



Representation of Disability in Fairy Tales from the Perspective of the Social Model of Disability. A Case Study of Fairy Tales by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde, Charles Perrault, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont

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Abstract:

Beginning from the position of disability understood as a social and cultural construct, this paper aims to analyze and compare representations of disability in fairy tales by such authors as the Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde, Charles Perrault, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Despite the prevalence of disabled characters in many fairy tales, there exists just a handful of articles on disability in fairy tales within the

field of disability studies (Schmiesing 2014). Therefore, this study attempts to fill in a knowledge gap in the area of disability studies by looking at disability and characters with disabilities in fairy tales from the perspective of the social model of disability. In this paper I seek to explore variations in the way different authors describe disability/sickness/deformity and to discuss such subjects related to the area of disability studies as overcoming disability and the question of cure (understood, in the context of fairy tales, as a supernatural restoration to the able-bodied state). In addition, I attempt to see if there exist any differences in how sick/disabled/deformed fairy tales characters are portrayed depending on their gender.

1. Introduction

Disability is the subject of a small but growing literature in such areas of research as sociology, anthropology, and comparative literature among others. Although disability studies has developed as a subfield of academic research of such disciplines as sociology and medical anthropology, little attention has been paid toward situating disability within a “politicized, social constructionist perspective” (Thomson 2017:15-16). Instead, particularly in Western societies, disability used to be regarded from a strictly medical standpoint. Nevertheless, over the past three decades those “over-medicalized and individualist accounts of disability” (Shakespeare 2013:214) have been challenged by disability rights activists who ultimately managed to replace the medical model of disability with the social one.

According to the social model of disability, “society is constructed by people with capabilities for people with capabilities and it is this that makes people with impairments incapable of functioning” (Finkelstein 2001:2). In other words, it is society that disables impaired people by employing such measures as inaccessible public spaces, lack of financial support or segregated schooling, among others, that exclude and isolate people with disabilities. To this end, “disabled people are not the subject matter of the social interpretation of disability” (Finkelstein 2001:1). Instead, the social interpretation of disability focuses on the “social, economic, and



political barriers that disable individuals with devalued embodied differences... and prevent them from full inclusion in all aspects of society” (Gabel 2018:553-554). In a similar manner, Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that physically disabled people “are produced by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives” (2017:6). From this perspective, disability is in fact a social construct which portrays people with disabilities as “the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance” (Thomson 2017:6). In consequence, people with disabilities are often stigmatized, ridiculed, and discriminated against by able-bodied people.

Beginning from the position of disability understood as a social and cultural construct, this paper aims to analyze and compare representations of disability in fairy tales by such authors as the Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde, Charles Perrault, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Despite the prevalence of disabled characters in many fairy tales, there exists just a handful of articles on disability in fairy tales within the field of disability studies (Schmiesing 2014). Therefore, this study will attempt to fill in an important knowledge gap in the area of disability studies by looking at disability and characters with disabilities in fairy tales from the perspective of the social model of disability. To this end, this paper will try to see if there exist any variations in the way different authors describe disability/sickness/deformity. Furthermore, it will attempt to discuss such matters related to the area of disability studies as overcoming disability and the question of cure (understood, in the context of fairy tales, as a supernatural restoration to the able-bodied state). In addition, this study will attempt to see if exist any differences in how sick/disabled/deformed fairy tales characters are portrayed depending on their gender.

In order to answer these questions, this paper is divided into six sections. Each section is dedicated to one specific disability, that is aphasia, blindness, bodily differences, dwarfism, intellectual disabilities, and the loss of a limb (or limbs). The first section “Aphasia” will discuss such tales as “The Twelve Brothers” (Grimms), “Our Lady’s Child” (Grimms), and “The Little Mermaid” (Andersen). The second section “Blindness” will cover “Cinderella” (Grimms), “Rapunzel” (Grimms), and “The Happy Prince” (Wilde). The third section “Bodily differences” will focus on “The Frog King” (Grimms), “Ricky of the Tuft” (Perrault), and “Beauty and the Beast” (de Beaumont). The fourth section titled “Dwarfism” will discuss “Little Thumb” (Perrault) and “Thumbelina” (Andersen). The fifth section called “Intellectual disabilities” will focus on such tales as “The Three Feathers” (Grimms) and “Crazy Pietro” (Straparola). The sixth and final section titled “The loss of a limb (or limbs)” will cover “The Girl Without Hands” (Grimms), “The Little Mermaid” (Andersen) and “The Brave Tin Soldier” (Andersen).

