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Hybridity

Francisco Vaz da Silva

The musical *Into the Woods*, recently adapted into a film (2014), describes how the characters from various fairy tales go into the woods in order to fulfill plural needs and wishes. In the forest, the characters interfere with one another. And, as the straight paths vanish, they trespass into each other's plots, seduce one another, and establish unexpected relationships. As Cinderella's Prince sums it up, "Anything can happen in the woods ... Foolishness can happen in the woods ... Right and wrong don't matter in the woods." *Into the Woods* draws attention to fairy-tale hybridity on two levels. First, the differences between plots are less important than the shared feature that everyone enters the woods, hence inter-plot hybridity is a given. Second, a blurred period of open-ended possibilities in relationships and identities unfolds in the woods before patterns are set anew, which matches the fact (noted by Vladimir Propp 1983, 63–74) that going into the woods launches betwixt-and-between phases of transformation in fairy tales.

This entry is not concerned with inter-plot hybridity, which is largely a function of our tendency to think about tale types as fixed texts (for a discussion of this sort of hybridity, see Haring 2008, 464). Rather, it explores the hybridity that pervades into-the-woods spells, also known as enchantments, in fairy tales. I argue that the core of fairy tales is enchantment, which is a phase ruled by cyclic time, and I submit that cyclic time breeds hybridity. Therefore, I take it that examining hybridity in fairy tales requires addressing the cyclic logic "of 'ordeals,' 'deaths' and 'resurrections'" that fairy tales share with initiation rites (Eliade 1998, 202). I wish to do so at the simplest possible level. Propp (1996, 114; 1983, 16, 63) famously argued that the basic form of the fairy tale is about a hero who grabs magical powers in the forest, then slays a monster, and liberates a princess. But, clearly, this androcentric model both supposes and obfuscates the princess's prior enchantment. Therefore, I take it that a feminine enchantment is the simplest fairy-tale form, and I address hybridity at this basic level.

In a recent essay I pointed out that feminine enchantments often comprise a blood connection with an older woman as well as a sexual experience (Vaz da Silva 2015, 107–13). In this discussion I focus on the feminine connection. I examine stories in which a witchy fairy shuts a girl in a tower in the woods, and I discuss hybridity in light of this basic strand in fairy tales

Discrete Outlines vs. Hybridity in Fairy-Tale Models

For a start, let me state the obvious. Something hybrid is a

heterogeneous piece, a complex unit. Therefore, being on the lookout for hybridity involves heeding complexity, nuance, and ambiguity, which entails parting ways with a longstanding consensus on the need to foreground homogeneity, purity, and simplicity in fairy tales.

For instance, Antti Aarne, the founder of the standard folktale classification, assumed that “originally” (whatever that means) each tale type was a fixed text with its own set of motifs; therefore, in accordance with this assumption, Aarne used texts from the Grimm collection and the Copenhagen archives as templates for the tale types he devised (see Thompson 1977, 417, 439). But the assumption that tales are fixed texts is simplistic. As Propp pointed out, “tales possess one special characteristic: components of one tale can, without any alteration whatsoever, be transferred to another” (1996, 7). Alternatively, Propp proposed, “the entire store of fairy tales ought to be examined as a chain of variants” (114).

Yet, although Propp rejected Aarne’s assumption that one could define discrete tale types containing their own motifs, he did share with Aarne the aim of defining clear-cut units in fairy tales. So he proposed to drop the “amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color” of the attributes of fairy-tale characters in order to focus solely on the characters’ abstract actions, which he calls functions (1996, 20–1, 87). Thus he defined the axis of all fairy tales in terms of a string of discrete functions: “none will fall out of order, nor will any one exclude or contradict any other” (22). But Propp himself noted that various anomalies complicate the seductive simplicity of his discrete-units model. He acknowledged cases of “the double morphological meaning of a single function” (69), which implies that functions overlap; and he recognized that the *dramatis personae* may hold opposite functions, which entails they are hybrid too. For instance, the witch often “begins as an antagonistic donor and then becomes an involuntary helper” (81). Eleazar Meletinsky and collaborators developed this point: “Almost every personage can perform temporarily some opposite functions. To consider such cases as mechanically superimposed is incorrect. ... [I]t is obvious that functional fields are continuous, and that they form a cyclical structure” (Meletinsky et al. 1974, 117). The following discussion draws on this insight.

