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FAIRY TALES and FEMINISM

New Approaches

Edited by
Donald Haase

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Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale

Cathy Lynn Preston

Date: Sun, 19 Sep 1999 21:06:41 EDT
From: Anna XXXXXXXXX
To: humor@listserv.uga.edu
Subject: Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)

Once upon a time in a land far away, a beautiful, independent, self assured princess happened upon a frog as she sat, contemplating ecological issues on the shores of an unpolluted pond in a verdant meadow near her castle. The frog hopped into the princess' lap and said: Elegant Lady, I was once a handsome prince, until an evil witch cast a spell upon me. One kiss from you, however, and I will turn back into the dapper, young prince that I am and then, my sweet, we can marry and set up housekeeping in your castle with my mother, where you can prepare my meals, clean my clothes, bear my children, and forever feel grateful and happy doing so.

That night, as the princess dined sumptuously on a repast of lightly sauteed frog legs seasoned in a white wine and onion cream sauce, she chuckled to herself and thought . . . I don't fucking think so.

Gendered Performance and Authoritative Frames

In her essay "Gender and Genre," Amy Shuman explains that "genres are not neutral classification systems but are part of a politics of interpretation in which meaning and the authority to propose and ascribe categories

is contested" (71). Noting that "genres exist only in relation to other genres" and that "they are what Bakhtin has termed 'texts bearing upon texts,'"[1] Shuman analyzes the relationship between a woman's life-history story and the parable embedded in the telling of that story, explaining that "parables are a form of reported speech. As Bakhtin warns us, reported speech can be parodic as easily as it can be referential [*Dialogic Imagination* 342–43]. That is, when we borrow another's words, and traditional phrases and stories are not only another's words but are the words of the anonymous and sometimes authoritative, traditional 'other,' we negotiate between the world the authority describes and the world we describe" (80). In the process of analyzing one woman's appropriation and recontextualization of a traditional parable, Shuman raises a series of questions that are worth exploring further, questions concerning "the ways in which boundaries [those of genre and those of gender] are maintained, reproduced, transgressed, or shifted" (72). In particular, for feminist studies (and as she notes, "for feminist studies concerned with the concepts of tradition and change") are questions concerning "what constitutes a rupture in the status of proposed fixed meanings" and whether "new interpretations" simply "stand alongside the old ones" or whether "they disturb the status of the fixed meanings" (80). With these questions in mind, I would like to return to the joke "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)."

The joke is, I believe, a good example of a story that references "the words of the anonymous and . . . authoritative, traditional 'other,'" but it does so for a parodic purpose. The stylized beginning, "Once upon a time, in a land far away, a beautiful . . . princess," invokes stereotypical female gender patterns of the past (enumerated later in the joke by the frog as marriage, housekeeping, cooking, cleaning, procreation, and child care) that are associated with the genre of folktale (and specifically with the subgenre of fairy tale insofar as the specific textual tradition that is referenced is "The Frog King").[2] By means of parody the text then proceeds to negotiate contestively between the world that the authoritative fairy tale describes and the world that the narrator of the joke describes: a world where princesses are independent and self-assured women who own their own property, cook meals to nurture themselves, use princes to satisfy their own desires, and contemplate the ecological possibility of a pollution-free environment. Symbolic inversion becomes a mechanism for breaking the fairy-tale frame and resituating the tale as a joke, a shift in genre that, I would argue, "constitutes a rupture in the status of proposed fixed meanings" (Shuman 80), those both of genre and of gender. More difficult to answer is the question of whether such a rupture "disturb[s] the status of the fixed meanings" (80) in any permanent way or whether it merely creates a text that stands alongside the older ones, competing for social space but ultimately not displacing their authority.

