

Conversation Pieces
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Resistance and Transformation

On Fairy Tales

by Mari Ness





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Introduction

The court of Versailles under Louis XIV could have served as a setting for a fairy tale: dripping with opulence and fulfilled desires; bursting with princesses and princes both wealthy and poor, jealous and generous; and overflowing with nobles who had watched their fortunes rise and fall at the whims of the powerful. (In a very real way: courtiers complained that even the vastness of Versailles did not contain enough rooms to host the number of nobles who wanted or were required to be there.) Masked balls, disguises, and costumes were commonplace; the king's own brother was whispered to play with gender roles and temporarily transform himself. The king himself conducted a secret marriage to someone not of his rank.

Naturally, fairy tales sprang up along its edges.

By “edges,” I mean the salons—that is, social gatherings in the homes of the aristocrats and very wealthy, which, during the reign of Louis XIV, slowly turned into centers of education and careful resistance—primarily if not exclusively for women, who frequently found themselves excluded from other educational opportunities, including universities and academic societies. The salons allowed these women to pursue their intellectual interests.

Among these interests: fairy tales. Not, I should note, in recording and preserving France's rich oral tradition of

folk and fairy tales, or studying the meaning and symbolism behind said tales. That would be for later French scholars. No, the salon fairy tale writers were interested in something else: using the fairy tale to express subversive, revolutionary ideas that could not be expressed openly in the repressive, absolutist court of Louis XIV. And, on a secondary note, using the fairy tale to extend the definition of “literature.”

This interest was sparked in part by the works of Italian writers, notably Giovanni Francesco Straparola (1485/1486?–1556/1558?), who published two volumes of fairy tales and fables, *Le Piacevoli Notti*, in 1551 and 1553, and Giambattista Basile (1566–1632), whose *Il Pentamerone*, or *Lo cunto de il cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerile*, appeared in 1634 and 1636. Both authors acknowledged that fairy tales were, even then, frequently thought of as children’s tales. But Straparola still felt that these tales—which he freely admitted to stealing from other authors—deserved to be written down and preserved. Basile cheerfully included copious amounts of sex, extreme violence, bestiality, cannibalism, and profanity in his versions, in the process making his collection somewhat less than child-friendly.

But both had larger goals than simply preserving or creating fairy tales. They wanted to help establish their “vulgar” languages—Italian and Neapolitan, respectively—as full *literary* languages, equal to Latin and Greek, cultures which had left written collections of myth and what might now be classified as fairy tales. That had already been done to an extent in Italian, but less so in Neapolitan. Basile also took the opportunity to express—under the guise that he was, after all, only

writing *fiction*—certain less than friendly and supportive statements about Italian aristocrats, and especially Italian aristocrats and other Italians not fortunate enough to come from Naples.

This proved particularly attractive to many of the attendees of the French salons, many of whom had found themselves in trouble with Louis XIV and his regime for one reason or another, or who came from financially insecure or comparatively marginalized backgrounds—like the talented Catherine Bernard, born to a Huguenot family and therefore never *quite* part of the Catholic establishment, even after her conversion. Others, like the fabulous Henriette Julie de Murat, seemed to positively *revel* in scandal. Not *every* writer of French salon fairy tales was mired in scandal—indeed, the most famous of them, Charles Perrault, lived a nearly irreproachable life from the standpoint of Louis XIV’s regime. But many were, and those scandals crept into their remarkable, subversive fairy tales.

The essays in this collection explore some of these remarkable stories, their writers, and the occasional parallel tale from other European cultures. Most originally appeared as part of the *Disney Read-Watch*, which ran on Tor.com between 2015–2017 (with one additional essay appearing in 2018), and *On Fairy Tales*, which ran on Tor.com between 2017–2019. They have been lightly edited to remove repetition and typos in the original versions. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed reading and researching these tales and their writers.



Charles Perrault

A Pair of Magical Shoes: Variations on *Cinderella*

What do you do when you find yourself downtrodden, turned into a servant by trusted family members, dressed in mud and rags, without, apparently, a friend in the world?

