

ONCE UPON A TIME: A FEMINIST TWIST IN FAIRY TALES

Stephanie Fernández Hernández

Programa de Estudios Interdisciplinarios, Escritura Creativa

Facultad de Humanidades

*But one question remains unresolved:
do we have the courageous vision and energy
to cultivate a newly fertile ground of psychic and cultural experience
from which will grow fairy tales for human beings of the future?*

Karen E. Rowe (1979: 253-254)

Abstract:

This work tries to present a brief exposition of the feminist discourses and how they are reflected on an entertainment platform such as the *Once Upon a Time* television series. Since this television series is a collection of fairy tales that do not follow the pattern of heroic manhood and helpless women, there is a new way to narrate the popular stories that go accordingly with the change in mentality of feminine role. In other words, this work evaluates the female characters based on the feminist proposal.

Resumen:

Este trabajo pretende presentar, en una breve exposición, los planteamientos de los discursos feministas y cómo se reflejan en una plataforma de entretenimiento como lo es la serie televisiva de *Once Upon a Time*. Siendo esta serie una recopilación de los cuentos de hadas que no siguen el patrón establecido de heroicidad masculina y desamparo femenino se abre la posibilidad de una nueva muestra de dicha narración de cuentos populares que vayan acorde con los cambios de mentalidad en cuanto al rol femenino. En otras palabras, se evalúan los personajes femeninos de la serie basándose en los planteamientos feministas.

In one way or another, we have all heard fairy tales that depict a damsel in distress who is rescued by a prince, instantly falling in love, eventually getting married and living happily ever after. And there is no need to mention that these stories come from a long and strong tradition of oral narratives that were eventually written and passed down to future generations, while staying attached to the historical time period in which they were created. That is why it comes as no surprise that in this twenty-first century, after the empowerment of feminist theories, fairy tales have been openly questioned due to how the female characters are presented and thus to the way which they represent the female population.

Princesses such as “Snow White”, “Belle” and many others are portrayed as vulnerable and unintelligent women submissive to men’s will. Princes on the other hand are courageous, strong and are the only hope for these unprotected ladies. Karen E. Rowe states in her article ‘Feminism and Fairy Tales’ that,

... while feminist political movements of the last century may seem to signal women's liberation from traditional roles, too often the underlying truth is far more complicated: the liberation of the female psyche has not matured with sufficient strength to sustain a radical assault on the patriarchal culture (1979: 253).

With the purpose of revoking these words, *Once Upon A Time*¹ (from now on *OUAT*), a current television series from ABC, gives us a rearranged version of the common tales so that they have various feminist qualities, and in doing so, respond to those feminist theories and critique while still being part of a wonderful tale.

Fairy tales tend to promote reliance, resignation and open submission in women. Making them willingly accept their roles as mothers and wives (Rowe 239). But that is not the case of *OUAT*. Here these women hold political power, recognize their intellectuality and independence, make sure they are respected in male environments, and truly believe that they can “change the world, not just observe it” (Inglis & Thorne, 2012: 235). Taking into consideration the ideas of Radical feminism, the concern of women to abolish the patriarchy, characters such as “Regina”, “Snow White”, “Emma”, and “Belle” demonstrate how the ‘weaker sex’ can actually defeat and rearrange the conception of social relations. While holding a political position as mayor/queen, “Regina/Evil Queen” has a constant battle with “Mr. Gold/Rumplestiltskin” to maintain herself as the most powerful (S1 E12). As an independent woman, “Emma” demonstrates being capable of defending herself and those she loves without the need of a man. Going to a more extreme notion of feminist destruction of patriarchal imposition, a commonly

known tale, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, is drastically altered by transforming Jack into a Jacqueline who fights various giants (S2 E13) and by doing so, demonstrating that women have the power to overcome men's dominance. But this patriarchal destruction is visible not only in social contexts: it also happens in the family environment. "Snow White" constantly goes over "Prince Charming"'s orders publicly, making him succumb to her will, or in the way "Cora" is clearly the head of her household leaving her husband vulnerable to her wrath.