Part of my difficulty in answering this question stems from the permeability or shape-shifting quality of contemporary genre boundaries. Within folkloristic classification systems, a text, as Amy Shuman explains, "is designated as a this and not a that"; but as she also notes, the "discovery of permeable boundaries" has enabled discussions of dual membership such that a text may be simultaneously both "a this and a that" (76; see also Harris). For example, in the case of "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)," while one recognizes most readily the slippage between the boundaries of fairy tale and joke, one might also note that the text reads like one of the many literary feminist revisionary folktales of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, in particular the humorous ones (see, for example, Margaret Atwood's "The Little Red Hen Tells All" and "There Was Once" [*Good Bones* 13–15, 20–24]). But most of the revisionary literary texts were formally published, complete with attribution of authorship, whereas "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)" is informally "published" as an e-mail text and without attribution of authorship. As an e-mail text, it is not told orally (one of the older definitional requirements of a folk performance though now one that is generally questioned), but it is nonetheless "performed" for what might be called the imagined community that is made up by humor@listserv.uga.edu. And while that performance might be understood as being a folk performance, it might just as easily be seen as sharing qualities with the performance of a standup comic. Thus the text exists in a borderland betwixt and between genres, aesthetic registers, and processes of communication. In turn, the breaking and blurring of boundaries problematizes traditionalized notions of real and unreal, of authentic and unauthentic, of authority and lack of authority, and of traditionalized hierarchies associated with the real, the authentic, and the authoritative (Shuman 76–77). To this extent, "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)" participates in an emergent textual tradition that has indeed disturbed the status of fixed meanings: those of genre and by extension those of gender.

In this time and place, for many people the accumulated web of feminist critique (created through academic discourse, folk performance, and popular media) may function as an emergent and authoritative—though fragmented and still under negotiation—multivocality that cumulatively is competitive with the surface monovocality of the inherited older fairy tale tradition, particularly that tradition as it was mainstreamed into

American culture by means of Perrault's and the Grimm brothers' editions of fairy tales, Disney movie adaptations, senior proms, romance novels, television shows like *The Dating Game,* and so on. The remainder of this essay will explore how three relatively recent media texts—the movie *Ever After,* the American television special *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* and a magazine advertisement for women.com—break or blur genre frame and, in doing so, variously work to maintain, reproduce, transgress, or shift the boundaries of gender associated with the older fairy-tale textual tradition.

EVER AFTER

The movie *Ever After* (1998) is a relatively recent American popular culture production of the Cinderella tale that cleverly blurs the boundaries between folktale and legend in an attempt to retrieve the romantic possibility of "true love" for the generation currently being raised in the aftermath/afterglow of second-wave feminist and post-Marxist critique.[3] The movie opens in the nineteenth century with the arrival of the Brothers Grimm at a magnificent French chateau. Having recently published their collection of folktales, they have been called to court by the chateau's owner so that she might "set the record straight" concerning the ontological status of the Cinderella figure. This she does by producing two material objects, a shoe and a painting, and by reproducing through narrative (which the core of the movie dramatizes) the inherited family story that is linked to and thus legitimatized by the artifacts. The story she tells is set in sixteenth-century France and concerns her great-great-grandmother, Danielle de Barbarac. The narrator begins her story by glancing meaningfully at the Grimm brothers and then at the painting and saying, "Now, what is that phrase you use? Oh yes, once upon a time there was a young girl who," parodically referencing the conventions of the fairy tale in order to highlight the tale's larger framing as legend. Similarly, at the end of the tale per se, Danielle/Cinderella, while playfully chastising the prince, says, "You, sir, are supposed to be charming," to which he replies, "And we, princess, are supposed to live happily ever after." When Danielle asks, "Says who?" the prince responds, "You know? I don't know who," after which the audience is returned to the film's larger frame—that set in the nineteenth-century chateau where Danielle's great-great-grandmother has just finished telling the fairy tale now resituated as family legend. The matronly lineal descendant of Cinderella then concludes her interview with the Grimm brothers by noting that "while Cinderella and her prince did live happily ever after, the point, gentlemen, is that she lived." Thus, while, as the Grimm brothers acknowledge in their interview, there "are many versions of the little ash girl" (they mention, in particular, Perrault's version), thereby seemingly situating the tale firmly within the genre of fairy tale/fiction as well as within the patrilineal line of male collectors and editors, the movie works to negotiate a different status for the tale: familial (and by extension cultural) legend/history that has been transmitted orally and through the gifting of objects through the matrilineal line. Although one might read and dismiss this shift in genre as itself a convention of literature and film (which in part it is), I think the shift in ontological status of the Cinderella figure that accompanies the shift in genre of the tale, as well as the shift in gendered transmission, is significant as an engendering of genre.