Max Lüthi is another case in point. Lüthi submitted that the style of fairy tales aims “for clarity, exactness, positiveness, and precision. There is no ‘if’ and no ‘perhaps’” (1979, 57). His model stresses the “isolation of the characters” (50) and their “depthlessness”—hence, he wrote, “[i]nstead of different modes of behavior being combined in a single person, we see them sharply separated from one another and divided among per-

sons who stand side by side" (1982, 14–15). The isolated fairy-tale characters "have no inner life, no environment, no relationship to past or future generations, no relationship to time" (37). Hence, "there are no aging persons, and no aging otherworld beings either" (19).

And yet, Lüthi noted, "Mircea Eliade once said that the hearers of fairy tales ... experience a sort of initiation not entirely unlike that in the customs of some primitive peoples. 'The folk tale transposes the initiation process into the sphere of imagination.' ... How correct this scholar's assertion is can be shown in any folk fairy tale" (1979, 59–60). Indeed, Lüthi himself remarked that "Rapunzel" (Grimm no. 12, an instance of ATU 310) portrays the sort of process of "development and maturation" in which "every step forward involves a dying," like in "[p]rimitive ... rites of passage" (113). And he noted that "Dornröschen" (Grimm no. 50, an instance of ATU 410) "tells of death and resurrection" regarding a girl who "is fifteen years old when she comes under the spell: the time of transition from childhood to maidenhood" (24).

But Lüthi adds, "[o]ne instinctually conceives of the princess as an image of the human spirit: the story portrays the endowment, peril, paralysis, and redemption of not just one girl, but of all mankind" (1979, 24). Alas, the "instinctive" preconception that fairy tales are spiritual allegory brushes aside physical maturation, and it misses the point that fairy tales are *about* cosmic and physiologic time.

Maturation in Fairy Tales

Let us look at the tales. Both "Rapunzel" and "Dornröschen" feature a disquieting fairy (whom the Grimms later take to calling, respectively, "enchantress" and "wise woman," Grimm and Grimm 2014, 37, 163; see François 2011; see Tatar 2012, 57, 241) who shuts a pubertal girl in a tower. A fascinating description of the tower enclosure is offered in Mademoiselle de la Force's "Persinette," the literary ancestor of Grimms' "Rapunzel" (Lüthi 1979, 118; Tatar 2012, 56). This seventeenth-century variant recounts how a fairy grants parsley from her enclosed garden to a pregnant woman in exchange for her child. At the child's birth, the fairy names her *Persinette* (from *persil*, parsley) and makes her the most beautiful creature in the world. And before Persinette turns twelve, "since the fairy knew her fate, she decided to spare her to her destiny" by enclosing Persinette in a tower at the heart of a forest (La Force 1698, 104). But the girl eventually becomes pregnant in her tower, and the fairy belatedly recognizes, "destiny cannot be avoided, and my foresight was to no avail" (116).

To grasp what the girl's destiny is, consider the acts of the fairy.

First, she names the girl after a herb reputed for inducing feminine hemorrhages (just as rampion was recommended for regulating the menstrual cycle, Warner 2008; cf. Bricout 2005, 47), and then she shuts the girl in the tower at the outset of puberty. Moreover, the fairy acknowledges the ineluctability of the girl's fate after the latter becomes pregnant. So Persinette's fate is her menstrual bleeding *and* her pregnancy—her maturity and sexual initiation—taken together.

Pertinently, the locus of Persinette's maturation is a doorless silver tower that is brightly lit inside by "the fire of carbuncles [*escarboucles*] as though the sun shone there" (La Force 1698, 105). This image of a silver tower secluded in the dark forest, suffused with a red glow, strongly suggests the lunar dwelling of a pubertal girl—a point that resonates with a leitmotiv in comparative folklore. James Frazer, in a section of *The Golden Bough* called "The Seclusion of Girls at Puberty," quotes many instances worldwide of the custom of keeping menarcheal girls secluded from the sun for a spell. Frazer notes, "[a] superstition so widely diffused as this might be expected to leave traces in legends and folk-tales. And it has done so" (1913, 70). Indeed, both the tales ATU 310, "The Maiden in the Tower" and ATU 410, "Sleeping Beauty" feature the seclusion of girls at puberty.

