

Ada Chat Transcription

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Rhett Grant: Hi everybody, welcome to the Ada Public Library, thanks for coming. I'm Rhett the librarian. Tonight we have two speakers for Ada Chats. We have Dr. Jennifer Pullen, who is a creative writing and fiction professor at ONU. And Dr. Bradley Wile, who's a professor of chemistry. So we'll hear about conversing with ghosts, the real story or history of fairytales, and then the sustainable future through chemistry.

Jennifer Pullen: Hello everybody. So, I wasn't certain if there was going to be any kind of projection, so I made a little handout with some pictures that will be relevant later. So, when ... people could share their ten ... Well, greetings! So everybody, I'm really excited to get to talk about fairytales with you because it's my favorite thing in the entire world. So, conversing with ghosts, the real history of fairytales. When you hear the word "fairytales" you most likely have some idea of what the word refers to. You might think of Disney movies, like "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," or "Frozen." You might think of collections of fairytales for children. I, myself, grew up with a beautifully illustrated book called, "A Children's Treasury of Fairytales." There was a Rapunzel image in that book where she had this amazing hair that caused me to inflict excessively long hair upon my mother, my childhood self, for many years. Many of us have stories like this, where we are extremely marked by the stories and images that we associate with them.

References to fairytales are everywhere. Hiding in our language and culture, nearly invisibly. If you are a sports fan, you will have probably heard of certain players or teams who have near-miraculous come-backs as being in a 'Cinderella story.' You will also probably heard of events or films having 'fairytales endings.' Think happy endings, lessons for childhood. We also refer to the perfect distance for a planet from the sun, not too far, not too close, not too hot, not too cold, as the 'goldilocks zone.' Thus, fairytales are like ghosts, haunting our language and our culture without most people noticing. We think of them often like believing in ghosts, Santa Claus, or fairies, as something consigned most of the time to childhood. However, this conception of fairytales is a recent phenomenon, and only reflected a tiny, an unrepresented sliver of a long and varied history – and present – of fairytales.

In this talk, I will give you a brief history of fairytales as a genre, and show, through the example of "Beauty and the Beast," how fairytales have been and are being used, not as children's stories but to contort and make social critiques. Fairytales – linguists, historians, and folklorists now know – can be traced back, not mere hundreds of years, but in some cases thousands. Versions of "Cinderella" have been traced back to ancient Sumeria. And "Beauty and the Beast," as far as we can tell, began as "Cupid and Psyche" by Apuleius in seventh century Greece.

However, we would know none of this if it wasn't for two brothers in nineteenth century Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. These two brothers, you have probably heard of, did not set out to create the academic discipline of folklore studies, although that is what they did. Instead, as two young linguists and very, very impoverished librarians, they wanted to create a complete dictionary of the German language. Their impetus was industrialization. In the 19th century, industrialization was changing

most of Europe at a rapid, mind-boggling pace. People who had been living in the same 10-mile radius for generations were suddenly moving around, going to cities, working in factories, etc. The move away from feudal agrarian societies meant that local dialects, stories, and traditions were suddenly disappearing, evaporating.

Germany, at this point, wasn't really one country in the way you would understand it. But, rather, a collection of inter-connected nation-states. Thus, the brothers were afraid as the things changed that what they saw as the true German culture, the culture of the Volk, meaning Volk, ordinary people, hence the Volkswagen, the people's wagon, would be lost. So, they started wandering around talking, mostly to women, trying to collect the language and stories that they remembered from their own childhood. They started finding out that these stories weren't the same everywhere. They were just like reflections, slightly warped. But, with discernable patterns, but also nearly endless regional variations. So, they started writing these stories down, trying to collect oral tales before they were lost. This project, for the Grimm brothers, was essentially patriotic and nationalistic. They had no thought of children. They in fact, expected very few people to be interested in this collection of stories. They viewed it as a side project. They even got into fights about it. One of the brothers, Wilhelm, thinking it was a distraction from their dictionary, which was much more important and would be much more interesting.