I saw the film, when it was first released, with my then thirteen-year-old daughter. When asked to review the film for *Marvels & Tales,* I decided that before writing the review I wanted to hear how the age group that seemed to be the target audience had responded to the PG-13-rated film.[4] Consequently, I turned to my daughter and the young women in the undergraduate Women's Folklore/Folklife course that I was teaching at the time.[5] When asked to talk in general about the fairy tale "Cinderella," my daughter explained to me, first, that "there are many different versions of Cinderella," noting the Disney version and several multicultural versions she had read at school, and then significantly added, "but if a person wants to learn about the real Cinderella, they should see *Ever After.*" Continuing to speak, she fleshed out her definition of "real" by focusing on differences between Disney's 1949 film version and *Ever After,* noting that the one had "cartoon characters" and the other had "real people," that the one was set in "once upon a time," while the other was in a "real" place and at a "real" time, and that the one had overly simple characters, while the other had more complex people ("the way people really are"). Without knowing it, she had given a fairly accurate catalog of the traits normally associated with legend (an incident that is said to have happened in the historical past, that is geographically localized to a specific place, and that happened to real people). To explain further what she meant by complex people, she noted that while Danielle/Cinderella was still "nice," she could also throw an apple at the Prince and hit him with it, that Danielle "punched out" the mean, self-centered, older stepsister (I should note here that my daughter was taking karate at the time and that she, too, has an older sister), and that the younger stepsister wasn't bad but instead turned

out to be really "nice" (on the concept of being "nice" in girls' culture, see Hughes). Thus, for my daughter (who is the younger of two sisters, who can throw a punch as well as a ball, and who is coming of age in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries), the film presented images she could identify with and validated her construction of self by providing a fictionalized historical precedent for that self. As Elliott Oring has explained, "legend often depicts the improbable within the world of the possible" (125).

My daughter also pointed out that the great-great-granddaughter had Danielle's/Cinderella's shoe and the painting of her and that the great-great-granddaughter's ownership of those items proved that the family-based story was true, an assertion that she then qualified by explaining that she knew it was also "just a movie and so not really true, probably." My daughter's waffling over the nature of truth is also consistent with the genre of legend. While folktale is fiction and requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience in order to participate in its world, legend "never asks for the suspension of disbelief." Instead it "is concerned with creating a narrative whose truth is at least worthy of deliberation" (Oring 125). Legends are believed to be true by some and not believed to be true by others, but for many, legends fall within the "maybe/maybe not" category. As Oring notes, the raison d'être for legends is "the creation of a story which requires the audience to examine their world view—their sense of the normal, the boundaries of the natural" (126). Thus, one might argue that the film's overtly self-conscious resituating of folktale as family legend creates a liminal space for the viewer to construct a play-frame for the self in which, through a series of appropriations, the fairy tale/fiction cum family legend/history becomes cultural legend/history and then, in turn, is privatized by the viewer as personal lineage.

Girls older than my daughter (those in high school and the young women in my folklore class) sometimes noted disapprovingly that the point of the film was still focused on Cinderella's getting the prince, and lesbian students in the class similarly noted the implied but unstated injunction of heterosexuality; but just as frequently students pointed to Cinderella's "mastery of language" and "cunning wit," to the moments of gender reversal in the film, and to the fact that "a pretty, but not ravishingly gorgeous, or unhealthily thin" actress played the part of Cinderella as being positive features of the film. And I might add that in the spring following the movie's release more than one girl showed up at her local high school prom wearing wings attached to her dress (wings that were quite similar to the wings worn by the film's Cinderella when she went to

the ball). Significantly, though, the girls who attended the prom that year did so often having paid for their own tickets, having bought their own dinners, and having paid their share of the price of renting a limousine for the evening—at least this was the case at our local high school proms.

