

Of Innocents and Hags: The Status of the Female in the Seventeenth-Century Fairy Tale

**by
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Within the images of the virgin and the old woman in Occidental literature arise the problems of fertility and of phantasms; the image of the female intersects infallibly with reveries and fears of purity and fecundity, rottenness and death. The virgin beckons: her purity entices, her unused fecundity holds the promises of creation, the unleashing of the power of life. The old woman terrifies: carrying the knowledge of the enticements of old in her withered body, she offers the specter of death intermingled with the not-yet-silenced forces of life. The zone of my investigation is the canonical fairy tales of seventeenth through early-nineteenth-century Europe, especially those of Perrault and the brothers Grimm, where a powerful complex of images of the virginal and the aged female digs its roots deeply into the cultural ground of the Judeo-Christian Occident. Lilith, defiant first wife of Adam who became the demon of the night, the naive innocent Eve deluded by a serpent draped seductively over her garden wall, and Pandora, who let loose the evils of the world upon the human race, all left their strangely-intermingled progeny strewn across the paths of the fairies. Disseminated regularly over the centuries to follow, feeding into the desires and anguishes of modern (particularly psychoanalytic) conceptions of the female, the fairy tales have retained a peculiar force. Over the beds of little children, in the penumbra of the evening, and under the cover of charm, a haunting image of the female, deeply rooted in the strongest myths of the West, has continued to weave its way through the cultural consciousness of the Occident.

The virgin and the *vieille* are two of the most common elements of the European tale. The virgin is associated predictably with purity and goodness, the old woman with magic, death, and the forest. Between them lies a space that is perhaps more compelling because in the fairy tales it is silenced, elided or transformed. It is the place of fecundity incorporated into society: the place of the mother. Interestingly, in the male-authored European fairy tales, an abyss of narration opens around the space of the maternal uterus. This paper will begin to approach that abyss of maternal text by the two extremes that surround it.

The cluster of values surrounding the fairy-tale maiden is stable, predictable, and with rare exceptions, invariable. The younger daughter of Perrault's "Les Fées" is the most common of types: not only "honnête" and "douce," but "avec cela une des plus belles filles qu'on eût su voir" (Perrault 147). Cinderella too is sweet, and good, her beauty eventually shining out from underneath her cinders. Virtuous, industrious, diligent, kind, sweet, honest, pious (the last particularly in Germany), patient, good, and beautiful: the maiden gains not only a social and moral status but physical qualities as well that are tied to her virginity. Intimations of sex do appear in the tales, in the form of the female-devouring wolf of "Little Red Riding Hood," the bear of the Grimms' "Snow White and Rose Red" who asks to sleep on the hearth of the two rather uncomfortable little girls, or the importunate frog who insists on jumping into the princess' bed in the Grimms' "The Frog King." Yet with the exception of Rapunzel who, badly raised by her fairy keepers, finds herself pregnant one day, and perhaps Little Red Riding Hood in her disappearance into the wolf's belly, the virgins remain intact, ignorant, untouched, "perfect" in their undeveloped and unused fecundity. The princes will discover them arrayed in dresses the color of the moon, spitting diamonds at their feet, tending trees with fruits of gold: dream of paradisiacal pleasures untouched and unsullied.

Importantly, the social and moral status of virginity encodes itself, in the tales, as a narrative status. The space of the tale and the space of virginity largely coincide. These passive beauties, patiently awaiting their princes, their "good" character reflected in their physical beauty, are invariably heroines of the narrative place of fairy-telling. Narration leads up to but will rarely approach the place of fertility without a marked distaste. "Il l'épousa": so end the narrated lives of both Cinderella and the good daughter of "Les Fées." Their tale and their maidenhood share identical limits; both ceasing with the proprietary act of the prince. The remainder of their lives was not of interest to the teller. Fertile and post-fertile women are largely prefatory or auxiliary characters in this genre; they rarely serve as protagonists. The tales of virgins, unlike those of other women, are tellable. Fairy-telling is a place of sense rising in the sexual and semiotic place of virginity, a place of narration waiting for the closure offered by the prince.