Because they only thought the fairytales would be interesting to scholars, they were written down just as they were told, with as few literary inflections they could possibly have. They were straightforward, dry, and brutal. These were stories that were told by adults for adults. Think of them as the equivalent of TV. These stories, in their brutality, documented the concerns of the people who told them. Who will I love? Who will I marry? How will I live when I must leave my parents' house as an adult? What happens if there is no food? Stories like "Hansel and Gretel," they discovered increased in their frequency and concentration in areas with famine. They reflected actual food shortages, not just a fanciful tale about cannibalism. The preponderance of stepmothers, for instance, document actual high maternal mortality rates. The first versions collected by the brothers, thus didn't attempt to soften anything. They are full of sex and violence. Rapunzel's affair with her prince in the oldest version by the Grimms gets revealed because the witch discovers that she is pregnant. Snow White doesn't wake up to a kiss, instead the prince purchases her dead corpse from the dwarves and falls in love with it, staring at it day after day after day, neglecting the rule of his country. She only wakes up when her coffin happens to get jostled. Cinderella's stepsisters don't just try on the shoe, they cut off their feet and the shoe fills with blood. This is probably the most common example of the brutality that most people know. And Sleeping Beauty wakes up because she is giving birth because she has been assaulted in her sleep. True story.

So, you can imagine the shock of the brothers when they discovered that their collection was becoming extremely popular all over Europe, but especially in England, where the daffy English were reading them to their children! The financial success of the collection, however, and the fact that people were doing something very unexpected by reading them to children, led the brothers to print seven editions, each one becoming more and more stylized, more and more religious, and more sanitized. The stories began to drift to reflect the way that they were being used at the time. In fact, it was at this very cultural moment that people really first started to come up with the idea of childhood as we understand it. The very idea of children having separate stories from adults. In England in the nineteenth century, people were in the process of inventing the type of childhood that most folks lived. Child labor laws were being created, and more and more people were moving into the middle class. And the best way to show that

you were moving up in class was to have your wife not work and to keep your children at home and keep them as child-like as possible.

Before the nineteenth century, even if you were literate, there weren't really separate books for children and adults, just books. Some of which may or may not be right for children. The creation of the idea of childhood is directly tied to sanitizing fairytales and the addition of moralizing endings. These stories essentially, at that time, had three separate existences - oral folktales, scholarly historical texts collected for nationalistic purposes, and children's stories. All over Europe, other places began to try to preserve their oral stories for the purposes of nationalism. In Ireland, W.B. Yeats and others began at the end of the century to try to save Irish stories as a way to resist British Imperialism. The Finns popularized the Kalevala. These stories were being used by adults to create a sense of national identity. However, while this was the great flowering of folklore studies, this was not the beginning of fairytales, nor the beginning of fairytales being manipulated by writers and tellers to match their purpose.

People began to notice similar stories were actually all over the world. There was a Cinderella-like folktale in China, in North America, and in Italy, for example. This led to an attempt to study these patterns to systematize them, a form still used today called the Aarn-Thomson-Uther Index, look it up online, it's a radical, you'll never come out. Through this process of systemization, we can trace the history of a tale, recognizing the same type of tale in different kinds of places, and discovering how that tale type shifts based upon the needs of the teller.

The "Beauty and the Beast" type is an excellent example of how this works. Anyone who's been in my class, one of which I know this one person asked me this like, oh I know all about this. So, forgive me. The earliest known version of "Beauty and the Beast," as I've mentioned before, was from a collection called, "Golden Ass," the donkey not the body part. One of those stories is actually completely discernable as a "Beauty and the Beast" tale as we know it now. In it, a young woman named Psyche is condemned against her will to go and live in the home of Beast, who unbeknownst to her is actually the god of love, Cupid. In that castle, invisible servants see to her every whim. She thinks she will be devoured alive, eaten. Instead, she is pampered and taken care of. However, she cannot see her husband. Instead, he only comes to her room at night, and she is forbidden from opening the drapes or lighting a candle. And yes, this sentence and story is frankly sexual. What else do you think the god of love is up to at night? Eventually, she gets lonely for her family and gets permission to visit or be visited by her sisters. They convince her that her husband must be a monster, or he wouldn't hide. So, she sneaks a candle into the room and looks at him. She is then banished by his mother, Venus, for breaking the rule. And she has to go on a quest to get back to her husband. This story, according to many scholars, is essentially a wish fulfillment tale. A story of a young woman triumphing against the odds, against the rest of us. She is powerful and active. Her quest mirroring, in many respects, not only Beauty and the Beast, but the labors of Hercules. This author is actually doing something quite radical in writing Psyche's story this way.

