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Different Representations of Women in Victorian Fairy Tales

For my personal collection, I decided to focus on different representations of women in Victorian fairy tales. Most of my tales are from women writers, with the exception of Lafcadio Hearn, whose work I selected to include a woman of colour. The female characters I have chosen are from different classes and stages of life, but all possess perseverance and agency in similar ways. I hope you enjoy my collection!

1. **Title:** “The White Rose” (*The Book of Princes and Princesses*)

Author: Leonora Blanche Lang (edited by Andrew Lang)

Illustrator: Henry J. Ford

Publisher: Longmans, Green & Co.

Place of Publication: London, England

Publication Date: 1908

UBC Library Call Number: PR10.Q4 L3 1908 B6

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=1743759>

The Book of Princes and Princesses tells stories of historical figures from the British royal family with stunning images. “The White Rose” refers to Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King Edward IV, who is destined to be queen even though she is not first in line for the throne. The two images I have selected depict Elizabeth sitting on her father’s lap: in the coloured image, she

is welcoming her father after a long absence, and in the black and white image, her father reveals a map of her destiny in which she “would one day wear the English crown” (177-178). She is described as the child “he loved the best” (174), which is shown by the affection between them. The placement of Elizabeth on the King’s lap, who is sitting on a chair in both pictures, seems to indicate that she will indeed assume his throne. The tale follows Elizabeth from her childhood years to an adult. Although she is a princess, Lang shows her hardships—Elizabeth is forced to go into hiding when her father dies and her uncle Richard takes the throne by claiming she and her siblings are illegitimate heirs. Lang gives Elizabeth power over her situation, as she is the only woman amongst a group of male conspirators that plot to take down her uncle (who has murdered her male relatives). She overthrows Richard by marrying Henry, earl of Richmond, and by doing so, also unites the warring Roses of York and Lancaster.



2. **Title:** “The Wise Princess” (*The Necklace of Princess Fiorimonde and Other Stories*)

Author: Mary de Morgan

Illustrator: Walter Crane

Publisher: Macmillan and Co.

Place of Publication: London, England

Publication Date: published with Macmillan and Co. in 1886, but Rare Books edition was copyrighted in 1963

UBC Library Call Number: PZ7.D3775 Ne

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=1009985>

“The Wise Princess” provides an interesting contrast to Lang’s tale, for the protagonist, Fernanda, is a fictional princess. Like many of de Morgan’s heroines, Fernanda is raised without a mother, and seeks to fill this absence by desiring to “know everything” (175). I was drawn to this story because it depicts a woman seeking to nurture her own education. Fernanda goes to an old wise wizard and takes lessons from him for three years. After learning everything there is to know, she wants to know how to be happy. The image below portrays Fernanda setting out to discover what makes others happy. She is carrying a book, which symbolizes her love of learning, but her hand is on her head, revealing the sadness behind her unquenchable search for knowledge and need to find happiness. It is evident from the rough, rolling waves that her mind is not at ease, and these waves also foreshadow the end of her journey. Fernanda asks both animals and humans what makes them happy, but finds no satisfying answer, and wants to die in order to know the happiness of a smiling corpse she finds. She gets her wish after saving a boy from drowning, where she gets taken by the waves and dies herself. De Morgan concludes the tale with the wizard claiming that Fernanda is now wiser than himself (184), for in death, her lips

“[smile] as they had never smiled before” (183), suggesting that she has found happiness at last. Although the ending is rather morbid, I liked how de Morgan shows a woman struggling with what would today be considered depression. Fernanda persistently seeks answers, ultimately paying for it with her life.



“Then the Princess left the cave and wandered down to the sea-shore.”—P. 178.

3. **Title:** “Amelia and the Dwarves” (*The Brownies and Other Tales*)

Author: Juliana Horatia Ewing

Illustrator: George Cruikshank

Publisher: George Bell and Sons

Place of Publication: London, England

Publication Date: 1896

UBC Library Call Number: PZ6 1896 .E955b

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=2027118>

Ewing tells the story of Amelia, a spoiled daughter of gentlefolk whose boisterous ways and disregard for others lead her on a journey that forces her to reassess her behaviour. When she disobediently sneaks out one night, she meets a pair of peculiar dwarves who take her underground and force her to do what she should be doing at home: she cleans her dirty frocks, repairs broken ornaments and fixes interrupted conversations. Although the picture below shows Amelia in very feminine roles (cleaning and dancing), it is in these moments where she starts to take ownership over her actions. She learns the value of hard work and discovers how to return home (by dancing and finding a four-leaf clover) from being kind to the unassuming woman in the top picture. I found it interesting that the dwarves are illustrated grotesquely like “goblins” (82)—although they force her to change her ways, they also trap her and thus stop her from maturing in the human world. When she finally returns home, she has become “good and gentle, unselfish and considerate” as well as “unusually clever” (91). While the first qualities may be considered domestic, Ewing’s tale emphasizes the importance of work and acknowledging one’s privilege, which is what ultimately allows Amelia to save herself both from the dwarves and from an ignorant and selfish lifestyle. The wisdom and knowledge she gains from her experience

is inspiring for young readers who may also need to consider their privilege and behaviour.