"To set the record straight" is to call into question and thereby revise a past "record," in terms of both genre and gender. Accompanying the shift in genre from fairy tale to legend was a shift in gender patterns insofar as the movie does attempt to respond to the last thirty years of feminist critique of gender construction in respect to key Western European, popularized versions of the fairy tale (in particular those of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Disney). Feminist critique has ranged from Rosemary Minard's description of fairy-tale heroines as "insipid beauties waiting passively for Prince Charming" (*Womenfolk and Fairy Tales*; qtd. in Yolen, "America's Cinderella" 297) through the catalog of various traits requisite for being chosen for such connubial bliss: gentility, grace, selflessness (296); beautiful, sweet, patient, submissive, an excellent housekeeper (Stone, "Misuses" 139); and patience, sacrifice, dependency (Rowe, "Feminism" 217). The catalog is by now well rehearsed. As one undergraduate female student (Annie Hurst) in my Women's Folklore/Folklife course in the spring of 1999 noted: "Little girls that are told again and again of princes who come to save a beautiful but foolish princess may be learning that, in order to get a prince, they must be outwardly rich with beauty, but do not need to possess the common sense that is essential in keeping them from needing to be saved in the first place. The fairy tales of the past are permeated with the ideals of the past, and could be updated in a way that would keep the integrity of the story, while relaying behavior that is now socially acceptable."

The latter is what *Ever After* attempts to do. As a review of the film in *People* magazine notes, "a clever movie director [decided to] remake the classic *Cinderella* tale . . . [and has] goosed the story by giving it an unmistakably feminist spin. Out went the pumpkin carriage and the white mice who drew it; in came references to public education and rights of servants" (Rozen). These lectures are delivered to the prince by the populist-minded Cinderella figure, whose most cherished possession is a copy of More's *Utopia,* given to her by her father just before he dies. The screenplay writers kept what Rozen describes as "the bare bones of the *Cinderella* story": "The prince, for example, first meets Cinderella while on the run from an arranged marriage to a Spanish princess. The orphaned Cinderella remains with her stepmother because she keeps hoping the woman will actually express maternal feeling for her. And Cinderella's fairy godmother

is—hold on to your paintbrush—Leonardo da Vinci, who is hanging about doing some artwork for the prince's father." To *People* magazine's catalog one might add that not only does this Cinderella use her wit and brawn to save the prince, but she also does likewise for herself, when, toward the end of the story, she is sold off by her stepmother to the local wealthy "scuz-bag" (who is, among other things, old enough to be her father) to use as he sees fit (read *potential rape scene* here). Whether the filmmakers were consciously doing so or not, they have, through a series of displacements, merged tale types 510A and 510B.

In short, the film plays off of what both folklorists and feminists have asked for: an acknowledgment that there have been many versions of "Cinderella" and that there is a need to return, as it were, to a Cinderella figure who is a "shrewd and practical girl persevering and winning a share of the power" (Yolen, "America's Cinderella" 296). That the film negotiates a shift in vision by means of a shift in genre from fairy tale to legend is perhaps a necessity for a generation who still harbor a desire for "happily ever afters" but who are also the product of a revisionary understanding of what that "happily ever after" might be and how it might be attained. In relation to the joke "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)," many of this generation, when asked to envision themselves as adults, see themselves as independent, self-assured women who will own their own property, nurture themselves, and work for a clean environment but who want to sit down to dinner with the frog rather than have it/him for the main course. This vision of themselves, though, is problematized by the next media text that I now turn to.

WHO WANTS TO MARRY A MILLIONAIRE?

The extent to which *Ever After*, as a single text, did or did not change the "status of fixed meanings" for any extended period of time is perhaps best argued by the number of people who watched the FOX network special *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* that aired 15 February 2000. Described by one newspaper columnist in her editorial titled "Who Wants to Marry a Frog?" as television bringing "the glass slipper to the 21st century" (Estrich) and generally denounced as having set feminist arguments for gender equality back to the Middle Ages, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* drew a viewing audience that successively grew through the evening from "10 million viewers in its first half hour to 12.3 million in the second half hour to 18.9 million in the third half hour to a huge 22.8

million in the final half hour" (B. Carter). Furthermore, the show's "ratings were even bigger among teenage girls and young women," and in "its final half hour, the show pulled in more than a third of all women under age 35 watching television" that night (B. Carter).

