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Good and Bad Beyond Belief

Teaching Gender Lessons Through Fairy Tales and Feminist Theory

Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber

Classical fairy tales recount true female experience under patriarchy, a world in which innocent young women are set against their sisters and mothers in rivalry for the prince's favor. Hearing the tales for the first time—sitting, most likely, at a woman's knee—the impressionable little girl, like centuries of readers before her, comes under the enduring spell of these tales. Through the analyses this essay offers, teachers concerned about "keeping gender on the chalkboard" will find new perspectives and tools for teaching fairy tales, perspectives that invite authentic questioning of and conversation about these narratives and their many contemporary versions—in romance novels, in movies, in soap operas, in girls' magazines. Indeed, one might build a middle school curriculum unit around reading, analyzing, and rewriting classical fairy tales.

Engaging and familiar as "happily ever after" narratives for children and adults alike, fairy tales exert a noticeable influence on cultural ideals of goodness, images of evil, models of manhood and womanhood, and fantasies about "true love." A majority of the stories most frequently retold, such as "Snow White," "Cinderella," and "Rapunzel," feature a young girl's halting progression to royal marriage, her dream-come-true repeatedly threatened by the wicked deeds of a depraved stepmother, witch, or enchantress. The fairy tale father, oblivious to his child's misery, never intercedes; nor is he reproached for being inattentive. Ultimately, the prince delivers the heroine from women's wrath. His power to save her and her utter dependence on him seem key to their imagined future happiness.

Many parents, educators, and literary critics know that it remains impossible to read these charming tales and ignore their capacity for reinforcing limiting sex role stereotypes and conservative ways of thinking about family that act upon children when they are most impressionable. Reconstructing traditional theories to include the
developmental experiences of culturally diverse women, feminist psychological theories offer effective tools for "resisting" male fantasies, which, when consumed uncritically, can narrow young girls' visions of their social roles in this culture. "What is needed," Jack Zipes writes in his introduction to Don't Bet on the Prince, "is a socio-psychological theory based on the recent findings of feminist investigations and critical reinterpretations of Freud that will help us grasp how fairy tales function... within the American and British socialization processes" (2). Our work attempts this kind of analysis.

Mothers and Their Daughters

"Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect you, and I will look down on you from heaven and be near you" (Grimm 121). With that message Cinderella's birth mother dies and so ends the first sentence of the story. This dying mother's words are few but loving, and it is her enduring magical presence (incarnated in the hazel bush and in the birds) that enables Cinderella to overcome her famous stepmother's wickedness. Finally, however, when Cinderella is "chosen" by the prince, she leaves behind the hazel bush, and fully enters the patriarchal world, thus satisfying the conventions of women's proper role.

As the fairy tales readily show, and as other critics have amply demonstrated, it is not angelic but demonic images of the mother that prevail (Dworkin 35-41; Gilbert and Gubar 36-44; De Beauvoir 573-75). The good mother is completely eclipsed by the entrance of her vile antithesis, the renowned witch or stepmother. Proffering a psychological rationale for this demonic female presence, Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment argues that the child needs and in fact thrives on destructive maternal figures in fairy tales (68-71). His psychoanalytic view posits children's exposure to images of women's malevolence as a curative, allaying their guilt by providing an acceptable outlet for unconscious, hostile fantasies about their mothers.

Current feminist psychological studies elucidate Bettelheim's misreading of the basis for girls' fury with their mothers. In "Anger in the Mother-Daughter Relationship," Judith Lewis Herman and Helen Block Lewis, for example, explain that the Freudian interpretation of a young girl's anger toward her mother (resulting from the inferiority complex the daughter develops), entirely overlooks the male-dominated context in which a growing girl "first recognizes what it means to be female in a world where power and privilege are the province of men" (150). Disturbed and ashamed to observe that her mother and
other women are devalued, the daughter expresses outrage at female subordination by "hating" her mother.