It has to be underscored that due to the paucity of descriptive language used in folklore tales it is often difficult or even impractical to attempt to identify what specific condition a protagonist may seem to have (Schmiesing 2014). Therefore, this paper does not attempt to make any definitive diagnosis regarding characters’ type of a disability, even though some researchers made an attempt to examine disability in fairy tales from a strictly medical perspective. While physiological differences influenced some descriptions of “change-lings, dwarfs, and monstrous births in folklore... [a] pronounced emphasis on diagnosis medicalizes disability instead of focusing on its narratological and thematic functions in folklore, or on the manner in which depictions of disability in folklore reflect and further influence social attitudes toward disability” (Schmiesing 2014:7). It is impossible to say if, for instance, Little Thumb and Thumbelina really had dwarfism, even though this paper categorizes them as such for the sake of clarity and in order to make the comparison of different tales more accessible to potential readers. Therefore, in this paper the term “disability” is understood as a physical or mental difference that contributes to the process of “othering” of some fairy tales characters, who due to their differences are discriminated against, ridiculed, and pushed to the margins of society by able-bodied characters.

2. Aphasia

According to the National Aphasia Association, aphasia is “an impairment of language, affecting the production or comprehension of speech and the ability to read or write. Aphasia is always due to injury to the brain—most commonly from a stroke, particularly in older individuals” (National Aphasia Association n.d.). In “The Twelve Brothers”, “Our Lady’s Child”, and “The Little Mermaid” the characters with aphasia are young women who lost their voices either as a consequence of sacrifice (“The Little Mermaid” and “The Twelve Brothers”) or wrongdoing (“Our Lady’s Child”). In the tale of “The Twelve Brothers”, the sister agrees to remain quiet



for seven years in order to save her brothers from a spell that turned them into ravens. Zascavage argues that “her consent to remain silent is a form of selective global aphasia” (2014:159). When the sister marries a king, she becomes the victim of the schemings of her new mother-in-law. As a result, her refusal to speak almost causes her death on a burning stake. Similarly, the Little Mermaid sacrifices her beautiful voice in exchange for a pair of legs. The heroine of “Our Lady’s Child”, on the other hand, is condemned to be mute by Mary the Mother of Christ as a punishment for refusing to admit to a wrongdoing against Our Lady. Despite different reasons for being mute, it is important to underscore that all characters who either choose or are punished with selective global aphasia are female. In case of the Grimms’ tales this silence may be caused by “[a] vigorously championed German ethic at that time... of the silent woman” (Bottigheimer 1986:115). Bottigheimer observes that in German fairy tales “[m]en could be silent, but women were silenced” (1986:118), which is the case of the female protagonists of “The Twelve Brothers” and “Our Lady’s Child” who become silent as a result of the events beyond their control. Furthermore, Zascavage notes that “with the loss of voice came the loss of power, the disrespect of the community, and the inability to protect one’s own children” (2014:159). In result, in the tales discussed above, disability is depicted as a kind of punishment that pushes the heroines to the margins of society. The female protagonists of “The Twelve Brothers” and “Our Lady’s Child” almost die due to the lack of voice and, consequently, their inability to defend themselves against false accusations, while the Little Mermaid is unable to express her love to the Prince. In all these cases selective global aphasia is a feature that hinders the heroines. This approach toward aphasia is reflective of general attitudes toward disability expressed by able-bodied people, who have a tendency to associate disability with punishment, obstacles, and unhappiness (Schmiesing 2014). It is significant that in the Grimms’ tales the mute characters restore their voices toward the end of the tales. In both cases, voice restoration can be considered as a reward for resilience and perseverance for the sake of loved ones (“The Twelve Brothers”) or for confessing one’s sins (“Our Lady’s Child”). To sum up, in all three tales disability in the form of aphasia is depicted as a negative trait.