Get some magical footwear—and go dancing.

It's the sort of tale that could easily seize a world. And for the most part, has.

Versions of the Cinderella story date back to ancient times and can be found in nearly every culture. Details vary—sometimes Cinderella is helped by birds, sometimes by magical trees, sometimes by ghosts—as does the footwear. The glass slippers are a comparatively recent—that is, within the last few centuries—addition. Sometimes her family isn't even all that awful. In one of my favorite versions from Italy, the stepsisters, unaware that Cenerentola has a magical bird, are actually friendly to her, offering to bring her to the balls, and upset when she refuses. That tends not to be a particularly popular version, admittedly. Italian composer Gioachino Rossini, for one, found the idea of friendly stepsisters boring, and reinstated the evil stepsisters (who do exist in other Italian versions) along with concocting an extremely convoluted plot regarding the prince, his valet, and his

tutor, with everyone running around in disguise. This 1817 version is still performed today.

Probably better known to English speakers, however, are two English translations that also retained the evil stepsisters: *Cinderella*, or “Aschenputtel” (Ash-Fool) as collected and severely edited by the Brothers Grimm, and *Cinderella, or the Glass Slipper*, as elegantly penned by Charles Perrault.

The Grimm version is, well, *grim* (I’m neither the first nor last to use this pun). It starts off on a sad note (“A rich man’s wife became sick,”) and before we’re even out of the first paragraph, someone’s dead. This is followed by weeping and mourning, magical trees, more crying, hunting for lentils in ashes, the destruction of a completely innocent pigeon coop, the killing of a perfectly innocent (non-magical) tree, one girl cutting off her toe, another girl cutting off her heel, drops of blood everywhere, and pigeons flying down to pluck out eyes. Very cheerful.

What’s remarkable about this version is Cinderella herself: although often perceived as a passive character, here, she is a magical creature with gifts of her own. Her tears, spilled over a hazel branch, allow that branch to grow into a magical tree. When Cinderella needs something, she heads out to the tree, shakes it, and receives it—no waiting around for a magical fairy godmother to help. When her evil stepmother sets impossible tasks with lentils and peas, Cinderella heads outside and summons birds to help, and they do. This is the sort of heroine who *deserves* a prince. Though, to counter that, this is not a particularly kindly or forgiving Cinderella: the text establishes that Cinderella can control birds, to

an extent, but when pigeons swoop down to pluck out her stepsisters' eyes (the text cheerfully says they deserve this), she does nothing. Also remarkable: in this version, Cinderella goes to the ball three times, and her shoe is not fragile glass but firm gold, a shoe provided by her magical tree.

Some of this stemmed from a certain anti-French sentiment on the part of the Grimms, who were, after all, collecting their tales only a decade or so after the Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent social and political upheavals in Germany. This meant, in part, an emphasis on qualities considered particularly German: piety, modesty, and hard work (the Grimm version emphasizes that for all of Cinderella's magical trees and bird summoning abilities, not something exactly associated with Christian tradition, she remains pious and good), as well as a rejection of certain elements considered especially "French," such as fairies.

With Aschenputtel in particular, the Grimms were reacting to the other famous literary version of the tale: *Cinderella, or the Glass Slipper*, by Charles Perrault.

Who in turn was reacting to the fairy-tale traditions of 17th-century French salons—tales written by authors frequently on the margins of high society, who used fairy tales to examine aristocratic French society (they did not have a lot of interest in the peasants), and in particular, the inequities and limitations often faced by aristocratic women. Or, occasionally, to sneak in a few BDSM scenes right past French censors and others with delicate sensibilities.

Exactly what Perrault thought about the kinky stuff is not known, but he had definite ideas about fairy tales.

