

Do You Have the Phone Number of the Castle? or Sex Stereotyping in Folk And Fairytales

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Stories for children are important indicators of societal values. D.C. McClelland in *The Achieving Society* has shown a strong relationship between achievement imagery in children's stories and subsequent economic growth. Other researchers (Weitzman, 1972, Hillman, 1973, Stewig, 1973) have assumed a relationship between the role models available in children's stories and sex role learning.

Since studies have shown that sex role differentiation occurs very early in life (Hartley, 1960) and at least one study has shown no appreciable increase or decrease in sex stereotyping from kindergarten to sixth grade (Schlossberg, 1972), it would seem that the earliest stories to which a child is exposed might well be the

ones most important in forming sex role stereotypes.

Usually children are exposed to two forms of story at a very early age. The first is the authored story or picture book; this is what was analyzed in the Weitzman and Stewig studies. The second type of story told to the pre-school child is the traditional folk or fairy story. These stories, such as Cinderella, the Three Billy Goats Gruff, and Little Red Riding Hood, are told and retold throughout early childhood.

This paper presents a preliminary analysis of sex roles in *Told Under the Green Umbrella*, a collection of these traditional folk and fairy stories. Stories in the collection were rated on several variables; achievement in women was particularly of interest.

Before discussing the analysis of

the tales, the history of the collection itself should be explained. *Told Under the Green Umbrella* was copyrighted in 1930. This is a standard folktale collection, currently heavily used by storytellers and teachers. The stories contained were selected by the Literature Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International Kindergarten Union. It should be noted that all members of the committee were female, and all were employed either in teachers' colleges, as public librarians or as public school teachers.

Out of the entire twenty-five stories analysed, only one had a female character who achieved any desired end through her own effort. In this story, *The Old Woman and her Pig*, through a tortured sequence of events, an old lady finally gets a stick to beat a dog, and the dog finally to bite a pig, and the pig finally to jump over a style so that the old lady finally can get home in time for dinner. It is noteworthy that the heroine of this story is an "old woman" as the masculine hero in most stories tends to be a young man or a man in the prime of life. Another difference between this story and the stories with masculine heroes is the fact that the old lady merely gets "home in time for dinner" for her trouble, whereas a successful male hero may win a princess, as in *The Princess on the Glass Hill*, or at least get his business back into shape as in *The Elves and the Shoemaker*.

Two stories in the collection portrayed women with good ideas. In both *The Straw Ox* and *The Elves and*

the Shoemaker, the wife had a good idea but the husband was needed to help carry it out. In both stories, the main contribution of the wife was the idea. Again, the woman in *The Straw Ox* was an "old woman".

Another story, *The Fisherman and His Wife*, which had an outstanding female character, should be mentioned. In this story, the fisherman took the bad advice of his greedy wife;

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this tale is a child's sized MacBeth. There is no correspondingly evil picture of a husband. In fact, no masculine villain caused the downfall of an innocent victim as successfully as this wife caused the downfall of her husband and herself. Perhaps stories like this can be correlated with findings that young boys describe adult women as nasty and exploitative (Hartley, 1959).

But the above stories are the exceptions. For the most part the stories in *Told Under the Green Umbrella* ignored women altogether. This is shown in the quantifications we made of the numbers of females mentioned in titles, the numbers shown in illustrations, the number of female characters altogether, and the numbers of stories with no females as opposed to the number of stories with no males.

On the assumption that characters named in story titles are often the important characters in a story, the characters named in titles were counted by sex. Fourteen stories had male characters in the title, six had female characters.

The findings are similar when counting the sex of characters portrayed in the illustrations. We included in this count animals who were wearing clothes which made their sex obvious. There were twenty-one illustrations showing males, and nine depicting females.

Out of twenty-five stories, seven had no female characters, but no story was completely lacking in male characters.

After counting all males in all

stories, we found sixty male characters; total number of females, thirty-six.

However, the thirty-six female characters took up much less of the stories than an equivalent number of male characters. With the exceptions mentioned, the females tended to be peripheral to the story. Many more of them were wives or mothers, mentioned in one sentence and then forgotten, than were the male characters. In fact, out of sixty male characters only five were designated primarily by their relationship to other characters. While out of thirty-six females, thirteen were described primarily by their relationship to another character.

Many of the women in the stories were passive prizes for masculine achievement. In *The Princess on the Glass Hill*, the princess had no character whatsoever and no speaking lines. She existed only as would a pot of gold — the prize at the end of the rainbow.

Another example of the passive prize was Cinderella. She succeeded through no action of her own. We are told she was good and kind, although this was not shown in the story. Actually, she was completely passive, just "waiting for the prince to come around and try the glass slipper on her foot." The impression was left that if the prince had not made it to her house, Cinderella would not have gone to him. The message to little girls was "someday your prince may come, but you certainly can't go to him."

Other stories in this collection in-

volve the woman as sexual prize. *Little Scar Face* is similar to Cinderella; in this story a good, kind, non-aggressive girl gets the handsome man. Two stories are of the brave-and-aggressive-man-gets-the-beautiful-girl type. However no story shows a brave and aggressive girl getting a handsome man; and no story shows a kind and good man winning a beautiful girl.

The stories in *Told Under the Green Umbrella* also contained more subtle innuendoes which were harder to quantify. The following quotes exhibit some attitudes which convey sexual stereotypes.

From *Old Lukois, The Dustman*:

Then they came to the bridal hall, where all the little lady mice stood on the right whispering and giggling, as if they were making fun of each other, and on the left stood all the gentlemen mice stroking their whiskers with their paws.

(*Told Under the Green Umbrella*, p.4)

From *The Race Between Hare and Hedgehog*:

"Don't be so quick with your words, woman," said the Hedgehog. "That's my affair; you musn't meddle with what you don't understand. Look sharp: put on your things and come along."

What was the wife to do? She had to obey, whether she wanted to or not.

(*Told Under the Green Umbrella*, p. 32)

One ironic observation can be made. Since the women responsible for this collection were all working women, actively involved in a national committee of an educational association, they must have had lives much different from those they chose to have portrayed in these stories. The Weitzman study makes a similar point concerning the women authors of picture books.

In general we found our results agreed strongly with the results of the Weitzman study. Considering that the Weitzman study concentrated on prize winning picture books from 1967 to 1970, this might mean that sex role depiction had not changed in major ways in the preceeding forty years.

More hopefully, one recent study (Stewig 1975) shows a significant change between books spanning the period sixty-eight years before 1972 and more recent books published between 1972 and 1974.

Since trade books seem to be reflecting our changed ideas about sex roles, we may find our folklore beginning to change, our mythology being rewritten, Cinderella phoning the prince and asking him to return her shoe.

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