4. **Title:** "The Little Witch of the Plain" (*Wymps and Other Fairy Tales*)

Author: Evelyn Sharp

Illustrator: Mabel Dearmer

Publisher: John Lane and The Bodley Head

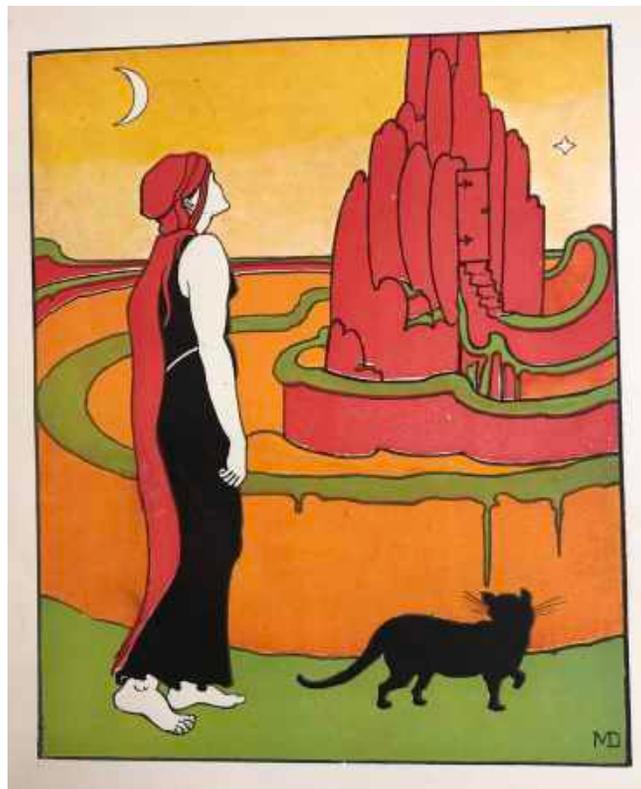
Place of Publication: London, England

Publication Date: 1897

UBC Library Call Number: PZ6 1897 .S537

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=9850411>

I chose this tale because I was immediately struck by the vivid images in Sharp's book. I was drawn to the story of Blarnie, the titular "Little Witch of the Plain," who is shown in the picture below. She is described as being "as beautiful as any one could wish" (139), and her pale skin stands out against the contrast of bright colours. The moon, cat and her dark clothing emphasize her identity as a witch, but as the tale reveals, she is more than that. When Blarnie impulsively turns a man into a black cat, she tries to reverse the spell by finding the most precious thing on earth. This leads her on a similar quest to that of Princess Fernanda, where she asks others what the most precious thing is. She ultimately has to do something selfless in order to discover the secret: help a prince save his princess from a giant keeping her inside a castle. Not only does Blarnie save the day, but she also learns from the reunited prince and princess that a kiss is the most precious thing, and kisses the cat who will later become her husband. I enjoyed Sharp's twist on the typical fairy tale—Blarnie rescues the princess, helps the prince and saves the man she comes to love. After kissing the cat, she loses her magical powers and finds purpose by helping others, thus demonstrating that she is capable of more than her former label as a witch defined her.



5. **Title:** “Japanese Fairy Tale: The Old Woman Who Lost Her Dumpling”

Author: Lafcadio Hearn (translated tale into English)

Illustrator: Not specified

Publisher: T. Hasegawa

Place of Publication: Tokyo, Japan

Publication Date: ~1898-1922

UBC Library Call Number: PZ6 1898 H427

UBC Permalink: <http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=940351>

The last tale of my collection is Hearn’s beautifully illustrated story of an old woman who goes on an adventure after dropping her dumpling down a hole into another world. The woman, as seen by the cover and the second image I have selected, is very jovial and carefree. She follows and tries to catch her dropped dumpling, ignoring the warnings by the *Jizō* to beware of the man-eating *Oni* nearby. As seen by the second image, the *Oni* is depicted as a racial ‘other,’ yet the old woman does not see him as a threat. Instead, she laughs with a child-like innocence while hiding behind the *Jizō* statue, resulting in the *Oni* taking her to his house filled with other *Oni* to cook for them. She is instructed to use a magic paddle that turns a grain of rice into a great quantity. I like how in this tale, similarly to some of my other tales, the old woman saves herself. She is smart and resourceful, taking the magic paddle to escape on a river and making the *Oni* laugh when they try to stop her. She arrives home with the paddle, and uses it to make lots of dumplings, eventually becoming rich. I appreciated how this tale shows that women, even if they appear trivial, should not be underestimated. The reading experience of this book, printed on crepe paper, was also wonderful—the delicate pages and soft colours seemed to represent the frail, yet strong beauty of the old woman.