With a format reminiscent of the Miss America pageant, *The Dating Game*, and ABC's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* the show, as many people noted at the time, some with disgust, offered women (the one thousand who applied to be on the show and from which were chosen fifty, a number that was then paired down to ten semifinalists, five finalists, and then ultimately one "winner") the "chance to be Cinderella" (Estrich), and the numbers of applicants and viewers would seem to suggest, as Estrich pointed out, that the "pre-feminist ideal is alive and well." Not only does the "perfect couple" remain "a beautiful woman and a rich man," but the man did the choosing. As Estrich continues to explain in her editorial, the women who put "themselves on the auction block" knew nothing about the man (Rick Rockwell, age forty-two) except that he was supposed to be a multimillionaire. The man was kept in shadow during the show while the women went through a series of interviews and paraded for him and the viewing audience in evening gowns and beachwear. The show concluded with the contestants appearing in wedding gowns, Rockwell kneeling to propose to the winning contestant, and a legal wedding. Beyond a husband and what was described as a "standard prenuptial agreement," the bride, Darva Conger (a "34-year-old emergency-room nurse from Santa Monica, Calif., who also served in the Gulf War"), received "a two week vacation (the honeymoon), an Isuzu Trooper and a $35,000 diamond ring" (B. Carter).

Ironically, while the television special (an example of what is now ubiquitous and being termed "real-life programming," or "reality TV") turned fiction into one kind of reality (at least for Darva Conger and Rick Rockwell), almost overnight both Conger and the viewing audience were faced with another form of reality: questions were raised concerning the real-life nature of the "prince," in terms of both his economic status and his previous treatment of women: "Rick Rockwell may or may not have a million dollars to his name. Sorry Darva, but I wouldn't bet on it. What he does have is a record of abusing the woman with whom he was involved, to the point that she had to get a restraining order. Real princes don't have to go on television to find a mate. Rick Rockwell is no prince" (Estrich). In other words, Rick Rockwell turned out to be "a wannabe with a record" (Estrich). In Estrich's words, "Fantasy meets reality. The prince turns out to be a frog. What else is new?"

Two days after it aired, I discussed the show with students in the various classes I was teaching that semester. Many had watched the show or some piece of it, all but a couple of students had heard about the show, and most students readily identified the show as a contemporary literalization of a Cinderella script, one that disclosed, openly reproduced, and sanctioned the gendered economic relations of the older tale. While the students situated themselves along various ideological lines in response to the show and why they had or had not watched it, the one comment that repeatedly surfaced had to do with its real-life format, a format that is not only increasingly being used in television programming but one that is also increasingly drawing in large viewing audiences ranging in age from adolescents through young adults (more recent examples of real-life programming would be the limited serial show *Survivor* and its sequels).

While the viewers of these "real life" shows seem generally aware that the programs have been shaped by a film editor and thus, through that shaping, are in some way fictions, the viewers continue to cite the shows' nonfiction status as the reason they are drawn to them. As several students have explained, it is the difference between watching a fictional train/car wreck and watching a real train/car wreck, or watching fictional comedy and watching real people make fools of themselves, or watching a fictional soap opera and watching the soap opera of real people's lives (spring 2001). This slippage between fiction and reality is analogous to the crossing and blurring of the boundaries between fairy tale and legend in the film *Ever After*. But while *Ever After* blurred genre boundaries in order to negotiate a space in which to redefine gender boundaries, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* blurred genre boundaries in order to reproduce and thereby maintain traditional gender boundaries.

