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# **THE PERVASIVENESS AND PERSISTENCE OF THE FEMININE BEAUTY IDEAL IN CHILDREN'S FAIRY TALES**

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*This study advances understanding of how a normative feminine beauty ideal is maintained through cultural products such as fairy tales. Using Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, the authors explore the extent and ways in which "feminine beauty" is highlighted. Next, they compare those tales that have survived (e.g., Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty) with those that have not to determine whether tales that have been popularized place more emphasis on women's beauty. The findings suggest that feminine beauty is a dominant theme and that tales with heavy emphases on feminine beauty are much more likely to have survived. These findings are interpreted in light of changes in women's social status over the past 150 years and the increased importance of establishing forms of normative social control to maintain a gender system.*

**Keywords:** *beauty; fairy tales; Grimm brothers; social control*

The institution of gender relies in part on what Lorber (1994, 30-31) referred to as gender imagery—"the cultural representations of gender and embodiment of gender in symbolic language and artistic productions that reproduce and legitimate gender statuses." Children's fairy tales, which emphasize such things as women's passivity and beauty, are indeed gendered scripts and serve to legitimize and support the dominant gender system.

The present study focuses on one prominent message that is represented in many children's fairy tales: the feminine beauty ideal. The feminine beauty ideal—the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain—is of particular interest to feminist scholars. While the feminine beauty ideal is viewed largely as an oppressive, patriarchal practice that objectifies, devalues, and subordinates women (e.g., Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Freedman 1986; Wolf 1991), it is acknowledged that many women willingly engage in "beauty rituals" and

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perceive being (or becoming) beautiful as empowering, not oppressive (Dellinger and Williams 1997). A further paradox of the feminine beauty ideal is that in a patriarchal system, those women who seek or gain power through their attractiveness are often those who are most dependent on men's resources.

This study investigates the extent to which the feminine beauty ideal has persisted over nearly 150 years by examining its pervasiveness, and tracing its survival, in children's fairy tales. We begin by investigating the pervasiveness of feminine beauty in the Grimms' fairy tales. We then analyze tales according to whether they survived into the twentieth century and explore the extent to which women's beauty predominates in these surviving tales. This study of beauty's significance in children's fairy tales can provide insight into the dynamic relationship between gender, power, and culture, as well as the cultural and social significance of beauty to women's lives.

### THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FEMININE BEAUTY

Beauty, or the pursuit of beauty, occupies a central role in many women's lives, especially relatively affluent Euro-American women who have the resources, time, and energy to expend on acquired beauty. Bordo (1993, 167) argued that the beauty regimes of diet, makeup, and dress are "central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women." It remains one of the major means by which adolescent girls and women gain social status and self-esteem (Backman and Adams 1991; Suitor and Reavis 1995). As noted by Freedman (1986, 11), "women are aware that beauty counts heavily with men and they therefore work hard to achieve it."

The social importance of the feminine beauty ideal lies in its ability to sustain and to reproduce gender inequality (Bartky 1990; Currie 1997; Freedman 1986; Wolf 1991). The feminine beauty ideal can be seen as a normative means of social control whereby social control is accomplished through the internalization of values and norms that serve to restrict women's lives (Fox 1977). In this way, women internalize norms and adopt behaviors that reflect and reinforce their relative powerlessness, making external forces less necessary. Value constructs such as "nice girl" or "feminine beauty" operate as normative restrictions by limiting women's personal freedom and laying the "groundwork for a circumscription of women's potential for power and control in the world" (Fox 1977, 816).

Fox (1977, 816) also noted that "normative control guarantees to those women who comply with its demands safe passage in the world" and that women who do not comply are somehow punished. In the case of the beauty ideal, women who achieve a high degree of attractiveness are psychologically and socially rewarded (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). Adolescent girls in Currie's (1997, 472) study reported that "feeling good about themselves" depended on "looking good." And Dellinger and Williams (1997) found that women who wear makeup in the workplace are seen as heterosexual, healthier, and more competent than those who do not. Those who unsuccessfully attempt to achieve the

standard, or fail to try at all, are viewed more negatively (Bartky 1990; Dellinger and Williams 1997).