Missing from Herman and Lewis's interpretation, however, is an account of the positive maternal feelings that researchers have documented in African American girls who grow up with mothers enjoying respect and positions of authority within their communities (Collins 49; Joseph, "Traditional and New Perspectives," 94; Bing and Trotman Reid 193). For more than two decades studies have shown that many African American girls are taught by their mothers' examples and words to become independent, self-supporting, and not too reliant on men. In personal reflections and responses to interviews, these girls voice tremendous admiration for their mothers' abilities to negotiate racist and sexist conditions (Collins 51–52; Guy-Sheftall 4; Joseph, "Traditional and New Perspectives," 95; Joseph, "Their Roles and Functions," 101). This research implicitly challenges both Bettelheim and Herman and Lewis by bringing into psychological theory recognition of positive relationships between strong mothers and their daughters. Moreover, African American girls would seem a notable exception to Bettelheim's theory of a split consciousness around the idea of "mother": for the daughter's image of the African American mother is both "tough and tender" (Joseph, "Their Roles and Functions," 101).

Yet, as these daughters of color enter adolescence and grow more sensitive to institutionalized prejudice, they eventually see that in the outside racist and sexist world their mother's status declines. From this perspective Herman and Lewis contribute insightfully to our discussion of fairy tales when they maintain that "anger between mothers and daughters is often a displaced anger" (140), the hidden source of which is "the oppressed condition of women" (153). Their analysis, instead of implicating the fairy-tale stepmother for her terrifying acts of aggression toward the girl under her care, draws our curiosity to the untold story of this disruptive female character whose rebellion against the "feminine plot" of passivity and submission is repeatedly cast as the source of conflict in the tales (Gilbert and Gubar 89; Dworkin 41).

While the fairy tales consistently polarize the characterization of motherhood, a profound imbalance in these opposing maternal portraits stands out: as a character, the bad mother is at the center, dominating not just the princess, but the plot. In contrast to the good mother (Cinderella's or Snow White's, for example), who has a barely perceptible part to play—appearing literally for a sentence or two before dying—the wicked stepmother assumes a starring role as the girl's tenacious adversary. In terms of narrative significance, a fiercely
competitive, vicious, and pathological mother becomes the extant symbol of adult womanhood. But for the preadolescent girl—be she protagonist or reader—emulating the witch (the only available, living "model" of feminine maturity) would surely incur severe social criticism, a fate unequivocally represented by the stepmother’s demise. Thus the dutiful daughter assumes instead the passive, feminine identity of the first queen, avoiding any identification with the active principle embodied in the characterization of the bad mother/witch.

One lesser-known tale in our study offers a refreshingly different set of possibilities for its “good” mother and daughter, both of whom assert themselves in surprising ways. In “The Twelve Brothers,” a loving queen secretly warns her twelve sons so that they can escape a death decreed by the king, their father, should a daughter come next from his pregnant wife’s womb. Minutes after their infant sister is born, the twelve boys receive the queen’s warning and run away, living together in the forest until many years later, when their grown-up, brave, and faithful sister comes in search of her lost brethren.

Shortly after the girl finds her brothers, an old woman, who typifies the evil enchantress, bewitches the princess: the twelve boys are changed into ravens and the girl is forbidden to speak or laugh for seven years lest her brothers die. Soon she meets a wandering, love-struck king and agrees—in silence, of course—to marry him. But once they make their home in his palace, the king’s mother, “a wicked woman,” repeatedly lies to the king about his bride, finally persuading her spineless son to sentence the woman he admittedly loves to death. At the last moment possible, the princess is saved, just as the sinister spell has run its course. Here the story ends, climaxing with the usual, ruthless vengeance toward the evil stepmother who is put to death in “a barrel filled with boiling oil and venomous snakes” (64). The girl’s father (that death-decreeding king) has long vanished. Although his barbarous proclamation was the plot’s original catalyst, only the stepmother personifies evil in this story. Forgotten, too, by tale’s end, is the noble queen. Yet we can claim that it is her maternal daring that accounts for this daughter’s unusual courage in stepping beyond the limits of conventional femininity; uncharacteristically, the princess leaves home by herself, then heroically and silently risks her own life to save her twelve raven-brothers.