3. Blindness

In his “Lecture on Old Age” delivered in 1851, Jacob Grimm maintained that “the blind person’s sense of touch often becomes so refined that it is as if he can see with his fingertips... Every misfortune and suffering leads gently and peacefully to a beneficial compensation” (in: Schmiesing 2014:146). He seems to suggest that disability and extraordinary ability are somewhat intertwined and that both can be considered as a gift from Nature or, given the Grimms’ Calvinist faith, God (Schmiesing 2014). Despite this “disability as a gift” perspective, the Grimms’ fairy tales often equal blindness with a punishment. For instance, in the 1857 version of “Cinderella”, the two evil stepsisters have their eyes plucked by pigeons: “and then the pigeons pecked out the other eye from each of them. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness as long as they lived” (Grimms 2011:n.p.). It is interesting that their earlier version of the same tale published in 1812 lacks the motif of blinding by the doves. This version of the tale ends with Cinderella and the prince living happily ever after as opposed to the gruesome ending of the later version. Schmiesing argues that it was Wilhelm Grimm who added the pigeons’ blinding of the stepsisters in order to “enhance the moral-pedagogical dimensions” (2014:16) of the tale. Similarly, in “Rapunzel”, the prince who is in an illegitimate relationship with Rapunzel throws himself from the tower and has his eyes poked out by the thorns. As a consequence of his intimacy with Rapunzel, which resulted in out-of-wedlock children, the prince is destined to wander around blind, eating “nothing but grass and roots” (Grimms 2011:n.p.). However, unlike in the case of Cinderella’s stepsisters, his eyesight is ultimately restored by the tears of Rapunzel, who forgives him his transgressions. Zascavage argues that both tales “reinforce the image of vision impairment, blindness, resulting directly from the deliberate exploitation of another through actions that are based on selfishness, deceit, and immorality” (2014:158). Odrowaz-Coates (2016) notes that an image of undesired figures, that is figures that are somewhat different and therefore deviate from socially recognized norms, such as people with disabilities, is often created in a way that makes these characters even more stigmatized and distinct from ‘the rest of the public’. Both “Rapunzel” and “Cinderella” reflect the folk notion of blindness as a result of sinful actions, which ultimately leads the sinner to poverty and starvation (Zascavage 2014). The case of the prince from “Rapunzel”, who ends up eating roots and grass because he cannot provide for himself anymore due to his blindness, is a good example of this folk attitude toward visual impairments.



A very different picture of blindness emerges in “The Happy Prince” by Oscar Wilde. In this tale, the statue of the Happy Prince loses his eyesight not as a result of immorality or selfishness, but due to his sacrifice to people living in poverty. In Wilde’s tale, the Happy Prince, with help from the Swallow, donates his ruby eyes to those residents of the city who cannot afford basic necessities. Unlike the stepsisters in “Cinderella” or the prince from “Rapunzel”, the Happy Prince is selfless and caring. In this context, his blindness is not a punishment, but a sign of his gentle heart and good deeds performed on behalf of those who are less fortunate than him. Subsequently, the Happy Prince as well as his helper, the Swallow, are rewarded by God for their selfless actions – the Prince’s leaden heart and the Swallow’s dead body are brought to God by the Angel as the two most precious things in the entire city. To this end, the vision of blindness depicted in “The Happy Prince” is different from the folk attitude toward visual impairments presented by the Grimm brothers in “Cinderella” and “Rapunzel”. Unlike the Grimms, Oscar Wilde in his works criticized social norms and exposed Victorian hypocrisies (Britannica n.d.). “The Happy Prince” juxtaposes the good Prince and the faithful Swallow with the heartless elites of the city.

4. Bodily differences

Schmiesing argues that “The Frog King or Iron Henry” is probably one the Grimms’ tales that “has the most to say about the reality of disability and bodily impairment” (2014:98). After being transformed into a frog, the protagonist “experiences his changed body as disabled in an environment engineered for humans” (Schmiesing 2014:99). For instance, the frog cannot keep up with the princess when she runs back to the palace and his pleas for help are ignored by her. Moreover, the frog requires the princess’s assistance with such daily activities as eating or moving around. In this context, the frog’s experience of inaccessible environment is a good illustration of the social model of disability, according to which it is poorly designed environment as well as attitudes of able-bodied people that really disable people with disabilities. The princess assists the frog with eating and moving around, but she does not even try to hide her disgust while carrying the frog upstairs or having a meal with him. This continues until the frog’s human form is finally restored. Therefore, the tale suggests that the initial transformation, that is from a human into a frog, is something inherently negative that needs to be reversed or, to use more medicalized language, cured. The frog can win the princess’s heart only when he becomes again a handsome, able-bodied prince.

Similarly to “The Frog King”, in “Beauty and the Beast” by de Beaumont the human form of the Beast is also ultimately restored but there is one major difference between these two tales: Beauty falls in love with the Beast before he turns back into a handsome prince. Beauty declares that despite his ugliness, the Beast has many valuable traits and weeps when she leaves his castle to visit her ailing father. Even though some researchers argue that in the tale of “Beauty and the Beast” physical beauty “symbolizes goodness and disability or characters who are made to look ‘ugly’ represent evil” (Hodkinson & Park 2017:57), the disability narrative in this tale seems to be more complex. Although the Beast essentially holds Beauty captive, there is also a gentle side to him. In addition, unlike in the Disney version of “Beauty and the Beast”, we do not learn why the Beast was turned into a beast in the first place – we are only told that it was a wicked fairy that cast her spell on the Beast. Therefore, unlike in “Cinderella” or “Rapunzel”, it is not clear if Beast’s impairment was a result of a sinful action.