Fast forward, a bit, to seventeenth century France, and Beauty and the Beast appears again, this time in the pen of Madame Villeneuve. Now, this lady, she is a badass. When she was young, she was married off to a much older man, as was the norm. Somehow, we aren't sure how, after several years, she convinced him to buy her house in Paris and to never have to see him again. We think this may have had some blackmail involved. There she lived independently for the rest of her life, writing and running an art society for notable women. From her we get the term fairytale. She was one of the ringleaders, in

fact, among a major movement of writing fairytales. This salon, this gathering place, was specifically intended for these notable women to write subversive stories, to speak truth to power. They talked about their concerns in sideways fashion, under the radar of authorities, in order to dissent without putting themselves in danger. Madame Villeneuve was particularly upset about forced marriage, arranged marriage, which was the norm at that time for her class. So she wrote a version of "Cupid and Psyche," specifically referencing "Cupid and Psyche," that she called "The Rude Serpent." In which a princess who is exiled by her family for being ugly ends up, through a shipwreck, living in a castle with very helpful commandment objects that are her servants, and a man she never sees. However, in this version, rather than have sex they stay up all night talking. He ends up being a prince cursed to look like a flying serpent, and the princess saves him by going on an epic quest that mirrors, almost exactly, Psyche's quest. Madame Villeneuve offers up in this story, an alternative to relationships between men and women expected at the time that she lived. The protagonist is ugly, not beautiful, and so her value as a person is based upon her intelligent conversation. She builds a bond with the cursed prince based upon that conversation and playing chess. Her sisters, when they come to visit, trick her into looking at her nighttime conversationalist, and once again a spell changes her. She lives in this castle, though, by choice, not because she is forced. In the end, she saves the prince by breaking the spell through heroism, not a kiss. This story was written by a woman for other adult women, not for children. And was meant to critique the gender norms of the period in which she lived. She was phenomenally popular in her time. Influencing many writers who are more well known today, such as Charles Perrault, who was the first to give "Little Red Riding Hood" her hood. Perrault, in fact, argued that fairytales were the true French native form of storytelling. So influenced was he by Madame Villeneuve. We even have letters he wrote, actually, to her asking for her advice about his stories. She was so popular that other writers to react against her, think of this as a whole bunch of writers sort of throwing shade across time and space.

The first version of "Beauty and the Beast" to actually go by that title, the version that Disney based its story on, was written by another woman specifically reacting to Madame Villeneuve. She was in Britain. She was a French-English governess and her name was Marie Beaumont. She found Villeneuve's version scandalous, and wrote her own version complete with jealous sisters, a forced marriage to a beast in order to save a father who plucked a rose, and of course transforming that beast with a kiss. She wrote this story as an attempt to offer what she thought of as a proper code of conduct for young women. She felt they should be chaste, beautiful, and obedient to their father. Yuck. This version was part of the trend leaning the stories towards children. But, it also represents how these stories were used to make deliberate points by their authors. She attempted to give a code of behavior and later authors, in turn, have dissected that same code of behavior that many would now recognize as oppressive.

In fact, since the 1970s, writers, especially women, have been reaching back to earlier versions of the story, or reacting to the version by Beaumont or the version by Walt Disney, to point out issues with the way that women are depicted, or other social issues. In 1969, Angela Carter, my personal favorite, credited with starting the contemporary trend of feminist fairytales, wrote a version called "The Tiger's Bride." This version begins with the now-famous line, "My father lost me to The Beast at cards." In this version, Beauty gets to speak for herself, in her own voice. She rails against her fate, blaming her father for carelessness and for treating her like an object. She defies the Beast, who is a tiger who walks on his hind legs and pretends to be a man, at every turn. In the end, when he begins to treat her like an equal, she chooses to stay but transforms into a tiger herself. The end seems to say that she was a tiger inside all along. And that the only way to escape the terrible bonds placed upon her as a human woman is to

not be human at all. This story, to say the least, is not for children. It is incredibly Freudian, please do not read it to them.

More recently, in the late 1990s, Emma Donahue, a Booker prizewinning author, wrote a collection of short stories called *Kissing the Witch*. In these stories, she questions the centrality of heterosexual romantic relationships as well as other gender norms. In her version of "Beauty and the Beast," called "A Tale of the Rose," the beast is actually a queen who lives in her castle behind masks, convincing people that she is a terrible beast so that they will leave her the heck alone and let her live as she pleases. Beauty ends up staying with her, in a bond that is a bit ambiguous. Perhaps as her lover, or perhaps just as her friend, using the castle as a way to stay safe from the world and its demands upon them.

