s grandpa suggests that he was the cause of her anger as she was “still pissed with [him] for not waltzing with her [...] fifty years ago”. Yeh (2016) plays with the notion that perhaps men were the cause of the sidhes’ ill use of magic by illustrating not only one incidence of courtship gone wrong but two. By bringing forth the concept of history repeating itself

through the legends of Merlin being “imprisoned forever by his lover Nimue [... who] had been sidhe” (Yeh 2016), Yeh suggests female sidhe are not created evil but rather they are transformed through the acts of men. Furthermore, Yeh entertains the idea of what truly is an evil creature. Are they wholly evil, transformed, or merely misunderstood within the text. Through suggesting the sidhe’s magic turned evil after her romantic advances are rejected, Yeh acknowledges that not all female magic is evil nor was it initially intended for destructive purposes. Yeh (2016) further supports his efforts to contextualize the sidhe’s transformation through providing the historical background of “Old World sidhe [...as] good folks, guardians and healers”. Yeh aims to target the concept of men doing no harm, providing an alternative perspective for readers to analyze women’s acts of evil within other fairy tales. Through drawing attention to the initial spark provoking women to transform into evil characters, readers are able to trace and infer potential male causes for negative female transformation processes.

By paralleling the female sidhe to “a survivor of the Holocaust” (Yeh 2016), Yeh begins to instill sympathy within the reader, allowing the fairy to be seen from a different perspective. The sidhe’s innocence is further emphasized through her “appearance [as] a little girl” (Yeh 2016) with her desperation for death indicated by her “fall[ing] upon her own blade” (Yeh 2016). As the tale concludes, Yeh challenges Pete as the hero who has killed the evil fairy by depicting him as understanding of the position of the sidhe and sympathizing with her. Pete “gathered her close in [his] arms” (Yeh 2016) after observing her transformation back into an Old World sidhe, acknowledging her pain dissipating as “the light drained out of” (Yeh 2016) her eyes. Yeh applies this significant passage as an aid redefining what it means to be a woman in fairy tales. After being exposed to the standard fairy tales “filtered through centuries of patriarchal culture [... showing] little respect for women” (Crowley and Pennington 2010, 304), the sidhe is brought forth as having her own tale beyond the boundaries of gendered expectations.

Similar to Vernon, Yeh emphasizes female choice within *Cottage Country* as he suggests the sidhe provoked her own death and wished to be released from the confines of the tale. Pete remarks on the “excruciating pain” (Yeh 2016) the fairy inflicted upon herself by entering the range of the cold iron. Furthermore, the sidhe rejected Pete’s requests for parley, lunging herself towards his gun and subsequently her death. However, most significantly is Yeh’s (2016) necessity to specify that the sidhe had “fallen upon her own blade” and was not killed by Pete’s weapon. Yeh (2016) depicts the sidhe curling her lips “into the hint of a smile”, emphasizing her desire for death and satisfaction with the unravelling of events. By demonstrating her as an active choice-maker in the events that took place, Yeh puts emphasis on the power of women’s choices. Yeh explicitly emphasizes the power of the sidhe, by suggesting the sidhe as the one who had constructed Pete’s hero journey through active planning and intricate decision-making.

Overall, both Vernon and Yeh attempt to challenge traditional fairy tale structure and the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes. Although both authors utilized differing means and structures within their tales to obtain gender equality within fantasy, the texts managed to draw women’s issues within the real world into the fantastical. Through drawing attention to the fairy tales’ focus on women’s physical appearance, weak personality traits, and their overall lack of presence within fantasy, the authors raise significant concerns as to whether gendered stereotypes depicted are able to be truly abolished. As described throughout the analysis, even

the best intended literature can be easily subjected to the unequal thoughts socially primed within humanity.

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