All the previous examples can be analyzed from the phenomenological feminism point of view as well. Phenomenological feminism, especially from Iris Marion Young's work², emphasizes the movements of the body and the socially constructed differences between 'male' and 'female' attitudes and positions. In fairy tales, "... women tend to be more corporeally reactive than active in comparison to men, who are more active ...". (Inglis & Thorne, 2012: 253) It is as if when a woman rebels against these social structures, "...then she risks social denunciations of her femininity, nagging internal doubts about her gender identity ...". (Rowe 243) All of these observations have been used in *OUAT* to transform these female characters into aggressive and battling women. "Snow White" and "Prince Charming"'s first encounter occurred when she robbed him and then attacked him. When the character of "Emma" is shown for the first time, we think she is the incarnation of all the stereotypes of feminine conduct but we are quickly oriented in another direction as she reveals to be a bail bondsman with a lot of attitude³. Another example comes from the modified tale of *Red Riding Hood*, where "Red" is not a defenseless girl but really the "Big Bad Wolf" that eventually kills her loved one (S1 E15). Even the grandmother of "Red" detaches herself from the 'feminine grace' as she faces a pack of wolves (her husband and male children) in order to stay alive. In this particular television series and version of fairy tales, women are not attached to the mainstream idea of how a princess or woman should act; they are freely changing past conceptions.

Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography as well as second wave feminists argues that men are the ones who control the social institutions, leaving women with lower positions (cited in Inglis & Thorne, 2012; 236, 254-256). These concerns are taken into consideration as we are presented with women who have important roles such as mayor, sheriff, queens and members of the round table. Throughout the series, women are the ones who make final decisions and even though it might seem that the character of "Mr. Gold/Rumplestiltskin" is the one with all the power, he is subject to what a seer told him long ago as well being under the strong influence of "Belle".

But there is another type of social control done by the women of *OUAT*, and that is the typical heroic saving which is usually entitled to men. Rowe, in her view of fairy tales, states that a woman is "...unable to act independently or self-assertively; she relies on external agents for rescue." (Rowe, 1979: 239) This is the part that transforms this television series into something unique. Here, "Snow White" saves her "Prince Charming" from the sleeping curse as well as from trolls; Emma saves all the fairy tale characters from the curse created by "Regina" as she simultaneously saves her son, thus called the "Savior"; and "Belle" saves "Prince Phillip" from the curse that transformed him into a *yaoguai* and in this case, it is her knowledge that helps her, not her strength. This does not mean that men have become weaker: it is just that women have become stronger; making themselves equal to them and that is what liberal feminism was aiming for. Our fairy tales are no longer susceptible to marginalized ideas of inferiority that used to be the center of female description. From now on women can be intelligent, saviors and rulers.

There is another part of feminist theory that has made its way into the world of the fairy tale and that is Judith Butler's understanding of sex and gender. With the destruction of these patriarchal conceptions there is a timid portrayal of bisexuality in *OUAT*, carried out by the character of "Mulan". At first we see her sentimental interest towards "Prince Phillip" but as the television series carries on, she begins to show affection towards "Aurora". Even though there is no open mention of this, in season #3 episode #3, "Mulan" goes to "Aurora" to try and tell her something important but after knowing of Aurora's pregnancy decides not to tell her anything and simply goes heartbroken. This leads us to infer that "Mulan" was going to confess her love to "Aurora". At the moment of this paper there is no confirmation about this because the television series is not yet over and there might be a future development of the subject but the hint leads to thinking that there is a possibility of bisexuality in her character.

The transformations of the female characters in fairy tales responds in a way to something that Judith Butler herself takes from Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language, and that is 'speech acts', "[T]he act of speech brings into existence the very thing that speech act seems merely to describe as if that thing was already there." (cited by Inglis & Thorne, 2012: 248) The actions of the female characters of *OUAT* become true and believable. They refer to social empowerment and changes mentioned in feminist theories. Before, in mainstream fairy tales, females were depicted susceptible to men but now they have power and control, and they are strong and intelligent at the same level as men. *OUAT* has become a response to Karen E. Rowe's question⁴ since the television series has demonstrated that there already is a new mentality and culture in place that has led to a more fitting

fairy tale for our historical and social time. The modification of these stories (fairy tales) wouldn't have been possible without the desire of women to change the rules of power play and create a social movement, thus *OUAT* is a result of all the theories and movements throughout time.

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Notes

¹ Created by Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz. It was premiered on October 23, 2011 and is currently on its third season.

² Resumed in the book *An Invitation to Social Theory*.

³ This episode in particular (S1 E1) makes a correction of the term bail bondsman to bail bondsperson which is inclusive for both genders.

⁴ See epigraph.