Reliance on normative means of social control is likely to vary depending on how contested the gender terrain is. That is, when or where women's lives are highly restricted via external means (e.g., laws), it may not be necessary to rely heavily on normative controls. However, as women gain greater social status and independence, reliance on normative controls becomes more important to maintain gender inequality at structural and interpersonal levels. In other words, as women's status in society is enhanced, there is likely to be a greater reliance on normative controls via value constructs such as the beauty ideal.

In this study, we explore whether the beauty ideal has diminished, intensified, or remained stable over time in children's fairy tales. If the feminine beauty ideal operates as a type of normative social control, we would expect to see an increased emphasis on beauty in these tales as women's legal, economic, and social status improves. In particular, we would predict greater emphasis on women's beauty during the latter part of the twentieth century, compared to earlier periods, as women have gained greater legal and economic power (Flexner and Fitzpatrick 1996). This is not to suggest that women's progress has been uncontested or consistent over the twentieth century or that all women have enjoyed improved status. Indeed, research on issues such as women's poverty, the devaluation of women's work, and sexual victimization suggests that conditions for many women, especially women of color, immigrant women, and poor women, have remained relatively stagnant (Bianchi 1999; Russo 2001; Williams 2000). Unquestionably, the group that has reaped the most benefits is white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class women (Sorensen 1991; Williams 2000). For these women, legal, economic, and social conditions have tended to improve, especially since the 1970s. Notably, this is precisely the group of women to whom the feminine beauty ideal is directed and that is depicted in children's fairy tales.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Cultural products embody societal values and provide a means to observe shifts in such values (Schudson 1989). One of the most useful sets of cultural products for investigating cultural motifs and values is children's stories, which according to Bettelheim (1962) are a major means by which children assimilate culture. According to Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997, 444), "the intended clarity and moral certainty with which adults provide children with tales of their world offer a fortuitous opportunity to examine social relations and belief systems." Children's literature is especially useful for studying value constructs such as the beauty ideal. Fox (1977, 807) suggested that where normative restriction prevails, one is likely to "find an elaboration of socialization structures that conduce toward the internalization" of such values. Thus, we would expect to find these values expressed in media, especially those marketed toward children.

Research since the early 1970s has shown that children's literature contains explicit and implicit messages about dominant power structures in society, especially those concerning gender (Clark, Lennon, and Morris 1993; Crabb and Bielawski 1994; Kortenhuis and Demarest 1993; Weitzman et al. 1972). Fairy tales written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were intended to teach girls and young women how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner and to teach boys and girls appropriate gendered values and attitudes (Zipes 1988a, 1988b).

But these messages are not static. Children's media have been found to be powerfully responsive to social change and not simply in a way that mirrors society. Research by Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) found that during periods of intense racial conflict and significant political gains by African Americans, Black characters virtually disappeared from children's books. They suggested that children's media both reflect and are shaped by shifting social and power relations among groups. As such, it is possible to study children's literature for insight into important political and social struggles over time.

In the present study, we investigate the gendered messages concerning feminine beauty as contained in children's media. We chose a classic set of children's literature—fairy tales written by the Grimm brothers in the nineteenth century—to investigate the extent to which the pervasiveness of the feminine beauty ideal has shifted over time. These tales were originally used as primers for relatively affluent European children and served to impart moral lessons to them (Zipes 1988a). Today, these tales, at least those that survived into the twentieth century, are read by children across various social class and racial groups (Zipes 1997), while continuing to contain symbolic imagery that legitimates existing race, class, and gender systems.

We first document the prominence of a feminine beauty ideal and the ways in which beauty is presented in these tales. Our main concern, however, is not whether these fairy tales contain stereotypic images (they do) but rather whether women's beauty appears to play a more important role in fairy tales during certain time periods, possibly serving as a means of normative social control. Thus, we document which tales have survived (i.e., were reproduced in books and films) into the twentieth century and whether those that survived placed greater emphasis on women's beauty than those that did not survive. Furthermore, we examine the time periods when tales were reproduced. If normative social control is more critical during times when many women have gained greater social power, we would expect a large increase in reproductions of tales that focus on women's beauty during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Of course, we would expect some variation in the number of reproductions given changes in the children's book publishing industry during the twentieth century. When publishing houses first established separate children's sections around 1920, there was an increase in the production of children's books (Tebbel 1978). The 1930s and 1940s saw some decline in sales, although it was during this time period (1932) that Western Printing and Lithographing Company—the largest

lithographic company and publisher of children's books in the world—entered into an exclusive contract with Walt Disney Inc. to produce its books (Gottlieb 1978; Tebbel 1978). Children's book publishing increased significantly during the 1950s and 1960s, as the baby boom market increased sales and interest in children's reading, and federal aid was made available for library materials (Gottlieb 1978; Turow 1978). Finally, by the 1970s, the growth in children's book publishing subsided (Gottlieb 1978).