Unlike many of his fellow French salon fairy-tale writers, his life was virtually sedate. And much unlike most of them, he greatly admired the court of Louis XIV, where he had a distinguished career. From his position within the court, Perrault argued that Louis XIV's enlightened rule had made France the greatest country and civilization of all time. That career was all the more remarkable since Perrault and his direct supervisor, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, unlike most courtiers and high ranking officials, were not born into the French aristocracy, and were recognized for their talents, not their blood.

Perhaps because of that success, Perrault's version of *Cinderella* specifically focuses on a middle-class heroine without, apparently, a touch of aristocratic blood, who rises into the court largely by force of her inner talents—and a touch of magic. The story contains delightful little tidbits of French fashion and hairdressing issues (fortunately, Cinderella's talents include hair styling—and she has excellent taste, something you always want in your soon-to-be-princess). These not only give a very realistic touch to the story, but firmly set the story in a very real Paris, making its focus on a heroine without a title all the more remarkable—especially since Perrault's target audience was the minor nobility as well as the growing upper-middle class.

His version is not precisely free of snobbery and concern for class—Perrault clarifies that the king's son invites only “persons of fashion” (read: people with money, or people with the ability to fake having money) to his ball, not the “all the ladies of the land” that appear in later tellings and reinterpretations. This also holds true for the great glass-slipper tryouts: Perrault specifically

states that the slipper is tested, not on everyone, but on princesses, duchesses, and court ladies. Cinderella gets a try only after she asks—and only because the man holding the shoe thinks she’s handsome. Sure, you can jump out of your social class—if you have the right social connections, the right clothes, the right looks, and, well, the right shoe.

Perrault’s emphasis on fashion brings up another point: Cinderella succeeds in large part because she has the social skills needed by upper-class women: excellent taste in fashion (to the point where her stepsisters beg for her assistance), politeness, and, of course, the ability to dance gracefully. In other words, she succeeds because she is supporting the status quo—and an aristocracy that recognizes her good qualities (once she’s properly dressed). This is in stark contrast to other French fairy tales, where fine clothing does not always lead to acceptance, and the protagonists find themselves struggling to prove their worth. But it is also an emphasis on how the structures in place help *reward* women.

But for all its emphasis on approved gender roles, and for all his admiration of the French court, the story still has a touch—just a touch—of subversion in the tale, since Cinderella is not a princess. This may not seem like much, but it’s another contrast with the fairy tales he’s reacting to, many of which insist on marriage within the same social class. The original version of *Beauty and the Beast*, a long, tedious novella which we’ll be discussing later, goes to great lengths to emphasize that a prince can only marry a princess, and vice versa. Perrault, unlike that author, admired social climbers.

And, like other social climbers in the French aristocracy, Cinderella makes sure to reward family members. The stepsisters here don't have their eyes gouged out, or find their feet dripping with blood: after flinging themselves at Cinderella's feet, they are carefully married off to noblemen. This not only emphasizes her goodness, but also ensures that at least two members of her court will have reason to be grateful to her—even if their husbands, perhaps, will not. Though I'm not entirely without hope—the Perrault version is also the start of the tradition that the younger of the two evil stepsisters is just a little less evil. It's another nice humanizing touch, reminding us that not all villains are equally evil, and suggests that just maybe the noble that married her didn't have a terrible time of it after all.

Speaking of evil villains, though, in this version, we never do find out what happened to the stepmother afterwards. Presumably her only problem is trying to find a replacement scullery maid who also knows how to style hair really well. Get ready to pay out some big wages, oh evil stepmother.

But Perrault's version did not become famous because of the stepmother, or the stepsisters, but because of the little magical details thrown into the story: the pumpkin, the transformed mice, and of course, that famous glass slipper leading to a happy ending. It's almost enough to make even the most determined revolutionary raise a glass to the reign of Louis XIV.

Almost.

Cannibalism and Other Nightmarish Things: *Sleeping Beauty*

Stories of enchanted sleepers stretch well back into ancient times. In European mythology, they appear in multiple forms: stories of fabled warriors resting under mountains or on enchanted isles until it is time for them to return to serve their city or country in the time of greatest need—though if England hasn't *actually* faced its greatest need yet, I shudder to think what it would take to bring King Arthur back to its shores. Stories of sleeping saints. Stories of women sleeping in caves, in mountains, and in towers.