Cyclic Time, Hybridity, Queer Time

I wish to address the match between fairy-tale seclusions and the custom of isolating girls at puberty in light of the structural parallel of fairy tales and rites of passage. Arguably, the essence of this convergence is the depiction of maturation in cyclic terms. Rites of passage mark the separation from an old phase or status, through a liminal transition, into a new status. Arnold Van Gennep, who proposed this model, relevantly pointed out that in the liminal stage the "idea of a renewal, a periodic death and rebirth," often finds expression in lunar symbolism (1961, 180). Anthropologist Victor Turner developed this insight as he noted that the liminal phase of such rites features processes of "[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition ... accompanied by processes of growth, transformation and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns" (1977, 99).

Which brings us to hybridity. In such ontological transformations, Turner notes, "logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens," as happens in lunar symbolism because "the same moon waxes and wanes," in snake symbolism because "the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and reappear in a new one," and in bear symbolism because "the bear 'dies' in autumn and is 'reborn' in spring" (1977, 99). And this point on the hybridity of "logically antithetical" processes applies to fairy tales as well. Isabel Cardigos remarked, "[t]he core of fairy tales is the realm

of enchantment. If we can explain the movement of non-enchantment to enchantment and back to non-enchantment, as expressed in a wealth of different symbols, then we will be able to explain the logical illogicality of fairytales" (1996, 14). This "logical illogicality" is, again, that of cyclic processes in which dissolution portends renewal. Which is why, as Meletinsky et al noted, in fairy tales "almost any personage can perform temporarily some opposite functions" (1974, 117).

Alan Dundes quoted Ruth Benedict to the effect that we "do not see the lens through which we look," which, Dundes argues, is shaped by "the combination of 'line,' 'straight,' and 'square'" (2007, 200). While Dundes acknowledges some formulations that contemplate escaping "the vise of linearity," including the notion of "reading between the lines" and he exhorts to "think outside the box," he submits that such attempts confirm "the boundaries imposed by lines and boxes" (206). In light of such cultural constraints the cyclic logic of fairy tales does look queer; and queer studies have taken notice. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill point out that, because queer studies "challenge fixed or normative categories but also address concerns about marginalization, oddity, and not fitting into society generally," they have a natural interest in the "queerness" of the fairy-tale form, which "invites ambiguity and ambivalence" (2012, 6, 11). In the same trend, Lewis Seifert (2015, 23) contrasts the "astounding investment our culture has made in the 'happily ever after' (HEA) ending of the classic fairy tales"—"a telos of chrononormativity"—with the "temporal irregularities" at the center of fairy tales; and he correctly argues that the queerness of the fairy tale form stems from its narrative uses of time.

Hybrid Fates, Cycling Girls

In such narrative uses of time the prevalence of moon symbolism is notable. The moon is a paragon of hybridity because it conspicuously presents death-and-rebirth cycles every month; and, of course, moon circuits strikingly correspond with feminine cycles (Shuttle and Redgrove 1999, 127–29). Presently, I call your attention to the correlated facts that the fairies are hybrid characters bearing lunar attributes, and the girls who join them start cycling along with the moon.

First, it bears noting that the fairies who fate girls are close relatives of the Fates who spin individual destinies, such as the Latin *Fata*, the Greek *Moirai*, and the Germanic *Nornir* (Grimm 1880, 405; Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Dasen 2011, 16). The old Fates occasionally appear as a single woman, and their numbers do vary, but usually they are three (Grimm 1880, 405–10; Kerényi 1998, 32–33). Carl Kerényi pointed out that the *Moirai* "actually *are* real trinities, sometimes almost forming a

single Threefold Goddess" (31). Robert Graves stated that "[t]he Three Fates are a divided form of the Triple Goddess" (1961, 225), and likewise Kerényi associates the tripartition of the Fates with the usual division of the lunar month into three parts (1998, 31–32). This may be the right context to understand why the modern fairies act in three steps. In "Persinette," as we saw, the single fairy grants beauty to the girl, then she imposes on her the name bearing her fate, and finally she tries to attenuate the girl's fate. Likewise, in Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant" and in Grimms' "Dornröschen" the fairies act in three steps: the group of seven or twelve invited fairies grants the girl brilliant social graces, then the uninvited fairy imposes a hard fate on her, which finally one invited fairy softens.