According to classical psychoanalytic theory a girl does not favorably identify with her mother. Instead, a girl’s hostility and distrust nearly wipe out positive association (Freud, “Female Sexuality,” 227, 233–35, 241). Terry Apter’s study of adolescence, Altered Loves, however, captures the other side of girls’ constructive desire for enduring
attachment to their mothers, which she says, "remains a strength, not an immaturity" (1). Indeed, feminist psychological studies have documented thoroughly the importance of a mother’s positive role in her daughter’s gender identity. In Bonds of Love, Jessica Benjamin’s persuasive response to the classical psychoanalytic view of female development shows that, in contrast to Freud’s portrait of a young girl coming to femininity through attraction to her father, "girls sustain the primary identification with the mother," achieving "their femininity through direct identification with [her]" (90, 91).

Yet Freud’s analysis and the patriarchally molded fairy tale depict the mother as a wholly depriving (even castrating) figure with no recognition of the healthy emotional attachment and comfort that girls can experience in a close relationship with their mothers. "Mother-blaming" in life and in theory, moreover, is as common as it is in fairy tales. Mothers have been blamed for being "controlling, intrusive, engulfing . . . narcissistic, abusive, crazy" (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 21). In the fairy tales the innocent, virtuous female protagonist must reject identification with or empathy for her depraved maternal nemesis, illustrating Freud’s theory that “good” girls’ rejection of the women who mother them is only “normal.” This justified rejection then creates the space (and need) for our princesses to seek the ideal romantic relationship with the patriarchal designee: a rich and handsome prince.

Each of the heroines in the tales discussed does have an evil, threatening mother figure from whom she must free herself. This recurrent portrait of the evil mother serves one of the main cultural purposes of the fairy tale—conservation of traditional gender roles in the patriarchal state and family (Zipes, Fairy Tale as Myth, 36). For example, if Snow White’s (or Rapunzel’s or Cinderella’s) stepmother were a “good mother,” the young girl would have been far less motivated to flee the castle (or tower or home), and more important, she might not have fallen hypnotically into the prince’s arms. In “The Conflict Between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships,” psychologist Jane Flax notes rampant maternal devaluation and mistrust as a "cruel twist" in girls’ development, because it is “only through relationships with other women [that] women [can] heal the hurts suffered during their psychological development” (60). Interestingly, Flax sees that "women’s unresolved wishes for the mother is the truth behind Freud’s claim that what women wish for in a husband is their mother" (60).

However meaningful mother-daughter attachment may be, maternal separation—when freed from its significance in male-centered
developmental theory—has an important place in girls' growth toward adulthood. Arguing against Freudian views, Jessica Benjamin disputes the idea that innate striving for individuation is a predominantly hostile reaction against the mother's early care-taking role. Benjamin theorizes that the girl's separation from the mother is not enacted out of disdain for the one from whom she separates, but rather out of a need and desire to see herself as “other.” The challenge that girls face is to synthesize within themselves desire for feminine identification, represented by their attachment to the mother—and their desire for agency, represented by identification with the father (122).

For a girl child who does not develop an identification with her father, the desire for separateness “later emerges as ideal love, the wish for a vicarious substitute for . . . agency” (Benjamin 121, 122). Typical fairy-tale princesses do just what Benjamin says: lacking a model of maternal agency, and having a weak or absent father, they find in perfect romantic love the only feminine role available from which to act, albeit passively, and the sole source of feminine accomplishment. Offering only blissful fantasies of feminine helplessness, the best-known fairy tales stir readers to anticipate and even welcome miraculous masculine rescue. Once rescued, the young woman will be elevated by the prince's choosing her as bride. In marriage she will remain dependent on her husband's will, as was her “good mother” before her.

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have written in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, there is no escape from the stiffling reflection of the mirror in which fairy-tale heroines see their images (37). For “good mothers” and their daughters freedom from domestic restriction is possible only through early death, while a female character who acts as her own agent becomes the hated witch, condemned to die. In either case a woman is silenced. Because there are few outlets for creativity, a woman's “works” in these tales are limited to childbearing or the devising of nefarious, conniving plots. Either choice—"lying in" or "lying to"—will eventually kill her, revealing only dead-end possibilities for female destiny.