These two stories are only two examples of an entire contemporary tradition of fairytales by adults for adults. Not all of them are feminist fairytales. For example, true story, you can find online that the NRA made a revision of Grimm's fairytales in which all their problems are solved by only the good guys having guns, for some reason. One of those is called, "Little Red Riding Hood has a Gun," it's ridiculous. Another, less absurd, example is *Edward Scissorhands* by Tim Burton, which is a "Beauty and the Beast" story. If you look at it, it almost exactly mirrors the plot of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and Beaumont's. Except, in which case, the Beauty figure and the Beast figure get a bit collapsed.

But if you look around popular culture, you will see those patterns that make a story look like a "Beauty and the Beast" story all over all kinds of media. Like the ghost of the past haunting the present. From *Edward Scissorhands* to *Edward Cullen*. From Angela Carter's feminist vision to Walt Disney's essentially conservative one. You will find "Beauty and the Beast" stories everywhere, aimed at everyone. You will find it in art, music, fiction, and film. This is how fairytales survive, changing based upon the purpose of the teller, endlessly adaptable. The same story able to be used for purposes of nationalism, teaching young ladies how to be proper, or to rail against oppression. This applies not just to "Beauty and the Beast," but to the entire genre. Whole magazines, one of which I have in my purse, exist devoted to publishing literary fairytales. Popular anthologies and columns on folklore and fairytales run in print and online by people, like the acclaimed author Terry Goodkind. For every Maguire, author of *Wicked*, now a Broadway production, ranks novel after novel of revising fairytales for adults. TV shows like *Once Upon a Time* or *Grimm* use fairytales in innovate ways to create new stories, putting multiple stories together into one or making detectives who hunt down mythical creatures, naming their profession after the Grimm brothers. There are comics based upon fairytales. And video games, like "The Wolf Among Us," which has the Big Bad Wolf as a cop in New York City. Each time someone creates another story using a fairytale, they are in conversation with writers and storytellers alive now and long dead, commenting on their work and adding their own contributions. To read or write a fairytale is like speaking to ghosts. But these ghosts, rather than haunting you unpleasantly, want you to listen, to learn what they used to believe, how they used to live, and see that their stories are our stories. Tale after tale, endlessly connected and retold. And, you can see some of the comics I was talking about and artists in the handout that you have right there. And, that's it. Thank you.

Do folks have questions?

Question 1: Okay, so the first French woman and the woman who didn't like her story, she was French too, right?

Pullen: She was French-English. So, she lived in England but was also French.

Questioner: So, between those two stories and Disney's...Because the first French woman, she was an intellectual woman. So, I think of Disney's as, you know librarians love the Beast's library and all those books and stuff. The second woman, who wrote hers, where do the books come in?

Pullen: Interestingly, the books have been there all along. If you read Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche," there are tablets and parchments that have her name on it, saying "Hello, Psyche, greetings." So, there are like texts speaking to her all over the place. And the ones by Madame Villeneuve, once again there are books specifically addressing her and various inanimate objects. In Beaumont's there is a book that reveals, instead of a mirror, that reveals what is happening with her family. So the notion of books and various objects talking directly to Beauty or being everywhere are really sort of bound up in the story no matter where you see it. Does that answer your question?

Questioner: Yeah.

Pullen: Awesome. Other questions?

Question: I would like to know what you say. I always thought the Disney version shows the ambiguity of our culture about a strong independent woman. It makes her, in some ways, strong and independent. But, in others, it's really not. The same story.

Pullen: Yeah, I kind of view that film as like a transitional film, because she's going to be much more active than, like, Disney's "Snow White" and "Cinderella". Where they just kind of run around and squeal, right? They're pretty useless. But, there's still a lot of problems with the way that version works. How it's once again, sort of the female character sacrificing herself for her father. And there's aspects of the thing with the Beast that's sort of abusive relationship-y. There's how he throws a tantrum and breaks things. She comes back, she saves him and makes him better. There are a lot of issues with that, which I think that if Madame found out, would be very angry at. If she could talk to us from the seventeenth century. So, I view it as a film that maybe wants to be more progressive but doesn't manage it. That's what I think about that version.

Other questions? Comments, concerns? Aren't those photos there wild, the fallen princesses? That's a whole series of different versions that are commenting really directly on the Disney films in particular. My favorite one, which I didn't put on there, is one where you have Snow White barefoot and holding a whole bunch of babies and you have the Prince watching jousting on TV, with holes in his stockings. And, it's really interesting, it's like '50s housewife stuff. That one's really interesting. But, it's particularly fascinating how the whole tradition of still using them for commenting on almost anything you can imagine. Any other questions?