In the present study, we are not interested in whether reproductions of tales follow these general patterns but in whether those tales that highlight a feminine beauty ideal actually had increased reproductions during periods when normative control would be more necessary, such as since the 1970s. This study represents one of the few attempts to analyze long-term changes in children's literature and the only one to offer a historical analysis of the reproduction of a beauty ideal in fairy tales. As such, it provides critical insight into ways in which children's literature has been shaped by political and social forces over time and yet continues to provide traditional gendered prescriptions for children.

## DATA AND METHOD

The data used in this study are based on written texts contained in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (Grimm and Grimm 1992), translated by Jack Zipes, a leading contemporary expert on and translator of folk and fairy tales. The translation used in this study is based on the seventh edition of *Children and Household Tales*, published by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in 1857, and contains 250 tales. Tales were excluded from our analysis if they contained only nonhumans, simple rhymes, or short descriptions but no story or had never been translated into English until the 1990s. Thus, our data represent the population of Grimms' fairy tales ( $N = 168$ ) that contain human characters and stories and were available in English in the 1800s.

The unit of analysis is the tale, and each tale was coded by Baker-Sperry. To check for reliability, a subset of tales (20) was coded by two separate coders—one woman and one man—who were familiar with the goals of this research. The agreement among coders for each variable used in the study was 90 percent or higher.

To explore the prevalence of the feminine beauty ideal in these tales, information was obtained from each tale concerning the number of times female or male characters are referred to as beautiful, pretty, fairest, or handsome. Although we were not specifically concerned with variations by age, the double standard of aging (Sontag 1976) and cultural associations of beauty with youth would lead us to expect that the age (as well as gender) of a character would shape messages about attractiveness. Thus, we coded the number of references to "beauty" for younger women, younger men, older women, and older men (younger women/men include both young adults and children). Finally, because "beauty" is so gender specific, we sought an overall measure of the relative importance of physical appearance for

male and female characters. We obtained information on the number of references to a character's physical appearance, which included reference to any aspect of his or her body, looks, clothing, and so forth (e.g., body type, attractiveness, physical strength, eye color). These data were coded separately by gender but not age.

First, simple descriptive statistics were computed to explore the extent to which a feminine beauty ideal is evident in these tales and whether it differs by group. That is, we explore the extent to which there are more references to women's physical appearance or men's physical appearance, and the same for women's beauty and men's handsomeness (for readability, throughout this article we use the term *women* to refer to both girls and women and *men* to refer to both boys and men). We also compare the average number of references to physical beauty between younger men and younger women and between older women and younger women.

To explore cultural associations with beauty, we asked several general questions, such as, "Is there a clear link between beauty and goodness?" (yes/no), "Are there instances where danger or harm is associated with beauty or desirability?" (yes/no), and, if so, "Is beauty or desirability the cause?" (yes/no). Such questions, however, cannot tap the subtle but powerful messages surrounding beauty. Thus, we also employed qualitative discourse analysis (van Dijk 1985) to examine such associations with beauty. Discourse analysis allows for the identification of patterns or themes, along with variations (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In our analysis, several patterns emerged, including the associations between beauty and economic privilege, beauty and race, beauty and goodness, and beauty and danger. We provide excerpts from various tales obtained through the discourse analysis to illustrate such more subtle messages about beauty portrayed in these tales.