**Women and Deception**

In 1925, Freud wrote what he says he hesitated to express: that women, more than men, are “influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility”; thus, they show less of a sense of justice and abide by different—meaning “lesser”—ethical standards than do their male counterparts ("Some Psychical Consequences," 257-58). When
Adrienne Rich, on the other hand, discusses honor from a distinctly feminist perspective, she speaks of women’s conditioned need and willingness to fabricate. She understands that lies of duplicity, complicity, and denial are among the weapons women learn to wield in their ongoing struggle against sexual subordination. “Truthfulness,” writes Rich in “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” “has not been considered important for women, as long as we have remained physically faithful to a man, or chaste . . . . Women have been forced to lie, for survival, to men. How to unlearn this among other women?” (188–89).

In the Brothers Grimm, women who have ambition, who show a desire for control and status, must attempt to secure their standing by misleading others. They can find agency only through fraud and manipulation. Meanwhile, the fairy-tale fathers’ established authority, acquired from maleness alone, assures paternal figures control and status without their having to resort to deception. Yet witch and stepmother lie, not to take over the seat of power but to move closer to the male figures, be they kings or simply fathers. These fairy-tale women defraud and betray children’s trust in their quest to appeal to men. For example, Hansel and Gretel’s stepmother connives to rid herself of her husband’s children so she will have him and his resources to herself; Snow White’s stepmother uses trickery to ensure that she is “the fairest of all”; the wicked queen in “The Twelve Brothers” lies to eliminate her rival for first place within her son’s affection; and the stepmother in “Cinderella” attempts through butchery to fool the Prince so that one of her daughters may wed him; as mother of the bride, this woman would thus become near-royalty herself.

Studying adolescents in Meeting at the Crossroads, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan notice that for many girls on the cusp of womanhood, self-silencing becomes the “right” way to behave: it is socially acceptable for girls to withhold negative feelings, “covering dislike with lies” (179). Honest reactions of anger or frustration would betray a girl as “mean” or “rude” or “selfish,” posing serious risks to her being loved or even tolerated. In the fairy tales even relatively strong female characters cannot escape entirely the injunction to remain silent. “The Twelve Brothers” provides an interesting example of two brave women’s quiet attempts at rebellion against male authorities they cannot otherwise influence. After agreeing to her husband’s demands for secrecy, the good queen surreptitiously reveals to her son, Benjamin, that he and his eleven brothers will die should their pregnant mother’s thirteenth child be a girl. In collusion with her condemned boys, the benevolent queen subverts her tyrannical husband’s intentions.
without his knowing, thus keeping their sons alive and saving this father from committing a dozen murders.

Contrast this quiet betrayal of a husband by his wife with the mother-in-law's blatant lie in the same tale, a lie designed to malign and sentence to death her son's new and beautiful bride. The princess, of course, cannot defend herself against the wicked woman's accusation: to speak would be to turn against her brothers. But not to speak is to condemn herself to death. This story's crisis—for a girl to decide either to speak the truth and hurt (twelve) others, or to not say what she knows and thereby hurt herself—uncannily replicates Brown and Gilligan’s observations about girls' “voice” dilemmas. It echoes the no-win quandary girls in these studies have described: whether to speak honestly and maintain their sense of self or to preserve relationships at the cost of personal authenticity.

Apart from the many girls and women in the Brother's Grimm tales who seek agency through deception or silent complicity, there are also a few “good” women who directly name and even act on what they want. All good wives fervently express their wishes for a child; Snow White longs for the tempting apple; Rapunzel’s mother fixes her sights on sumptuous lettuce leaves that rouse her appetite beyond containment. Consistently, the desired objects of these fairy-tale women are concrete in nature—stays and a comb, lettuce leaves, even a baby. What expressive women want delineates their circumscribed universe of desire and emphasizes their concern with the physical. However, whenever a female character in the tales articulates physical craving, satisfaction of that appetite leads to her near-death or another’s suffering.