Unchanged. Static. Beautiful. Waiting, perhaps, for a kiss from a prince.

The literary version of *Sleeping Beauty* probably originates from Giambattista Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia," one of a collection of tales published posthumously in 1634. It's a cheerful little story of a girl who in this version is not *quite* a princess, only the daughter of a lord, who, after pricking her finger on a bit of flax and swooning, is placed on a lovely canopied bed in a nice country mansion. Naturally, a king rides up, as they do (Basile calls this "by chance"), and goes into the mansion without asking, because, well, king. Basile sums up the next bit quite nicely:

Crying aloud, he beheld her charms and felt his blood course hotly through his veins. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her to a bed, where he gathered the first fruits of love. Leaving her on the bed, he returned to his own kingdom, where, in the pressing business of his realm, he for a time thought no more about this incident.

Notice what little detail is left out of these three sentences? Yeah, that's right: *the waking up part*.

Talia even brings this up later, pointing out that the king had “taken possession while she was asleep.” The romance is giving me chills here. Between this and Snow White, I’m beginning to have some serious doubts about fairy-tale kings and their choice in sexual partners, is all I’m saying.

Though, to be fair, to this king it was the sort of incident that he could easily forget about.

Nah, I don’t want to be fair.

After this bit, it will probably not surprise anyone to read that Talia manages to sleep right through her pregnancy, which worries me—I can’t help but feel that she did not get proper nutrition during any of this. What does wake her up: her twin babies sucking on her fingers—since one of them sucks out the little piece of flax that put her to sleep. Talia handles the whole waking up to find baby twins crawling all over her very well, I must say; it’s an example to us all.

Until, that is, the king remembers that oh, yes, *that* happened, decides to visit his rape victim, and after see-

ing his kids decides to tell Talia the truth. It goes remarkably well:

When she heard this, their friendship was knitted with tighter bonds, and he remained with her for a few days.

What friendship? you might be asking, given that this is the first time they've actually, you know, *spoken*, but there's no time to focus on this because the story has a *lot* of cannibalism, betrayal, and infidelity to get to and not all that much time to get to it.

Oh, did I not mention that in this version, Prince Charming isn't just a rapist, he's an *already married rapist*, who has the nerve to complain after cheating on her with Talia that his wife didn't bring him a dowry when he got married? Granted, he says this just as his wife is serving him up what she thinks is a dish that includes the delicate tender flesh of his little twin children—it's that kind of story—so clearly, the dowry issue isn't the only problem here, but this king is a total jerk, is what I'm saying.

Also, Talia/Sleeping Beauty ends up doing a striptease for this wife, partly to make sure that her jewel encrusted dress doesn't get burned up, because that's important. Also the story ends with an implication that Talia, this king, and their kids end up in a rather incestuous foursome, which, *this story*.

Additional detail that you probably don't want to know: this version strongly implies that Talia aka Sleeping Beauty has no nipples. You're welcome.

Also two fairies are flitting around the story, but I must say, they don't help much.

Astonishingly enough, when Perrault came across this story about sixty years later, his first thought was apparently not “So, this is mildly appalling,” or even “Why is this guy so hung up about this dowry thing when he might be *actually eating his own kids*,” but rather, “Wow, this is *exactly* the sort of story I want to tell the French court *and* my kids!”

Which he did.

But not without making some changes. Perrault believed strongly in the French aristocracy, and whatever else can be said about the Talia story, it is not a particularly pro-aristocratic tale. The most sympathetic and heroic figure in it is the cook, who, as a bonus, is also the one character—apart from the fairies—who also manages to keep all of his clothes on and not participate in adultery, cannibalism, burning people alive, or incest, like, you go, cook, you go! Perrault liked tales featuring upper-middle-class characters and social climbers, and stories that emphasized the benefits of an aristocratic system, but was less fond of stories where the main hero turns out to be the happily married cook. He was also, apparently, not fond of stripteases in his fairy tales.