Paradoxically, however, like the primordial myth of the Judeo-Christian Occident where the pure Eve succumbs eventually to the lustful serpent, the scenario cannot remain intact. Virginity,

reverie of perfection, is, without its own violation, imperfect in the tales. To remain eternally virgin, to have no prince, no phallus, no fecundity, is plague and punishment in the fairy tales. Bad or bewitched girls remain forever virginal, relegated to the forests where no man will find or have their ugliness. The “bad” (lazy and impolite) daughter of “Les Fées” dies there. Sleeping Beauty spends her bewitched existence there, far away from the curious princes. “Good” girls get husbands and eventually children as recompense for their purity. But that reward is also — in one of the strongest paradoxes of fairy tales— the end of their status. The rupture of the hymen, recompense for goodness, represents also the rupture of the old status. The virgin, in Levi-Strauss’ terminology, must be cooked; the raw girl transformed into wife, nature into culture. And, although Levi-Strauss’ terminology in *Le Cru et le cuit* has a certain aptness, males and females do not necessarily “cook” in the same fashion in fairy tales. In females, the simplicity and narratability of virginity never seem to cook fully into social acceptance. Instead they leave a troubling remainder, simmering in the bottom of the male’s cookpot. It is the terror, the mutability, and the narrative silence of fecundity. It is the uterus, and its danger of creation; troubling, magic, and uncontrolled.

Appearing, apparently from nowhere, to either ease or block the process of virginal transformation are the fairies and witches. Although magical facilitators and interrupters appear in a variety of forms, from young fairies to testy old witches, nymphs and nixies to magical birds and fish, gnomes and giants to angels and the Virgin Mary herself, old women are among the most frequent interveners in the life of the virgin. Tester of young women, who rewards or punishes them according to their virtue (Perrault’s “Les Fées”), beneficent accomplisher of impossible tasks (Grimms’ “True Bride”), or envenomed spell-weaver (“Sleeping Beauty”), she may be wise woman opening her store of knowledge-experience for the virgin or evil force stirring her brew of potions within the darkness of the forest. Good or evil, helping or hindering, old women in the tales are infallibly inhabited by the forces of knowledge or magic. They fill young girls with enchantments that make them spit diamonds and pearls or snakes and toads, that ensconce them in the palace of the king or expel them from society, relegating them, like the witch herself, to the moribund darkness of the forest.

Old women cook or decompose, turn virgins into cultural objects, proper for marriage, or rejected nature, unused and unwanted, left to rot in the woods. Rewarding or “good” fairies

pass the virgin through to marriage and the male; the prince and his father, into the realm of what Luce Irigaray has termed “l’hom(m)o-sexualité,” the exclusive valorization of the need-desires of the male. The good daughter of “Les Fées,” spitting out diamonds at the feet of the prince to whom she recounts her tale, evokes both his physical and economic desire. Perrault here was inclined to be specific: “Le fils du Roi, qui vit sortir de sa bouche cinq ou six perles, et autant de diamants, la pria de lui dire d’où cela lui venait. Elle lui en conta toute son aventure. Le fils du Roi en devint amoureux, et considérant qu’un tel don valait mieux que tout ce qu’on pouvait donner en mariage à un autre, l’emmena au Palais du Roi son père où il l’épousa” (147). Sexual, social and economic pleasures combine in the successful place of fairy cooking, where the transformations inevitably add value to the world of the prince.

Evil, or punishing fairies, on the other hand, keep the maidens for themselves and the forest. The jealous fairies of “Rapunzel” shut her up in their tower, away from the prying eyes and phalluses of the princes. The testy old fairy of “Sleeping Beauty” offers the gift of death. The judging fairy of “Les Fées” too offers death to the impolite daughter, leaving her to spit toads in the forest. Among punishing and evil fairies, the virgin perishes —rots and spoils— rapidly, passed immediately from raw to rotten, entering, through her evil or the fairy’s desire, into the realm of the old women. Undesirable and productive of nothing but nature (serpents, toads, etc.), the cursed virgin is useless to the patriarchs who will allow her to die far from the palace and its pleasures: “La malheureuse, après avoir bien couru sans trouver personne qui voulût la recevoir, alla mourir au coin d’un bois” (149). Nature, place of death, rot and suspect magic, threatens constantly to engulf the virgin and keep her for itself.

The old woman, experienced over long years in the arts of cooking and the metamorphoses of childbirth, full now of a uterus unused and unnecessary for the re-engendering of the race, seems particularly well-suited to her role as magical intervener in the life of the virgin. Lévi-Strauss proposes that she is already rotten herself, past the dangers of nature and the risks of transformation. She is already liberated, one might add, from the patriarchy, her attractions no longer of interest to the princes, her uterus, the site of her former transformations now past the pale of male appropriation. The old fairy of “La Belle au bois dormant” had not been out of her tower for more than 50 years, so long that people took her to be “morte ou enchantée” (Perrault 97). In the

coincidence of death and enchantment, the old fairy declares her own rights over the patriarchy. She is phantasm of feminine-death still threatening the palace from without. In the terrors of nothingness spreading eternally and magic growing in the spoiled body of the corpse, the old woman finds the place of her power.

And one must not forget that there is power in *pourriture*, that death is beyond the control even of the princes, that rot, spreading through the body, is the sign and the agent of its metamorphosis. Death and rot escape the patriarchy. They are the force of the old woman, flowing from her neglect and her release from the normal place of the female. Her wand/phallus/finger/tongue at the ready, she creates change and wreaks havoc. She points and offers life or death. She waves, and the new appears to cover the body of the old. Displaying her finger/branch, she is the force of nature over culture, magic over ordered knowledge, the forest unconquerable by the palace. Speaking with fruited or poisoned tongue, she is the terror of the sign forming according only to her own whim, in her own strange alchemical musings. She is semio-magician, transforming Cinderella into princess or hiding Peau d'Ane in a donkey-skin, covering good daughters in dresses the color of the stars and the bad in pitch. She is necessary, for without her the virgin might never reach the prince. The good girls of "Les Fées," "Mother Holle" and "1-Eye, 2-Eyes, 3-Eyes," all variations on the same theme, might have gone unnoticed by the prince if they had not been able, under fairy magic, to entice him with jewels and golden fruit. The fairy is the displayer of the maiden's sense; the maker of connections. Yet with magic uncontrollable by even the King himself, she remains a dangerous supplement in the patriarchy.

Witches and fairies haunt the tales with their power, like the matriarchy come back to terrify the fathers and sons who thought they had disposed of it. And the purity of the virgins is filled with the strangeness of the witches. Enchanted or assisted by the aged wise ones, they fill with the magic that makes them either acceptable or horrendous to the princes. On their way to the palace and life, or to the forest and death, they inhale the pungent odors of fairy alchemy and age. The aged ones, long escaped from the patriarchy, haunt it again through their protégées. The virgin carries the threat of the old woman along with her, like Peau d'Ane with her fairy wand dragging her treasures behind her underground, beyond the grasp of the desirous king. Peau d'Ane, heroine whose purity was protected by the passage of her gifts through the earth, was not the only occidental heroine to mix the

realms of virginity and death. The chaste Persephone too mixed her purity with the taint of Hades, unable to dissociate herself fully from the underworld once she had tasted its fruits. Often in the Occident, the virgin is inhabited, and tainted by an otherness that the prince may never control. She will become his wife carrying the promise of purity and the suspect odors of death, like Peau d'Ane arrayed in the blindingly beautiful robes that had long followed her underground. The wife's fertility will be proof of the alchemical fairy-power the prince had feared and the annihilation of the virginity that had attracted him. Her simplicity evolves into the complication and multiplication of fecundity. The problem is that the virgin takes the powers of the witches with her to the marriage bed.

Married and fertile she becomes a figure apparently so threatening, so ripe with the magic fecundity of the uterus, so full of desires and transformations, that neither the royal household nor the fairy tale narration can contain her. Figure of desires overwhelming and monstrous, she will, like the mothers of Chatte Blanche and Rapunzel, promise her own child to the fairies for a piece of fruit. The virginity of the maiden beckoned; the fertility of the wife terrifies. Bluebeard's wives, even dead, swim in pools of blood. A particularly astute reader of the tale, a character in Huysmans' novel *Là-Bas*, suggests each was killed at the moment of her pregnancy (208). Reading of the terrors of blood and the male fears of procreation, it has many ancestors. A commentator on the Book of Genesis once suggested that Adam had had a similar distaste at the moment of Eve's creation. Seeing her "filled with discharge and blood" as the text of *Genesis Rabbah* goes, Adam was not attracted to his new wife. God was forced to remove the bloody woman and create her again, this time when Adam was asleep (XVII:VII.1.D). The married woman of the fairy tales fares little better than either the wives of Adam or Bluebeard. Like them she is frequently elided, dead before the narration begins and present only in the form of her terrifying replacement, the child-devouring stepmother. As if the fertile woman were too dangerous to gaze upon, she is shunted aside and doubled. Copulator with the prince, eater of children and murderer, she is the horrible fear of the feminine tracing itself over the place of the uterus.

The devouring mother/stepmother is what the figures of the virgin and the *vieille* surround and feed into. She is center of the female in the strange dreams of purity and fecundity, transformation and decay that animate the images of the female in

the fairy tales of early modern Europe. Absent yet ominously present in her terrible double, the fertile female unites the virgin and the old woman as semantic continuities. She is cooking in all of its horror, and the abyss of the tale, as if narration had lost its way within the “shadowy chaos” of her uterus.¹ She is the supplement of old-witch magic operating in the belly of the virgin.

These three representations of the female in the Occidental fairy tale take form within the intertwining threads of myths that have never ceased to haunt the narrative spaces of the Occident. The prince of the fairy tales slumbers as uneasily between the virgin and the *vieille* as Adam did between Eve and Lilith. Eve was Adam’s dream of purity ruined; raw nature, the garden and the woman become rotteness, eternal simplicity become infernal complication. All because Eve had let the serpent slither forth in his lust: the serpent/branch/tongue/wand had filled garden and woman with spoilage and death, ended the tales of paradise and purity. The magic —of the supplement of knowledge/lust that Eve should never have possessed— had destroyed all.² And by Adam’s side the shade of Lilith slumbered fitfully, always to be reinvoked in the terrors of the night. In myths that have faded even farther into the past, Lilith was often the first rebellious wife of Adam, made too of earth and believing thus in her own equality. Unwilling to submit to Adam’s desire to assume the superior position during intercourse, she flew away in indignation and bore a demonic brood in unrivaled promiscuity.³ Adam was long the man of two wives, despite the preeminence accorded to Eve by the Bible. The first man slept lengthily, in his mythic past, between the fallen virgin and the harlot, the woman infected by the snake and the magician of snakes herself, between the beauty and the lascivious originator of the plagues. The prince of the fairy tales inherits the primordial scenario. Progeny of Eve and Lilith, the virgins and the *vieilles* of Occidental fairy tales continue to draw from the anguishes and desires that shaped the depictions of their ancestors.

In the overlapping threads of literature, religion, social discourse and economic practice that form the cultural history of the Occident, the fairy tales of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries develop the peculiar phantasms of the feminine that have profoundly influenced not only the literary but the social and political status of women in the modern world. Woman as virgin functions as a dream to be embraced in its fleeting beauty. Woman as *vieille* terrifies, dissimulating the real within the tortuous windings of her magic. Like the Christian

traditions that produced the notion of a virgin mother, the fairy tales, in their according of status to the stories of virgins, valorize female sexual asceticism. With the Judaic horror of female blood that informed the commentary of *Genesis Rabbah*, they continue to gaze upon the place of the uterus in terror.

This deep embedding, throughout the Occident's history, of new representations of women within the deep sediment of the old mythology of origins, is significant. Not only literary, but social and political representations that dig their roots deeply enough into the ancient sediment quickly gain the semblance of "truth" and the authority produced by repetitive patterns. And woman is difficult to dissociate from the phantasms that have been drawn about her. Formed and colored within the musings of the patriarchs, Eve and Lilith find their progeny wandering still across the cultural pathways of the Occident.

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NOTES

¹The image is Simone de Beauvoir's in *Le Deuxième sexe*, I, 245.

²In the *Apocalypsis Mosis*, the serpent drips his lust onto the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, II, 137-49.

³For an overview of the Lilith legends, see Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess*.

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