Although blurred boundaries do not always disturb the status of fixed gender meanings, they do seem to provide a liminal space in which the artifice of storytelling itself is disclosed. As Donald Haase notes earlier in this volume when discussing Cristina Bacchilega's work on postmodernist fairy tales, the magic mirror (which Bacchilega understands to be the "controlling metaphor" of the fairy tale and of its revisions) is "something more subtle than a static image that could be simply shattered—or replaced with a truer mirror—to reveal women's 'real' or 'natural' identity," because "mirrors . . . are neither natural objects nor unmediated reflections of what is natural" (24). Thus, "As with all mirrors, . . . refraction and the shaping presence of a frame mediate the fairy tale's reflection. As it images our potential for transformation, the fairy tale refracts what we wish or fear to become. Human—and thus changeable—ideas, desires, and practices frame the tale's images" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 28). Drawing on the idea of the tale's refracting "what we wish or fear to become" might enable us to see the ways in which both wishes and fears were at work in the audience's viewing of *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* For example, it might help to explain the desire to watch Cinderella be played out as real life (wish fulfillment) but also to watch for the same reason that people are attracted to a car wreck or are willing to see other people make fools of themselves (fear of what might actually happen to themselves). It is this interplay between fantasy and reality and between wish fulfillment and fear that I will address by means of the next text, an advertisement.

WOMEN.COM

Lying before me on my desk is a page (dated 1999) torn from a magazine.[6] The page is light blue with a small strip of yellow running down the right-hand side. In the center of the page is a small but dominating cartoon caricature of a young woman (blushing white, with long blond hair and blue eyes) dressed in a ball gown that is a slightly lighter shade of blue than that of the surrounding page. The figure holds the edges of the gown's skirt delicately in her hands, lifting them as if in dance, showing a hint of white petticoat and one small foot in a blue slipper pointed in a dance step. Her head is slightly tilted down as if watching her step or avoiding her imaginary partner's eyes. Around her swirls an effervescent, white gyroscope of stars.

Underneath the figure is printed the following message: "A website for princesses [in white letters]. Also: women who get really annoyed with women who act like princesses; actual princesses; descendants of princesses; anyone who dressed like a princess for Halloween; women who believe in fairy godmothers; women who wear crowns; women with gold-crowned teeth; every woman who ever lost a slipper; and any woman who wore a puffy gown to the prom [in black letters]." Horizontally, across the bottom of the page are printed the words "money, career, shopping, family, health, relationships, food, fitness," followed by the comment "the smart way to get things done" and a Web site address: women.com.

The figure in the women.com ad is clearly a Disneylike cartoon caricature of Cinderella; in fact, the color of the page and the figure bear a remarkable resemblance to that on the jacket of the video version of Disney's 1949 *Cinderella*. In the advertisement, the dainty and demure

female figure appears to be caught in the timeless swirl of "once upon a time" and "ever after" magic. She is, as I have argued elsewhere concerning Disney's *Cinderella,* a representation of Mikhail Bakhtin's classical body: a "smooth" and "impenetrable surface" that situates itself as "a separate and completed phenomenon" in terms of both image and the story that is intertextually invoked by the image (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 318; qtd. in Preston, "Cinderella" 29). This fantasy image, if taken alone, is referential (both in terms of genre and a specific textual tradition within that genre) and invokes the authoritative voice of tradition as interpreted and reinscribed specifically by the Disney movie and more generally as a fixed figure in media representations of "princess."

The verbal text below the image is participatory in what the visual image invokes insofar as it situates all women (those who are real princesses, those who want to be or ever wanted to be princesses, and those who "get really annoyed with women who act like princesses") in relation to the word "princess," suggesting the extent to which authoritative discourse successfully "strives . . . to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 342). Simultaneously, though, the verbal text is contestive of that authority and seeks to resist its historically privileged status. The tone of the verbal text is ironic, disclosing discrepancies between idealized representations of "women who wear crowns" and the everyday-life realities of "women with gold-crowned teeth," between fictional lost slippers and real lost slippers, and between fantasy balls and ball gowns and the realities of "puffy gown[s]" and high school "prom[s]." Finally, the mapping of "money, career, shopping, family, health, relationships, food, fitness" at the bottom of the page foregrounds what might be called "real-life" concerns of women as opposed to fantasy "happy ever afters."