This ternary pattern is recognizable in modern films as well. For instance, the two retellings of the story by the Disney studios feature three fairies plus Maleficent, the uninvited fairy. In the first film, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), two fairies grant beauty and song to the little princess, then Maleficent curses her to prick her finger and die, but the third fairy attenuates the foretold death into sleep. The second film, *Maleficent* (2014), focuses on the eponymous fairy. At the christening, the fairies still grant beauty and grace to the princess, as before. But Maleficent now brushes aside the three fairies and takes up the fating work all by herself. Maleficent grants that the princess will indeed grow in grace and beauty, but then curses her into a death-like sleep forever, and finally allows that the princess might reawaken by the effect of true love's kiss. Beyond this tripartite action at the girl's christening, Maleficent later acts on the girl's fate in three steps. First she utters the fatal curse, of course; then, as the girl's sixteenth birthday looms, Maleficent tries in vain to revoke the curse; and finally, the fairy herself kisses the girl with true love and revives her. Thus, the princess is nothing but accurate as she calls the hybrid fairy her "fairy godmother."

It is noteworthy the fairies' ternary fating boils down to anti-thetical gifts. In "Persinette" the fairy grants the girl utmost beauty and a spell in the tower. In Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant," seven young fairies grace the girl with "all the perfections imaginable" whereas an "old fairy" curses her to die the moment she touches a spindle. In Grimms' "Dornröschen," twelve fairies grant the girl splendid things whilst the thirteenth fairy decrees she will prick herself with a spindle. Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* contrasts the good-fairies' gifts and the dark curse. And, one step ahead, *Maleficent* casts the eponymous fairy as "both hero and villain."

But, again, the binary endowments of the fairies belong in the ternary tempo of lunar cycles. Note that Maleficent's horns fit a traditional image of the crescent "horned" moon (on the horned

moon in folklore, see Vaz da Silva 2008, 19–22, 68–70, 116–19). Also, her trichromatic image conveys the contrast of black and white, with a splash of red, which evokes lunar phases along with women’s cycles. This said, Maleficent is just the latest avatar of the hybrid fairies who bring girls to maturity according to the lunar rhythms of death and rebirth. Like the moon goes through bright and dark phases, and springs anew out of darkness, so all the motley fairies grant social graces *and* a death curse from which cycling girls emerge to accrued life .

To his credit, Bruno Bettelheim noted that a curse concerning a fifteen year-old girl, uttered by a thirteenth fairy, likely conveys a menstrual theme (1978, 232–33). The rub of the matter is that a solar year fits twelve moon cycles plus a small residue. Therefore, as anthropologist Chris Knight explains, as long as people reckon with moon cycles in the frame of the solar year, there is “no way in which the number ‘13’ could be avoided.” The modern Gregorian calendar features twelve months adjusted to the solar year, but in folklore the number thirteen is often relevant for traditions that reckon with the moon (2004, 3). Indeed, the Grimms’ contrast between the twelve fairies who receive golden plates and the one who does not suggests that the thirteenth fairy represents an attribute beyond the pale of solar time. (Likewise, Perrault’s contrast between seven fairies and the eighth fairy recalls that a lunar month comprises four weeks averaging seven days plus a remainder, which again yields the same dichotomy between accredited time and liminal time as in Grimm.) Moreover, Perrault’s parallel between the *vieille Fée* secluded in her tower (who utters the curse) and the secluded old spinner in a tower (who makes the curse come true) hints that they both impersonate the Fate who fates girls to seclusions in a tower. From another angle, Cyrille François mentions Jacob Grimm’s acknowledgment (apropos of “Dornröschen,” Grimm 1880, 419) that spindles are an essential characteristic of German wise women as a reason to think that the *weise Frau* who curses the girl is the same character as the old spinner who makes the curse come true (François 2011, 268). Along the same trend, in “Sleeping Beauty,” Maleficent herself lures the girl to the spinning wheel.