Finally, to determine which tales had survived since the mid-1800s, we consulted numerous sources to document whether a particular tale survived in the form of a book or film. Eighteen primary sources, such as Bowker's Books in Print (<http://www.booksinprint.com/>), *Index to the Baldwin Library of Books in English before 1900 Primarily for Children* (Baldwin Library 1981), and *Media Review Digest* (Media Review Digest 2002), were consulted to document whether a particular Grimms' fairy tale had been reproduced in book or film from the time of its publication in 1857 to 2000. Title, illustrator, translator/narrator, date of publication, and publisher were coded for each tale listed in these references. We then eliminated duplicates from those coded.

From these sources, information on the number of times a tale had been reproduced (in a children's book, video, or film) was obtained. This variable ranged from 0 to 332. Regression analysis was used to determine whether the number of references to women's or men's appearance, beauty, or handsomeness in a tale is related to how many times a tale has been reproduced. To correct for skewness, the dependent variable was logged. To use all tales, including those that had never been reproduced (and therefore had a value of 0), the value of 1 was added to all original enumerations of reproduction. Because the log of 1 is 0, the value for tales that had not been reproduced was still 0 but could be included in the analysis. We also controlled for number of pages because references to physical beauty are likely to be related to

the length of the tale (i.e., longer tales are more likely to elaborate on physical attributes).

We explored whether other factors might explain the survival of tales. In particular, we coded whether a tale contained a romantic theme (yes/no), women's victimization (yes/no), men's victimization (yes/no), or both types of violence (0 = no victimization, 1 = men's or women's victimization only, and 2 = both men's and women's victimization in tale).

Finally, to determine whether the reproduction of tales varied over the twentieth century, we examined descriptive data on reproductions for six time periods: before 1900, 1901 to 1920, 1921 to 1940, 1941 to 1960, 1961 to 1980, and 1981 to 2000. To determine statistically whether tales that glorify women's beauty were more likely to have been reproduced in the latter periods than those that do not, we created a variable time period that ranges from 0 to 6 and represents the time period when most reproductions occurred (0 = never reproduced, 1 = before 1900, 2 = 1901-20, etc.). If a tale was reproduced an equal number of times in two or more periods, the mean value was assigned for that case. Correlations between time period and number of times beauty, handsomeness, and appearance were mentioned in a tale were then analyzed.

## FINDINGS

### Physical Appearance and Beauty in Fairy Tales

There is frequent mention of characters' physical appearances (their looks, physiques, clothing, etc.) in these fairy tales, and this is true regardless of their gender or age (see Table 1). For instance, 94 percent of the tales make some mention of physical appearance, and the average number of times per story is 13.6 (among those stories that have at least one mention, the average is 14.5). There is no substantive gender difference in the number of times physical appearance is mentioned (the average number of times that physical appearance is mentioned in reference to men is 6.0 and for women is 7.6), but there is a notable difference in the range of references for men and women. The number of references to men's physical appearance ranges from 0 to 35 per story, whereas the range for women is 0 to 114.

More detailed examination of physical beauty/handsomeness by gender and age reveals some interesting patterns. Table 1 indicates that women's beauty is highlighted more than men's attractiveness and that beauty plays a more dominant role for younger women than for older ones. Overall, there are approximately five times more references to women's beauty per tale than to men's handsomeness (the average number of references to women is 1.25 and 0.21 for references to men's handsomeness). The average number of references to younger women's beauty in all tales (1.17) outnumbers those of younger men (0.20), older women (0.08), and older men (0.02) combined. Although the actual number of references to younger women's beauty is not all that great, what is striking is the way in which women's



**TABLE 1: Average Number of References to Physical Appearance and Beauty/ Handsomeness by Character's Gender and Age for All Books**

Reference	<i>All Tales (N = 168)</i>	
	n	SD
Women's appearance	7.56	14.31
Men's appearance	6.00	7.10
Women's beauty	1.25	2.53
Men's handsomeness	0.21	0.56
Younger women's beauty	1.17	2.11
Older women's beauty	0.08	0.65
Younger men's handsomeness	0.20	0.55
Older men's handsomeness	0.02	0.11

beauty is mentioned. For instance, in *The Pink Flower* a maiden is described as "so beautiful that no painter could ever have made her look more beautiful" (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 286), and in *The Goose Girl at the Spring* a young woman is said to be "so beautiful that the entire world considered her a miracle" (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 566).