In the advertisement, the phrase used to describe the Web site—the "smart way to get things done"—seems at once to be a reference to the performance of tasks required of the Cinderella figure and a continuation of parodic critique: real tasks and problems require real information and action for resolution. Having acknowledged all of this ("this" being the latter part of the verbal text's seeming disruption of the dreamy passivity of the visual image), one nonetheless cannot help but notice that there is also a way in which that same piece of text returns us to the world of fairy tale (or perhaps, as Linda Dégh argues, resituates fairy tale as legend) by displacing the magic of the "old" fairy-tale tradition with that of the "new" world of the Internet: subliminally, women.com is situated as a magical agent, as fairy godmother (or perhaps the Internet itself is the fairy god-

mother), and the words women.com are the "bibbidi, bobbidi, boo" that calls forth that agent's transformative power.

Quoting Theodor Adorno's assertion that "mass media consists of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect" (Adorno 601; qtd. in Dégh, *American Folklore* 51), Dégh has analyzed television commercials and mail-order advertisements in relationship to a two-part layering of meaning. The top, or surface, layer, she argues, is märchenlike:

> The top layer [of the märchenlike commercial] is the manifest tale, which we have already ascertained is functionally no more than figurative expression, dramatized metaphor: an ingredient of the advertisement but not the whole of it. In a story, a witch is shown in a characteristic outfit. Her magic wand, which she waves over a lady's hairdo, splits in two. As it turns out, there is no need for the wand because Hidden Magic hair spray does the trick. The idea behind this story is not that there was once a witch whose magic wand broke, but rather that whoever applies the hair spray in question will have no need for any other help. (51)

The second, or obscured, layer, Dégh argues, is legendlike:

> A genre like the Märchen, which is fiction and by definition cannot be believed, is unfit for the conveyance of belief. The symbol must be understood and the figurative expression decoded in order to reach the second layer, in which the suggested to-be-believed statement is expressed. . . .
>
> What is being stated in the commercial (and what we have to call the "story," for lack of a better term) is, at least formally, nonfiction: something that is believed by some, doubted by others, but, after all, might also be true. This description fits the legend best. (51)

What is unstated here is that at the center of many legends, particularly contemporary legends, is everyday fear, whether the fear is that of not having perfect hair or a more general fear of simply not being in control of everyday life. As "something that is believed by some, doubted by others, but, after all, might also be true," legend mediates between the wish for control and the fear of lack of control; but unlike the fairy tale, both its wishes and its fears are located in historical rather than fictional time and space. The blurring of the boundaries between fairy tale and legend, like the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, creates a site of cultural production in which social transformation has both imaginative and material possibility.

The women.com ad is multivocal, with respect to both genre and the ad's gendered voices. It is perhaps best described as a postmodern text: a "tentative grouping of ideas, stylistic traits, and thematic preoccupations" that in the arts include "pastiche, the incorporation of different textual genres, and contradictory 'voices,'" as well as "fragmented or 'open' forms that give the audience the power to assemble the work and determine its meaning" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy x). As such, it is at once complicit with and resistant to the reproduction of the genre and gender expectations associated with the older fairy-tale tradition.

CONCLUSION

In postmodernity the "stuff" of fairy tales exists as fragments (princess, frog, slipper, commodity relations in a marriage market) in the nebulous realm that we might most simply identify as cultural knowledge. From an etic positioning the scholar may delineate among forms of transmission and impose genre classification on individual performances of the "stuff" for the purposes of analysis, but from an emic positioning it is free-floating cultural data that can be invoked conversationally, narratively, dramatically, or graphically as an e-mail message sent to an individual or a self-defined group, as a movie or a television special, or as a magazine advertisement, not to mention the many other forms it may take: a bedtime story told to a child, an edited text in a published collection, an authored short story or poem, a text in or of an academic article, a comic strip or cartoon, a television commercial, an item in the news or an item rumored to have been in the news, or a ritual enactment. The performer's and the audience's fragmented cultural knowledge may have been acquired through any or all of the above forms of cultural production. As Trudier Harris has noted, when "technology expands, so does the possibility for broadening categories of folklore genre" (518).