Early in the plot of “Rapunzel,” a mother must choose between appeasing her sensual appetite or keeping the long-awaited child she is carrying. Her choice of lettuce over infant results in her giving up the baby to the enchantress who owns the vegetable garden. The enchantress also expresses desire: as paradox would have it, the witch covets the baby growing inside: the pregnant woman, and the mother-to-be longs for the crop that the witch grows. Interestingly, both women dare to speak of and demand what they want, a striking recantation of the Freudian construct that aligns femininity with “being the object of someone else’s desire, with having no active desire of [their] own” (Benjamin 87). To desire, according to Benjamin, is to assert one’s sexuality and felt passion. Desire in this sense is a kind of truth-telling forbidden to women, because such assertiveness of the self challenges that feminine ideal that insists on a woman’s inhibition of her impulses. A “good mother” must learn, Benjamin maintains, “to accept
the abrogation of her own will” (89). Thus, a woman trained to femininity is “unable to say ‘I want that’” (88); instead, she duplicitously masks or “selflessly” stifles her desire for fulfillment.

Reconsidered within the context of patriarchal power, female duplicity in the tales does not simply represent women’s moral limitations, which Freidians say result from penis envy, but rather results when women and mothers in particular are not allowed direct access to power under patriarchy. In fact, we join many other feminist critics in saying that the triumphant “happily ever after” grand finale is itself a kind of lie endemic to fairy tales. Brown and Gilligan, for example, report that in making up their own stories, girls like to use happily-ever-after endings to resolve painful dilemmas. This, the authors note, is more like “wishful thinking on their part, something heard in a fairy tale, a pleasing and acceptable cover for experiences of feeling left out and fears of being abandoned” (47). The fairy tales’ happily-ever-after seems to accomplish more than simply reassuring readers by bringing “rightful” stature to the romantic patriarch. Happy endings also seal behind their thin facade ineffable female anger, aggression, fear of powerlessness, fear of men not pronouncing them sexually desirable, and, most of all, women’s fear of being condemned for having spoken authentically of their uncomfortable feelings and experiences. The Good and True Princess has learned to maintain silence, for she comes to see that her truths would be punished as disruptive.

“Happily Ever After”—The Fantasy of the Fathers: Only One Woman Allowed

In the romance story it inscribes for girls and women, patriarchal culture in the West creates a subplot, the separation of girls from women, especially their mothers. Carol Gilligan has observed that adolescent girls “have to give up their relationship with the world of girls and women, the world they have lived and loved in... for the sake of relationships that have been prescribed for them in male-led societies” (Debold, Wilson, and Malave 13). For acceding to patriarchal demands, girls are promised a “happy ending” that will act like a “balm for the wounding losses inflicted.” In response, girls learn to sacrifice all other relationships as they search “for true love, a perfect love that will never disappoint” (70).

This romance story, enshrined in fairy tales, divides girls from one another, from themselves, and from adult women. Reading fairy tale after fairy tale, girl readers come to see that they must relinquish ties to other women so that all their energies can be harnessed in preparation
for the fiercely competitive race toward men's approval. Trained to regard other women as adversaries, female protagonists in the tales never find contentment in the company of compassionate mothers, other female relations, or friends. Small wonder that the adolescent who yearns for happily-ever-after envisions in her fantasy no women at all—neither good mother nor stepmother, no sisters nor friends—only a handsome, wellborn mate or (if she is prepubescent) a noble, protective father.

Yet Cinderella, Snow White, and Rapunzel all have "good" mothers at the beginning of their stories, women who wish for the birth of a long-desired child. In none of these tales, however, does the daughter find friendship or support from any other girl or woman once her original mother dies. Both Cinderella's stepsisters and her stepmother harass Cinderella as their mutual rival; moreover, the two sisters are themselves opponents for the same marital prize. Even more isolated is Snow White, for whom bonding with another female is impossible. Since her interactions with women are narrowed to frightening encounters with the wily Queen, Snow White is left to find comradeship and guidance from seven diminutive men. Rapunzel, at her most wretched moment cast out by the witch into the desert, has only the company of her newborn twin babes. All three fairy tales reach a proper patriarchal conclusion, each woman in the castle with her prince, shut away from mother and sisters alike: these tales offer readers no imaginable female ally. Indeed, the "triumphant" exclusion of adult female characters in the final narrative frame signifies a "happy" return to male domination.

To counter the power of male myths in shaping portraits of women's relationships with one another, we can turn again to feminist psychological findings about adolescent daughters. In fact, psychologists have shown that, unlike pubescent boys who respond to a strong imperative to separate from the mother and all that she represents, girls thrive on defining themselves in connection with their mothers (Apter 5; Chodorow 167; Gilligan 8; Surrey 55). Contradicting Freud's view that girls do and must reject their mothers, feminist research gives the lie to pervasive happy endings that systematically exclude enduring connections between girls and women. Clearly, fairy tales enact a cycle of female disconnection. The growing girl in the Brothers Grimm tales, needing female models to empower her, is abandoned by women through early death or fiendish harassment. This cycle of female disconnection is perpetuated when the fairy-tale princess marries and follows the only model available to her: in maturity she follows her birth mother's model and becomes a good queen. Soon after childbirth she
dies. It is her unpressed self that lives on as wicked queen, reacting jealously against the beautiful, threatening daughter (Gilbert and Gubar 38–39).

For rebelling against society’s rules for women, the willful, self-serving mother figure pays the ultimate price, revealing indisputably the vantage point from which these stories are told. But for whom is the ending happy? Given the aggressive mother’s demise, it is no wonder that women and girls worry about overstepping the line demarcating feminine conduct, thus incurring male rejection or social ostracism. The awful fate of the witch-mother, and the fact that her story is never told except as a subtext of warning to wayward young women and girls, encourages girls’ turning against “unfeminine” activity or models in pursuit of that dreamed-of happy ending.

Conclusion

Renowned and full of charm, read or projected on a screen, fairy tales grasp the imagination of the individual consumer; on a broader, social level, the stories’ repeated happy endings secure the hold of cultural archetypes and fantasies depicting chivalric love and women-in-waiting. Just as Freud’s ideas about feminine development can be read not as “truth” but as an exposition of Victorian patriarchal ideology by which girls are prepared for womanhood, so fairy tales similarly reveal the deeply etched, subtle workings of entrenched, cultural artifice that indoctrinates boys and girls to accepted male and female roles.

Time and again, the compliant, patient, lovely princesses-to-be in the tales are assured their handsome royal mates. But in real life, neither quiet endurance nor physical beauty nor aggressive pursuit succeeds in capturing the attention of whatever man a fantasy-smitten heterosexual girl might regard as her perfect “prince.” Moreover, chasing that romantic illusion and feeling the pain of its inevitable demise leaves young women little psychic space or time for other more creative endeavors. Holding this fantasy about men—ungrounded in real-life relationships—seems more true for white than for black teenagers, whose mothers frequently tell their growing daughters that men are unreliable and that women need to remain independent and pursue self-sufficiency as well as education “through their own efforts” (Joseph, “Their Roles and Functions” 107). At the same time that the institution of marriage remains “ever enticing,” Gloria Joseph records in interviews with daughters recalling their mothers’ teachings that African American women overwhelmingly give realistic, “sensitively coded messages and advice” to adolescents, ensuring that teenagers
know that intimacy with men necessarily involves "inevitable problems that lie in waiting" (112; 121).

Joseph contrasts these interviews with responses of white, middle-class daughters to the same questionnaire. She observes that "there was more romanticism in the messages from white mothers. "Marry for love was a popular response" (125). Predictably, the responses of working-class white women were closer to those of black women, confirming that mothers who struggle every day with the realities of class bias and/or racism are less likely to convey dreamy portraits of men and marital arrangements. Matina Horner's early research reveals the extent to which many girls and women, limited perhaps by having internalized the tales' restrictive marriage plot, have feared the social costs of visible, ambitious achievement in the world. Competitive success against men is perceived as incompatible with femininity and too often leads to consequences of social rejection and acute discomfort (cited in Gilligan 14-15). The other kind of competition that thwarts women's development—competition between women in the unrelenting contest for men's favor—affects women at least as negatively as does women's reluctance to show their true potential in contests with men. In Among Women, Louise Bernikow writes of the effect that the "Cinderella" story has had on her attitudes toward women:

I carry [the story of Cinderella] with me for rest of my life. It is a story about women alone together and they are each other's enemies. This is more powerful as a lesson than the ball, the Prince or the glass slipper. The echoes of "Cinderella" in other fairy tales, in myth and literature, are about how awful women are to each other. The girl on screen, as I squirm in my seat, needs to be saved. A man will come and save her. Some day my Prince will come. (13)