Of the tales that contain younger women, 57 percent described them as "pretty," "beautiful," or "the fairest," and on average there are 1.74 references to their beauty. By contrast, only 5.2 percent of tales that contain older women make reference to their beauty, with the average number of references to older women's beauty being 0.14. For male characters, 18.3 percent of the tales that contain younger men describe them as "handsome" (average number of references was 0.25). Only 1.7 percent of the tales with older men characters describe them as handsome (average number of references is 0.02).

Discourse analyses reveal several themes in relationship to beauty. Often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil (31 percent of all stories associate beauty with goodness, and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil). *Mother Holle* incorporates both of these themes. The story begins, "A widow had two daughters, one who was beautiful and industrious, the other ugly and lazy" (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 96). As the tale unfolds, both daughters have the opportunity to work for Mother Holle. While staying with Mother Holle, the beautiful and industrious daughter admitted that she was homesick:

"I'm pleased that you want to return home," Mother Holle responded. . . . She took the maiden by the hand and led her to a large door. When it was opened and the maiden was standing right beneath the doorway, an enormous shower of gold came pouring down, and all the gold stuck to her so that she became completely covered with it.

"I want you to have this because you have been so industrious," said Mother Holle. (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 97)

When the ugly, lazy daughter began her work for Mother Holle, all did not go as well:

On the first day she made an effort to work hard and obey Mother Holle when the old woman told her what to do, for the thought of gold was on her mind. On the second day she started loafing, and on the third day she loafed even more. . . . Soon Mother Holle became tired of this and dismissed the maiden from her service. The lazy maiden was quite happy to go and expected that now the shower of gold would come. Mother Holle led her to the door, but as the maiden was standing beneath the doorway, a big kettle of pitch came pouring down on her head instead of gold. . . . The pitch did not come off the maiden and remained on her as long as she lived. (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 99)

Thus, while beauty is often rewarded, lack of beauty is punished.

Another theme identified through the discourse analysis, as evidenced by the example of *Mother Holle*, is that beauty is sometimes linked to race and class. The “lazy” daughter in *Mother Holle* is covered in (black) pitch. In *The White Bride and the Black Bride*, the mother and daughter are “cursed” with blackness and ugliness. Many tales connote goodness with industriousness, and both with beauty, and characters are “rewarded” for their hard work (*Cinderella* is another classic example). In this way, beauty becomes associated not only with goodness but also with whiteness and economic privilege.

Although beauty is often rewarded in Grimms’ tales, it is also a source of danger. Of the tales in which danger or harm is associated with physical attractiveness (28 percent of all tales), 89 percent involve harm to women. Forty percent of these acts of victimization are the direct result of the character’s physical appearance. For instance, there are examples of women who must flee or disguise themselves for protection because they are so beautiful. Such was the case for the princess in *All Fur* who was “so beautiful that her equal could not be found anywhere on earth” (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 258). She was forced to run away from the castle because her father “fell passionately in love with her and said to his councillors, ‘I’m going to marry my daughter’” (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 260).

Finally, in 17 percent of the stories there are links between beauty and jealousy. These issues almost exclusively concern female characters. *Snow White* offers strong messages concerning competition among women and the importance of beauty for women: “When a year had passed, the king married another woman, who was beautiful but proud and haughty, and she could not tolerate anyone else who might rival her beauty” (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 196). The murderous actions taken by the stepmother remind readers of the symbolic lengths some women go to maintain or acquire beauty.

In sum, messages concerning feminine beauty pervade these fairy tales. Although the tales are not devoid of references to men’s beauty, or handsomeness, it is women’s beauty that is emphasized in terms of the number of references to beauty, the ways it is portrayed, and the role feminine beauty plays in moving the story along.

**TABLE 2: References to Beauty/Handsome/Physical Appearance, by Gender, in Tales according to Times Reproduced**

Reference	All Tales Ever Reproduced (n = 43)	Tales Reproduced 101 or More Times (n = 5)	Tales Reproduced Between 1 and 100 Times (n = 38)	Tales Never Reproduced (n = 125)
	Women's appearance	11.30	33.80	8.60
Men's appearance	8.00	2.60	8.70	5.20
Women's beauty	2.11	7.20	1.50	0.93
Men's handsomeness	0.37	0	0.41	0.15

### Social Reproduction of the Feminine Beauty Ideal

Of the 168 tales analyzed, 43 (25.6 percent) have been reproduced in children's books or movies. The most frequently reproduced tale is *Cinderella*, for which 332 reproductions were recorded. In fact, just 5 fairy tales—*Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Briar Rose* (also known as *Sleeping Beauty*), *Little Red Cap* (also known as *Little Red Riding Hood*), and *Hansel and Gretel*—constitute more than two-thirds (72.7 percent) of all reproductions.

There are many more references to women's physical appearances in reproduced versus nonreproduced tales (11.3 vs. 6.15), and this is somewhat true for references to men's physical appearance (8.0 vs. 5.2) (see Table 2). In terms of beauty, the average number of references to women's beauty in those tales that have been reproduced is 2.11 for women, which is more than twice the number in nonreproduced tales (0.93) and much higher than the average number of references to men's handsomeness in reproduced tales (0.37) and nonreproduced tales (0.15).

Table 2 groups tales according to the number of times they have been reproduced. Interestingly, of the top five most reproduced tales—those that have been reproduced more than 100 times—there are two exceptions to the "beauty rule": *Little Red Cap* or *Little Red Riding Hood*, for which 227 reproductions were documented, and *Hansel and Gretel*, which trails the other tales at 143 reproductions. There are no references to women's or men's beauty in *Hansel and Gretel* and *Little Red Cap*. In fact, in *Hansel and Gretel* there are more references to men's appearance (8) than women's appearance (5). When analyses are conducted on just the top three most reproduced tales, which eliminates *Little Red Cap* and *Hansel and Gretel*, the references to women's beauty and women's appearance are much higher (12 references to beauty for the top three vs. 7.2 for the top five; 41.7 references to appearance for the top three vs. 33.8 for the top five) and those references for men's appearance decline (0.67 for top three vs. 2.6 for top five). Note that there are no references to men's handsomeness in any of the top five tales.

Because references to men's handsomeness and older women's beauty are so low (e.g., 98.8 percent of all tales have no mention of older men's handsomeness),

**TABLE 3: Regression of Number of Reproductions (Logged) on Women's Beauty/ Men's Handsomeness and Women's/Men's Physical Appearance, Controlling for Page Length**

	<i>Unstandardized Regression Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error of Estimate</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Equation 1			
Women's beauty	.146	.039	.001
Pages	.031	.043	<i>ns</i>
Constant	.255	.196	<i>ns</i>
Equation 2			
Men's handsomeness	.099	.176	<i>ns</i>
Pages	.079	.043	<i>ns</i>
Constant	.221	.205	<i>ns</i>
Equation 3			
Women's physical appearance	.020	.007	.01
Pages	.033	.046	<i>ns</i>
Constant	.282	.201	<i>ns</i>
Equation 4			
Men's physical appearance	-.005	.014	<i>ns</i>
Pages	.086	.045	<i>ns</i>
Constant	.240	.207	<i>ns</i>

we combined older and younger men, and older and younger women, to perform the regression analyses. Preliminary analyses suggested that it was appropriate to do so since there is no interaction effect between age and gender with respect to appearance or beauty.

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that even after controlling for length of the tale, references to women's beauty are associated with the likelihood that a tale has been reproduced many times, as is the number of references to women's physical appearance. For men, physical handsomeness and appearance are not significantly related to a tale's reproduction, nor is length of a tale.

We explored alternative factors that may help account for tales' reproduction, such as themes of romantic love or victimization. We found that even after controlling the regression analysis for tales that have a romantic theme, the number of times women's beauty is mentioned in a tale remains strongly related to the number of times it has been reproduced, as does women's physical appearance. Furthermore, there is a moderate bivariate correlation between women's victimization and number of reproductions (.202), but women's victimization becomes nonsignificant when number of reproductions is regressed on women's beauty, women's victimization, and pages (and women's beauty remains significant). The general presence of violence or men's victimization was not linked to reproductions.

Examination of reproductions over time reveals an interesting pattern. The vast majority of tales were reproduced in the latter part of the twentieth century. For instance, the average number of reproductions before 1900 was 4.07 ( $SD = 10.32$ ) versus 24.79 between 1981 and 2000 ( $SD = 51.72$ ). This is particularly true for the

most reproduced tales. For instance, there were 46 reproductions of *Cinderella* before 1900, 5 or 6 for each of the time periods between 1901 and 1960, 42 between 1961 and 1980, and 227 between 1981 and 2000. When we correlated time period in which tales were most often reproduced (which ranges from 0 to 6) with mentions of beauty, handsomeness, and physical appearance, we found no significant correlation between physical appearance and time, for men or women. However, the number of mentions of women's beauty is significantly correlated with a larger number of reproductions in the latest time period ( $r = .159$ ), and the same is true for mentions of men's handsomeness ( $r = .203$ ). In fact, all but one tale that mention a man being handsome were reproduced most often in the latter period.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly, among the many messages contained in fairy tales, those concerning the importance of feminine beauty, especially for younger women, are paramount. Young women are more often described as "beautiful," "pretty," or "fair" than are older women or than men of any age are described as handsome. Furthermore, beauty is often associated with being white, economically privileged, and virtuous. Fairy tales, like other media (Currie 1997), convey messages about the importance of feminine beauty not only by making "beauties" prominent in stories but also in demonstrating how beauty gets its rewards. So ingrained is the image of women's beauty in fairy tales that it is difficult to imagine any that do not highlight and glorify it. Recent Disney films and even contemporary feminist retellings of popular fairy tales often involve women who differ from their earlier counterparts in ingenuity, activity, and independence but not physical attractiveness.

Several of the tales have been reproduced in books and movies since their original publication. Our findings suggest that those that have been reproduced the most (*Cinderella* and *Snow White*) are precisely the ones that promote a feminine beauty ideal. Tales that make frequent reference to physical appearance and beauty for women are likely to have been reproduced. Even after controlling for length of a tale, references to feminine beauty and women's physical appearance are related to the number of times a tale is reproduced. However, the same is not true for men.

Our findings further suggest that attention to attractiveness may have become increasingly prevalent over the past century. Tales that were reproduced mostly in the latter part of the twentieth century tend to make more mentions of women's beauty and men's handsomeness, which is consistent with earlier studies that have found an increased emphasis on physical attractiveness in the late twentieth century for men (Berger, Wallis, and Watson 1995). In fact, of the 11 tales that have been reproduced and mention men's handsomeness, 10 were reproduced most often in the last time period. This finding suggests that both men and women are being increasingly manipulated by media messages concerning attractiveness, a trend that is undoubtedly linked to efforts to boost consumerism. This trend does not necessarily contradict a social control perspective that suggests such messages should

be directed more toward women than men. We found that messages concerning women's beauty are far more dominant than those for men. Only 2 of the reproduced tales that mention men's handsomeness are fairly popular (*Rapunzel* and *Puss and Boots*), and each makes only one mention of men's handsomeness. Passing mentions of men's handsomeness in these 11 tales simply do not compare to the tales in which women's beauty is glorified and in which beauty, for beauty's sake, plays a major role in the story, as in *Cinderella* or *Snow White*. Thus, while there does appear to be an increased emphasis on men's handsomeness along with women's beauty in the late twentieth century, there remains a profound difference in the prevalence and persistence of messages concerning attractiveness for men and for women, which is consistent with a social control perspective.

Clearly, beauty is not the only reason certain tales have survived. Some tales become popular during particular historical periods because they resonant so deeply with individuals' and societies' economic, social, or political struggles during these times (Zipes 1988b). Certainly, much of the success of certain tales can be attributed to the work of Walt Disney. For instance, the three top tales had all been made into Disney movies before 1960 and have enjoyed continued popularity. We were not able, however, to determine any other clear links between survival of a tale and themes. Mentions of women's beauty are far more likely to be linked to reproductions than are other popular cultural motifs such as victimization or romance.