So Perrault tweaked the story. The fairies were inserted much earlier on, adding a touch of magic and fate. To eliminate the adultery, the king’s wife was changed into the king’s mother, and to more or less justify all of the cannibalism, she was further transformed into an ogress. This change doesn’t entirely work, given that it brings up all *kinds* of questions, like why, exactly, did the previous king marry an ogre in the first place? Presumably for political reasons, but what sort of alliance was anyone hoping to get from this? Was this meant as a reference

to one of the many political alliances Perrault had witnessed in his years at Louis XIV's court? If so, which one? Enquiring minds want to know. And, well, this makes the prince half ogre, right? How is *that* working, and did Sleeping Beauty ever notice this? And did the prince ever warn Sleeping Beauty before finally bringing her to his castle that, hey, my mother is a bit of an ogre? And did Sleeping Beauty—who, in this version, is just a teenager—realize that in this case, the prince was serious, and not just speaking in metaphors?

And speaking of oddities, in this version, after the fairy puts all of the servants and nobles at the court to sleep so that Sleeping Beauty won't feel alone when she wakes up, the king and queen just...ride off. Was this an actual enchantment, or a method for getting rid of some troublesome court attendants and a few unskilled cooks for a hundred years or so without killing them? Especially since the fairy knew full well that a handsome prince—well, ok, a half ogre prince, if we're quibbling—would be right there at Sleeping Beauty's side when she awoke? You decide.

In more positive changes, the prince in this version doesn't even kiss Sleeping Beauty to wake her up: he just kneels in front of her. This is apparently enough to make her fall in love with him the second she wakes up, like, *see how much not raping women can help you out romantically, guys*, although Perrault kinda softens this by pointing out that the fairy had probably given Sleeping Beauty some delightful dreams of the prince while she was sleeping, so she's pretty prepared for the whole marriage thing.

One interesting detail in Perrault's version: the court failed to invite the old fairy who curses Sleeping Beauty to the christening not because the fairy was evil—but because the court believed that the fairy was trapped in a tower, much like Rapunzel, or Sleeping Beauty later. A reflection, perhaps, of Perrault's observations of Louis XIV's court, where princesses and grand duchesses could disappear for years, mostly forgotten, before making rather less than triumphant returns?

The second half of the story—the bit with the ogre—certainly does seem to reflect a bit of court society, first when the prince, later king, attempts to hide his marriage from his mother the ogre queen, a nod, perhaps, to the many secret court marriages that Perrault had witnessed, and later when the rival queens—Sleeping Beauty and her ogre mother-in-law—play games of murder and deception against each other in the king's absence. It's also an example—unintended, perhaps—of just what can go wrong when the king leaves his court for a foreign war, and an illustration—intended, almost certainly—of the king as the source of order and safety.

Not that the story is all about the aristocracy. Perrault also added an adorable puppy. We don't really get to hear much about the puppy, but I like the thought that Sleeping Beauty has a dog beside her for the entire century. It's sweet.

This still wasn't sweet enough for the Grimm Brothers, who, in a departure from their usual acceptance of blood and gore, decided to axe the second part of the story—the bit with the ogre and the eating of small children, typically a Grimm staple—though they did leave in the idea of dead princes hanging from the briar roses

outside the castle, as a warning, perhaps, to those who might want to cross boundaries. In an unusual twist, they added more fairies—typically, the Grimms liked to remove French fairies from every tale they could, but in this case they had thirteen fairies to Perrault's eight—twelve or seven good fairies to a single bad one. They also made their Briar-Rose just a touch younger—fifteen, to Perrault's sixteen.

And as a final touch, they added a kiss to wake the sleeping princess.

Andrew Lang preferred the longer, richer Perrault version, including that tale in *The Blue Fairy Book*. But despite this, the Grimm version was the one to persist and the version Disney chose to work with. Perhaps because it suggested that everything really could change with a kiss.



Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve