

**SLIPPAGE AND SPILLAGE: ANALYSING FAIRYTALES AS THE
DISRUPTION OF THE SYMBOLIC BY THE SEMIOTIC WITH
EMPHASIS ON *CINDERELLA* AND *SHREK***

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Abstract

Classified as a “hybrid narrative genre consisting of folkloric and literary elements” by the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, children’s literature criticism questions the marginal cultural role/status conferred on fairy tales. Fairytales have often been posited as a women’s literature by various critics though it is agreed that it has been sabotaged and appropriated for patriarchal ends. The intimate connection between spinning, weaving and telling stories has been recorded and the dominant presence of women as the central figures and the domestic nature of these tales embeds them in a matriarchal culture. Being accused of subverting the tales for patriarchal means and simultaneously being inherently matriarchal, an analysis of the semiotic and the symbolic, as they manifest themselves in some of the representative tales, is essential.

The paper attempts to establish that perceived within a symbolic narrative the inevitable disruption of or intrusion into the symbolic by the semiotic is underway in these tales underscoring Kristeva’s theory of the inability of the symbolic to circumscribe the semiotic. The paper also attempts an analysis of two fairy tales from different time frames to discern the changes in the nature of this disruption. Rooted in a matriarchal tradition obscured by the apparent complicity to the patriarchal one, the Grimm brothers’ version of *Cinderella* exposes the unconscious ‘spillage’ of the semiotic into the symbolic. Further study shows how this unconscious disruption transforms itself into a conscious attempt at the subversion of the symbolic as evidenced in the *Shrek* series that appeared at a chronologically later stage.

Keywords: Animation, cinderella, shrek, feminist analysis, psychoanalytic

Classified as a “hybrid narrative genre consisting of folkloric and literary elements” by the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, children’s literature criticism questions the marginal cultural status conferred on fairy tales.

Fairytales have often been posited as a women’s literature by various critics though it is agreed that it has been sabotaged and appropriated for patriarchal ends. The ‘intimate connection between spinning, weaving and telling stories’ has been recorded; and the dominant presence of women as the central figures and the domestic nature of these tales embed them in a matriarchal culture. But generated and established as it is through the dominant discourses, fairy tales emerge as a site of construction of appropriate gendered behavior. And as a product of the symbolic-initiated speaking subject it draws on the paternal reserves and constructs.

Shawn Jarvis attests to the fact that women have played a “shaping role in the European fairy tale canon” to the extent that in the 19th century women writers of children’s literature which included fairy tales far outnumbered the male writers not to mention the historicity of the women as tellers of tales. In fact, he finds contention with Zipes’s notion of the “male domination of the genre” and argues that it is rather “a male domination of the canonical genre”.

Kristeva’s seminal concept of the semiotic and the symbolic following the Lacanian concept of the various stages whereby the speaking subject emerges into consciousness postulates the formation of the subject as a “split unification” of the semiotic and the symbolic aspects of the signifying process. Associated with ‘authority, order, repression, control’ and maintaining a fiction of a fixed and unified self, the symbolic domain signifies the establishment of a sign system and a realm of position resulting in a ‘language with a foreclosed subject’. Alternatively the semiotic aspect of language is characterized by displacement, slippage and condensation and a ‘more randomized way of making connections’. The semiotic predates the symbolic and is associated with the subject before it enters the established linear sign system. Though linked conceptually with the maternal the semiotic is available to the masculine.

Though relatively exclusive both these domains share a dialectical relationship whereby the semiotic give rise to and challenges the symbolic. According to Kristeva the former is always discharged into the latter resulting in the disruption and subversion of the symbolic signification. Kristeva’s theory of marginality, dissidence and subversion informs this notion of subversion which threatens the sovereignty of the rational symbolic order by the semiotic signification and hence its relegation to the margins of discourse.

Fairy tales as a product of the symbolic-initiated subject demonstrate Kristeva’s notion of the speaking subject as emerging into the instituted socio-cultural matrix internalizing the established ideologies and practices of the dominant discourse of patriarchy in its myriad forms of biological essentialism, the male gaze and the stereotyped gender definitions and roles.

The pseudo-defining stereotype of the female manifests itself in the representation of the female protagonists on contending poles of acceptance. On the one hand, she is a damsel in distress waiting for her prince charming; thus effectively rendering her helpless and passive; the damsel connoting, of course, a young, beautiful, gentle, submissive, virginal angel. Or else she is pure evil represented by an evil step mother or a witch. As typified by the classics like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* and *Snow White* the female subject who conforms to the male notion of femininity and acceptable to the aesthetics of the ‘male gaze’ is held up as the model; and the female character with power who carries an implication of danger to patriarchy is attributed with evil actions and motives as validated by *Snow White* and *Hansel and Gretel*.

The happily-ever-after motif is another site of contention with its concept of happiness and the cause of this ‘happiness’ becoming problematic. The institution of marriage is publicized as the happily ever after and the possession of ‘helpless, vulnerable virgin beauty’ as the means of attaining this happiness.

The normalization process takes on a subtle tone when the powerful female protagonist as an agent of her own choice is pitted against the wronged innocent female protagonist. The governing gender perspective succeeds in standardizing its ideologies through the use of female villains as the Prince Charming is validated as the universal rescuer of helpless vulnerable woman from the powerful, evil woman.

The employment of “language and all its accompanying power structures” as well as reliance of the majority of the classic tales on the univocity of language to transmit meaning justifies their classification as symbolic narratives. The atypical occurrences of the attempts to circumscribe the symbolic through the disruption of the language syntax and the signification process are indications of the repression of the ‘arationality’ of the semiotic.

Perceived within a symbolic narrative the inevitable disruption of or intrusion into the symbolic by the semiotic is underway in these following tales underscoring Kristeva’s theory of the inability of the symbolic to circumscribe the semiotic.

Weighed down as it is by the symbolic signification process and its accompanying power structures Grimm’s version of *Cinderella* called *Ashputtelis* a manifestation of Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic element disrupting the unity of the symbolic. The Grimms’ ‘sought to capture the authentic voice of the common people’ and the result is a Cinderella who manages a degree of intervention over her own choice, exercising her power of speech autonomously.

Rooted in a matriarchal tradition the narrative begins with the death of Cinderella’s mother who instructs her to be good and pious and vows to watch over and protect Cinderella from heaven. The various elements of signification within the tale supports the fact that Cinderella’s power comes from her dead mother and that her mother does, indeed, continue to take care of her. Her father’s remarriage is followed by a hard time for Cinderella with her being banished to the kitchen to do all the domestic duties while ‘her sisters did everything imaginable to cause her grief and make her look ridiculous’. Unlike the Cinderella that we know of in the Disney version based on Perrault’s Cinderella who endures it all with a smile, Grimms’ Cinderella rages against her situation while visiting her mother’s grave. Her bitterness palpable this Cinderella offers an opening to experience a full range of emotions.

An explicit symbolism of the maternal is evident in a hazel twig planted by Cinderella on her mother’s grave which grew into a tree and gave her anything she asked of it. The twig had been given by her father at her request. As stated by Cashdan ‘tree’ is a common motif in Cinderella stories as an essential life force with connections to the earth and to the mother. Furthermore, the hazel tree is symbolic of female wisdom, Walker attests.

When the festival at the palace is announced Cinderella is barred from going by her stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella as an agent of her own destiny is revealed when she asks and is denied permission to go to the festival and seeks the help of the tree in order to dress herself appropriately and goes to the ball.

The prince too is represented as more an individual than a type by Grimms’ and exercises more agency; be it in asserting Cinderella as his ‘partner’ or in his being the cause of Cinderella tripping on the steps or even in his search for Cinderella which he undertakes personally.

Thus, Cinderella as well as the prince are antithetic to the phenomenological transcendental ego as contended by the paternal 'symbolic' and is revealed as a 'subject in process or on trial', effectively 'bringing the subject into crisis'. Cinderella defies definition as a unified, stabilized, and rationalized subjectivity while simultaneously eliciting the magnitude of 'a questionable subject-in-process'.

The use of repetition and rhythm to capture an audience is inherent in the oral tradition and Grimms' *Cinderella* is no exception. Interaction between the doves and Cinderella demonstrates repetition early on in the narrative and later the prince repeats each night "she is my partner". Her father also kept repeating "could it be Ashputtel?" after each night the prince attempted to follow her. The semiotic as a pre-oedipal aspect of language is denoted by the babbling and cooing of the child before it enters the paternal symbolic regulated signification system. The fact that Cinderella is able to communicate with the doves, whose signification system may be associated with this 'pre-symbolic' language of the child, is another manifestation of the semiotic.

Considered as a subversion of the classic fairy-tale paradigm, *Shrek* and its sequels by Dreamworks Production present an assorted and highly unlikely mix of characters. Self proclaimed as an "irreverent take on the classic fairy tale" *Shrek* is a conscious attempt at the subversion of the prevailing formal and narrative ideologies as well as the dominant power structures.

The dynamics of pre-established symbolic power structures are toppled when the previously marginalized is placed at the centre: an ogre named Shrek, a princess/ogress named Fiona and a donkey named Donkey. A parody of the stereotypically gendered fairytale characters in general and Disney characters in particular exposes an active interruption of the ideological gender construction. The description of three princesses by the magical Mirror is a case in point. The Mirror introduces Cinderella and Snow White in their gendered roles and Fiona as an eccentric. Shrek by his mere appearance becomes an anomaly in the land of the fairy tale heroes. Fiona as the princess/ogress is antithetical to the classical fairy tale princesses of the likes of Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty with her unconforming body language and dialogue and her inclination to question the actions and motives of Shrek. An agent of her own choice with regard to her destiny such as who to marry and whether to be a human princess or an ogress princess Fiona goes to Shrek's rescue with an all-girl team when he was in danger.

The tale creates and maintains a self conscious narrative construction opening with a meta-narrative of the classic fairy tale; an account of a fairy tale princess trapped in a tower and waiting for her Prince Charming and the 'true loves kiss'. The meta narrative is disrupted by Shrek tearing the pages of the fairy tale and exclaiming "like that's ever gona happen!." Another time Shrek scares a group of peasants who have come to oust him from his swamp and says "this is the part when you run away" reminding them what they are supposed to do in any given tale. Princess Fiona acts true to her fictional character in her first meeting with her 'Prince Charming', Shrek, with her over-dramatized and affected mannerisms like "this be-ith our first meeting should it not be a wonderful and romantic moment?" and instructing Shrek as to what he should be doing, "you should sweep me off my feet out yonder window and down a rope on to your valiant steed". In *Shrek III* Prince Charming gives a convincing speech in a pub to a variety of fairy tale marginal characters to rally them against the injustice of always having to play negative roles.

The self-conscious narrative construction of the tale enables it to facilitate the disruption of the symbolic through various means. The countless references to the fairy tale construction in these series is an element of that disruption since according to Waugh “through continuous narrative intrusion, the reader is reminded that not only do characters verbally construct their own realities; they are themselves verbal constructions, *words not beings*” ascertaining Kristeva’s notion of the ‘subject in process or on trial’. The divergence of this operation in *Shrek* is based on the extent to which it has been attempted as well as the nature of this conscious and palpable attempt.

The wishful nature of fairy tales have often been aligned with dreams as testified by Harold Neemann in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. “Governed by dynamics similar to the ways in which the dreamwork operates a transition between latent and manifest contents, a fairy tale transforms a limited no. of fantasies into a narrative”. *Shrek IV* takes on a dreamlike quality with the narration of the what-might-have-beens. The linear chronological sequence is interrupted when Shrek signs off his birth-day to the con artist Rumpelstiltskin. The signification process becomes heterogeneous to meaning as Shrek exists in an alternate temporal and spatial dimension where he does not exist and which defies the rationale in its operation effectively rendering the narrative semiotic.

The analysis of the two fairy tales from different time frames discerns changes in the nature of the disruption of the symbolic by the semiotic. The differing dynamics of the subversion and the techniques used becomes more evident as the text moves up the chronological scale. Rooted in a matriarchal tradition obscured by the apparent complicity to the patriarchal one, the Grimm brothers’ version of *Cinderella* exposes the unconscious ‘spillage’ of the semiotic into the symbolic. Further study shows how this unconscious disruption transforms itself into a conscious attempt at the subversion of the symbolic as evidenced in the *Shrek* series that appeared at a chronologically later stage.

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