We suggest that this emphasis on a feminine beauty ideal may operate as a normative social control for girls and women. The fact that women's beauty is particularly salient in tales in the latter part of the twentieth century suggests that normative social controls (such as internalization of a feminine beauty ideal) may have become increasingly important over the course of the twentieth century as external constraints on women's lives diminished. We do not propose that there is a direct relationship between cultural values concerning feminine beauty and women's behavior and identities, but the feminine beauty ideal may operate indirectly as a means of social control insofar as women's concern with physical appearance (beauty) absorbs resources (money, energy, time) that could otherwise be spent enhancing their social status. Women may "voluntarily" withdraw from or never pursue activities or occupations they fear will make them appear "unattractive" (e.g., "hard labor," competitive sports). The competition women may feel toward other women over physical appearance may limit their ability to mobilize as a group. In these ways, the focus on and glorification of feminine beauty in children's fairy tales may represent a means by which gender inequality is reproduced via cultural products.

One limitation of our study is that we cannot determine the extent to which messages concerning feminine beauty found in fairy tales have in fact been internalized or by whom. Nor do we know whether contemporary children read fairy tales in the same way as their mothers or grandmothers did, especially in terms of internalizing messages about beauty. Currie (1997) did find that even very young and adolescent girls are aware of how their own bodies fail to live up to the ideal and express strong desires to conform to this ideal. Of course, we do not claim that fairy tales are solely

or even largely responsible for instilling such beliefs. What seems clear is that messages in the Grimms' fairy tales, especially those that have been reproduced often, are consistent with other messages women and girls receive about the importance of feminine beauty. And they convey this message in a particularly powerful way, by drawing strong associations between beauty and goodness and rewards. Furthermore, the emphasis on beauty has remained strong and seemingly has increased during a period of time when many women have achieved greater economic and legal status.

The notion of normative social control raises questions about who makes choices about publishing children's books and why. Turow's (1978) research on publishing houses found that most publishers claim to make choices based on the book's quality, reputation of the author, and market consideration and that publishers in the mass market—which market books to nonlibrary outlets (which characterize most of the books analyzed here)—are sensitive to the preferences and tastes of their clientele (i.e., buyers for discount, department, and book stores). Surely individuals making decisions about which books to publish are unaware or unconcerned that books based on Grimms' fairy tales highlight and perpetuate a feminine beauty ideal. What they probably understand is that certain fairy tales have become nearly mythic and enjoy wide appeal (and a large market). Thus, there probably is no "conspiracy" to control girls' and women's lives by perpetuating certain messages, but if Zipes (1988b) was correct that "fairy tales do not become mythic unless they are in almost perfect accord with the underlying principles of how the male members of society seek to arrange object relations to satisfy their wants and needs," then these cultural products certainly reflect and legitimate hegemonic beliefs surrounding gender and feminine beauty. Thus, these books and other media that glorify feminine beauty may or may not be intended to redirect girls' and women's attention to their looks, but they do reflect broader cultural values and represent part of a larger gender imagery that helps to maintain and legitimate the institution of gender (Lorber 1994).

Although we do not subscribe to the idea that a "conspiracy" is at work among publishers to "dupe" girls and women into adopting subservient behaviors and values by intentionally publishing and reproducing those texts that emphasize and even glorify sexist values, the impact of such messages is likely to have the same effect. Children's media can be a powerful mechanism by which children learn cultural values. Through the proliferation of fairy tales in the media, girls (and boys) are taught specific messages concerning the importance of women's bodies and women's attractiveness. The messages presented in the Grimms' tales portray differing means of status attainment for women and for men, especially white, heterosexual women. The pervasiveness of fairy tales in our society, through books and movies, suggests that there are many opportunities for these messages to become internalized.

Of course, the effect of media on behavior is not clear (Currie 1997). As with other literature, children's media should not be viewed simply as gender scripts. Children (or their parents, through their readings of the texts to children) have the

ability to use these texts to challenge or “rewrite” these scripts (stories). Zipes (1988b, 191) suggested that by

introducing unusual elements into the fairy tale . . . the child is compelled to shatter a certain uniform reception of fairy tales, to re-examine the elements of the classical tales, and to reconsider their function and meaning and whether it might not be better to alter them.

The recent film *Shrek*, whose main woman character is ultimately transformed into an ogre rather than the beautiful maiden she was believed to be, may begin to challenge the value and meaning of women’s beauty. But such retellings of fairy tales are rare, and the cumulative effect of the more traditional tales, in conjunction with the unidirectional nature of media, makes such agency difficult. Indeed, the “beauty” of messages that may serve as normative controls is that so few question or challenge their legitimacy.

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