Bernikow writes retrospectively as an adult. But one need look only at contemporary magazines directed specifically at teens to see how mired in fairy-tale fictions middle-class adolescents still are today. Articles such as Rebecca Barry's "My Mom's Drinking Was Ruining My Life," Seventeen magazine's "Quiz: Is Your Mom Driving You Crazy," Sabrina Solin's "A Home of Their Own"—an article about sexually promiscuous girls who come from families with dysfunctional mothers—Maggie Keresy's "Toxic Friends: Are They Poisoning Your Life?" Eileen Livers's "Call of the Wild: Is Your Best Friend Bad News?" and Gigi Anders's advice to teens in Latina for using Web sites to "land Señor Right" (84) all resound with and thereby legitimize the distrust young girls are taught to feel for their mothers and their female friends through messages from popular culture.
Like the messages in these teen magazines, fairy tales are internalized at a tender age, before their primary audience—young girls—have acquired tools for questioning them. There can be no doubt that these myths learned in childhood continue to leave an indelible mark on girls' and women's identities. As Carolyn G. Heilbrun wrote in "What Was Penelope Unweaving": "The chief source of patriarchal power . . . is embodied in unquestioned narrative." Speaking of the stories that "come to us like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us of what conventions demand" (128), Heilbrun then asks: "Since the male plots, unchanged, will not do for women, and since there are so few female plots, how are we to make the new fictions that will sustain us?" (129).

We might answer Heilbrun by saying that before creating new fictions, we must deeply understand the old ones and their hold over us. As co-authors, we have studied the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, rereading, talking, and writing about them with images of the real girls we know in mind. Not surprisingly, we come across a reflexive sort of problem: once girls, the two of us internalized the stories' sexist messages long ago, hearing them read by our mothers, who had in turn learned their scripts from their mothers before them. In fact, we would venture to guess that these stories are kept spinning mostly by women, who take pleasure in returning, along with their children, to visions of perfect love, sweet revenge, and wondrous transformation.

But to free our daughters, our students, our young women friends, we must first free ourselves from the delicious fictions that have held us captive in subtle and penetrating ways. Perhaps through a new, woman-centered sociopsychological understanding of the tales, accomplished through the lens of multicultural feminist theory, we can begin to transform our expectations for ourselves and for our daughters and therein sow the seeds for new and liberating fictions and realities.

NOTES

1. In the Laurel School study described in Meeting at the Crossroads, Sonia, an African American girl, stands out from many of her eleven-year-old classmates as being "confident and clear" (Brown and Gilligan 73). An outsider in a white society, she has felt "unfairness and exclusion" (70), yet she has
remained connected to her feelings and what she knows. Unlike many of the girls in the study who are tyrannized by "nice and kind," Sonia, say the authors, "tells a story of courage and resistance in bold straightforward terms" (73).

2. Mothers or women in caretaking roles who advocate the sacrifice of female relationships in the competitive race for romantic success with men unwittingly collude in their daughters' loss of empowerment. However, studies show African American girls, in particular, identifying with and respecting, not competing with, their mothers and other women in their communities (Joseph, "Traditional and New Perspectives," 94–107; Robinson and Ward [92]). Specifically, Tracey Robinson and Janie Victoria Ward explain the socializing influence in the black community toward "human interdependence," which they distinguish from "Eurocentric principles of excessive individuality and autonomy" (92) that underlie competitive female relationships.

Observing mutuality and sisterhood between and among generations of African American women, Joseph concludes that "it was and still is necessary for Black mothers and daughters to collaborate in their fight against powerful societal conditions" ("Their Roles and Functions," 94). African American mothers empower their daughters by serving as role models in their neighborhoods: they are "women who share with, look out for, and help each other" (101). In this way they foster connectedness, not competitiveness, with others, including girls and women. In "The Meaning of Motherhood," Patricia Hill Collins adds to this analysis in her discussion of "othermothers," who in women-centered families in the African American community "foster an early identification with a much wider range of models of Black womanhood, which can lead to a greater sense of empowerment in young Black girls" (54).

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