The point, then, is that the old Fate who takes possession of young girls in the tower causes them to bleed. As young girls spin a spindle, they start cycling along with the moon. And, as the spinning fairy causes girls to prick their finger, she marks with blood the thread of their lives.

One step ahead, note that the contrasting gifts of the fairies delineate the hybridity of girls who meet cyclic time. Dornröschen’s father would want a dazzling daughter, all social graces, unhindered by the dark curse—but the tale recounts that

the daughter must tap the lunar sphere before she becomes a bride. For the sake of comparison, consider one Italian namesake of Dornröschen, Rosina, whom the fairies fate to shine like the sun *and* to turn into a snake the minute she sees the sun, before she can at last turn into a radiant bride (Nerucci 1880, 280–85; see a translated adaption in Calvino 1982, 225–29). Likewise, a Sicilian story tells how one girl is granted shining beauty *and* is also cursed to become a black snake the moment she sees the sun, before she can become a most beautiful bride (Zipes and Russo 2009, 279–87). The fact that being under the skin of a dark snake amounts to being in the lunar tower accords with Robert Briffault’s point that snakes have in common with the moon “the gift of immortality through perpetual renewal,” hence they “play the same part in regard to the functions of women as the moon” (1977, 312, 315). Regardless of the broadly equivalent images in use, the constant factor is that each girl is a hybrid who endures a dark phase before she shines forth in bridal fulfillment. As Cardigos puts it, the snake in such tales “is the precious, but unspeakable and ugly source of the beauty which will attract the king—the girl’s sexual potency as wife and mother” (1996, 137).

This stable pattern allows for creative twists and turns. Consider how the film *Tangled* (2010) transforms the theme of “The Girl in the Tower” (ATU 310). In this tale, as we saw, the secluded girl impersonates a herb (parsley or rampion) associated with lunar bleedings—hence, linked to cycles of growth and decay, death and rebirth. Contrariwise, in the film, the girl impersonates a solar flower that grants the healing power of incorruptible life. This shift puts the situation in the tower on its head. Instead of a fairy who helps a girl grow into lunar time, the film depicts an aging woman who taps the girl’s golden hair to keep herself young. The charm she devises to tap the glow in Rapunzel’s hair includes the lines: “Bring back what once was mine. ... Change the Fates’ design.” The essence of the matter is that the aging woman in the tower seeks to arrest lunar growth and decay by means of the girl’s solar hair. So, the situation in the tower is the opposite of the dark curse of the fairies—rather, it is a golden entanglement that keeps Rapunzel mired in immaturity. Thus, if the girl is to effectively come of age on her eighteenth birthday, her golden hair must go. Which, indeed, comes to pass. As the girl becomes a brunette, lunar time is released at long last: the old woman totters into dust, and Rapunzel steps into adulthood. Significantly, it is Rapunzel’s sweetheart who cuts her golden hair—and he lets her know he has “a thing for brunettes.” This is hardly surprising, for Rapunzel’s turning into a brunette means reverting to the “Fates’ design,” i.e., maturing into the cyclic time of nubile women.

Tangled offers a useful thought experiment as it twists the tale of

the girl cursed to lunar darkness into the story of a girl trapped in solar light. Indeed, Rapunzel entangled in her own golden hair is like Dornröschen hypothetically not cursed by the dark fairy, like Rosina not turned into a black snake, and like Persinette never dwelling in her tower. So the object lesson in *Tangled* is that a girl who would take only the golden spells would remain tangled in immaturity. *Tangled*, like the other variants, assumes that girls must take up the dark as well as the golden attributes of the fairies' fating.