As textual strategies that adopt "a playful irony as a stance that seems to prove itself endlessly useful" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy x), "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)," *Ever After, Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* and women.com problematize older dichotomies between the real and the unreal, between the authentic and the unauthentic, and between the authoritative and the nonauthoritative as they blur genre boundaries:

> fairytalejokefairytalelegendmoviefairytalejokeTVspecialfairytalejokelegen dadvertisement.

Doing so, they disclose "the constructedness of meaning, truth, and history," while reflecting and refracting "the complexities of subjectivity and identity" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy x). One might think here of that moment in the movie *Ever After* when the prince, looking at the portrait of Danielle/Cinderella, turns to da Vinci and says, "I must say, Leonardo, for a man of your talents, it doesn't look anything like her." This is the painting that Danielle's great-great-granddaughter uses to authenticate her own family-based storytelling, a performance that in turn contests that of the Grimm brothers and of Perrault. The moment is metatextual: artistic performance, art, and audience reception are self-consciously brought to the foreground, disclosing not only the painting's artifice but that of Perrault's and the Grimm brothers' edited texts, that of the great-great-granddaughter's oral narrative, and that of the movie itself. In such a moment one should ask, as has Bacchilega, "Who is holding the mirror and whose desires does it represent and contain?" and "How is the fairy tale's magic produced narratively?" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 28); or as Shuman has asked, what "kinds of authority does the [performance] appeal to: to the authority of male tradition or to gendered genres" (76)? In the case of *Ever After* the appeal to authority is multivocal. The film invokes the historical authority of male tradition (Perrault, Brothers Grimm, da Vinci), which it then contests through a performance of gendered genre: the great-great-granddaughter's appropriation of the painting and resituating of the fairy tale as legend such that male authority, both as storytellers and as those who historically have defined genre boundaries, is called into question. By disrupting genre boundaries, she is able to tell a different story, one that played to the competing authority of a popularized 1990s feminism.

Similarly, when "Once upon a time . . . (offensive to frogs)," *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* and women.com are brought into the same frame, they too disclose their respective appeals to the authority of male tradition or to gendered genres as they variously work to maintain, reproduce, transgress, or shift the boundaries of genre and gender. As Bacchilega has explained, "the tale of magic's controlling metaphor is the *magic mirror* because it conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice)" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 10). In turn, the blurred genre boundaries of the texts that I have been examining in this chapter "hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale [and to each other], playing with its [and their] framed images out of a desire to multiply its [and their] refractions and to expose its [and their] artifices" (23). In this way, although no performance has displaced the authority associ-

ated with the older fairy-tale genre, contemporary texts have cumulatively achieved a competitive authority, one that is fragmented, multivocal, fraught with contestation, and continually emergent.

Notes

1. Shuman 83. She quotes the phrase "texts bearing upon texts" from Todorov 22–23.
2. For a discussion of domestic duties, particularly the politics of tactical incompetence, and the fairy tale, see Lanser.
3. For an overview of feminist scholarship on the genre of the fairy tale, see Haase's survey in this volume.
4. My discussion of *Ever After* is largely based on my earlier review of the movie (Preston, review).
5. Student commentary is from undergraduate students at the University of Colorado, Boulder.
6. I have the page because a female student in one of my women's literature classes gave it to me following a class discussion of the Cinderella figure as it is manifested textually and culturally in American society. The student had handwritten on the top left-hand corner of the page, "Thought you might enjoy this! I did!"

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The fairy tales of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German women cited by Jeannine Blackwell and the fairy-tale texts of Iberian and Latin American women cited by Patricia Anne Odber de Baubeta are listed separately in dedicated bibliographies at the end of those essays. Otherwise, the following bibliography includes all works cited throughout this volume. In addition, this bibliography contains an extensive selection of feminist and gender-based research on folktales and fairy tales. It offers the most extensive listing available of woman-centered fairy-tale scholarship published since 1970.

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