Two-in-one, One-in-two

The point, again, is that hybridity is of the essence of fairy-tale characters. We saw that one fairy who yields antithetical attributes is equivalent to one aggregate unit of (two or more) antithetical fairies. Now I wish to point out that, likewise, a hybrid girl bearing antithetical attributes can split into two interdependent characters. Another tale (ATU 480, "The Kind and the Unkind Girls") externalizes the hybridity of the cyclic girl fated by the fairies into two halves—one girl gets only the golden attributes and marries, the other gets only the dark attributes and is cast aside. In such stories the fairy's curse comes closer to the demeaning sense of "the curse" in colloquial speech—an irritant to be discarded (Delaney et al. 1988, 116). Perrault's "Les Fées," for instance, features one fairy who appears in two contrasted guises to two sisters who impersonate the split dimensions of the pubertal girl. One guise of the fairy fates one girl to expel flowers and precious stones when she speaks—and this girl becomes a bride—whereas the other guise of the fairy curses the other girl to expel serpents and toads—and this girl dies, like a tossed rag, in a corner of the woods.

Even though the split of the menarcheal girl makes it trivial to treat the lunar curse like an irritant to be discarded, the cyclic framework and the attendant hybridity persist. Another variant of ATU 480, Grimms' "Frau Holle," associates the contrasting girls with, respectively, gold and pitch. (It also links the golden girl with Cinderella, who in the homonymous story puts on the golden slipper to become a bride whereas her sisters are cast into darkness as their eyes are plucked out.) Kay Turner points out the unusual fact that Frau Holle's abode is "a sun-drenched realm," and she helps explain this queer detail as she notes, Holle "owns a solar underground even as she controls the weather above" (2015, 52). The point is that the "good" girl who finds sunshine in the netherworld then takes to shaking the feathers in Holle's bed so as to make snow in the upper world. This mirror-inverted correlation between netherworld sunshine and a snowy winter on earth is surely one particular instance of the widespread notion that "the otherworld is an inverted image of this world" (Eliade 1974, 205; cf. Vaz da Silva 2002, 40).

And note that the girl who provides for a snowy winter up on earth then returns to the upper world covered with gold. The emergence of the golden girl after winter likely marks the merry season (and, conversely, the emergence of the black girl marks the return of winter). The implication is that the two girls—like the contrasting seasons—are the mirror-like halves of a single cycle: one goes down when the other goes up, one becomes black after the other becomes golden. Still, this seasonal coding coexists with the usual lunar imagery, which reappears in a variant from Thuringia in which the golden girl is welcomed back home by a yellow cock whereas the ugly girl is led through a gate of pitch into a misty abode of snakes and toads (Grimm and Grimm 1884, vol. 1, 371–72).

A Basic Thread, and Beyond

The foregoing discussion is very basic. It covers but a tiny number of tales; and, even so, important issues—such as Frau Holle’s winter/lunar traits, Sleeping Beauty’s enchanted sleep, and Rapunzel’s childbearing and exile—are left unexamined. But recall that I focus on fairy-tale hybridity as a structural feature. I argued that hybridity stems from the cyclic pattern that fairy tales share with rites of passage, and I chose to examine this feature at the simplest possible level—the same-sex thread in which an old woman transmits moon blood to a young girl—and to spell out the most obvious lunar imagery in place.

I acknowledge, of course, that fairy tales get more complex beyond the few stories I cover, and that is precisely the point. As I said, feminine enchantments often comprise a strand of illicit sexual experience besides the blood connection with a crone (Vaz da Silva 2015, 107–13). “Persinette” testifies to the fact that the experience in the tower often includes taking a lover, and several other tales confirm that enchanted maidens consort with lovers in the woods before they become brides (see illuminating discussions in Knight 1991, 7–11; Verdier 1995, 217–18). Also, in good lunar logic, other tales show the crone *turning into* the maiden by dint of a male kiss (Vaz da Silva 2002, 153, 179–80, 204), and suggest that the heroic acts of piercing monsters amount to the pre-nuptial trysts that turn enchanted maidens into brides (Cardigos 1996, 47–8, 63–7; Vaz da Silva 2002, 173–76). My point is that this cyclic logic thoroughly permeates fairy tales. And please take this entry as a teaser. I hope it might yet be developed, corrected, and taken in unexpected directions by your own research.

Related Topics

Mediagraphy

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