“Ricky of the Tuft” by Charles Perrault complicates the matter of bodily differences portrayed in fairy tales even more. Unlike the Beast, Ricky of the Tuft compensates for his ugliness with wit and intelligence. Furthermore, he possesses the power of making the person he loves equally clever. Even though this paper discusses the tale of “Ricky of the Tuft” in the section on bodily differences, the tale also contains an element of intellectual disability. One of the two princesses featured in the tale is, unlike her twin sister, very beautiful but, at the same time, she is not considered intelligent at all. In result, she is constantly ridiculed by other people, including her own mother. This, again, is an example reflective of the social model of disability: even though the princess is considered “stupid” by others, she is smart enough to be aware of what other people think of her and to finally accept Ricky’s marriage proposal. In exchange, Ricky of the Tuft makes the princess clever, while the princess, who possesses the power of making beautiful the person she loves, turns Ricky into a handsome prince. However, Perrault underscores that it is not entirely clear whether the change in Ricky’s appearance occurred in reality or only in the princess’s mind. The fact that



both the beautiful princess and Ricky of the Tuft are expected to compensate their intellectual and physical shortcomings with some other traits may be caused by the less-than-a-human status of people with disabilities. For instance, Thomson observes that

“To be granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort... If such efforts at reparation are successful... [o]nly then can other aspects of personhood emerge and expand the initial focus... [o]nly then can each person emerge as multifaceted, whole” (2017:13).

Toward the end of the tale, Perrault makes a point that the appearance is not as important as what is on the inside. However, his moral of the story is weakened by the way he treats the ugly twin sister of the beautiful princess. Unlike her beautiful sister, the ugly princess, who is very intelligent and interesting, does not possess any special “powers”. All she has is her wit, but unlike in the case of Ricky of the Tuft, her shrewdness does not make her a potentially good candidate for a wife. Instead, when her beautiful sister becomes clever due to Ricky’s “super power”, the ugly sister is almost entirely forgotten by everyone in the palace which, consequently, turns her into a bitter and sad person. Therefore, one can argue that when it comes to Perrault’s moral about appearances being deceiving there exists certain gender inequality in how much one can compensate his or her ugliness with intelligence.

To sum up, even though all three tales more or less make a point that what is on the outside does not matter as much as what is on the inside, the main characters are nevertheless compensated for their bodily differences with some other traits: the frog has to be bold, the Beast has to be gentle and kind, and Ricky of the Tuft has to be smart. In addition, all these characters ultimately either restore their previous, human and handsome (and therefore more acceptable), forms (the frog and the Beast) or become beautiful as a result of love (Ricky of the Tuft).

5. Dwarfism

“Little Thumb” by Charles Perrault and “Thumbelina” by Hans Christian Andersen are interesting examples of how disability is differently experienced by male and female characters. Both Little Thumb and Thumbelina suffer from abuse due to their small size. Little Thumb is constantly mocked and blamed by his own parents for anything that goes wrong in their household, while Thumbelina is passed from hand to hand and treated like less than a human. Little Thumb, however, compensates his small size with shrewdness. When his parents decide to get rid of him and his six siblings, it is Little Thumb who not only saves them from death, but also, due to his cunning and cruelty, brings his family countless riches. Thumbelina, on the other hand, goes, like a thing, through a series of owners (Yenika-Agbaw 2011). In this way, she lacks the same level of agency as that bestowed upon her male counterpart, Little Thumb, by Perrault. Aside from gender differences, “Thumbelina” is a good example of how hostile an inaccessible environment can be to people with disabilities. For instance, due to her small size, Thumbelina is constantly afraid that someone may step on her. Yenika-Agbaw points out that she “remains an object of curiosity, pity, and admiration because of her size, but, above all, an object of amusement until she joins other little people in a world where their size is the normative standard” (2011:98). Little Thumb, however, conquers, in a way, the world of able-bodied, normative people, while Thumbelina, provided by Andersen with less agency, leaves it in order to find peace and acceptance somewhere else. Little Thumb’s and Thumbelina’s gendered experiences of disability are not only an example of othering disabled bodies, but also of othering female bodies. Thomson argues that there exist many parallels “between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies” (2017:19). She elaborates that “[b]oth the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority” (Thomson 2017:19). To sum up, Little Thumb is ultimately given the chance to fully participate in public and economic life, whereas Thumbelina ends up leaving this world for a place that is less hostile toward disabled female bodies.

6. Intellectual disabilities

Schmiesing (2014) notes that when it comes to the Grimms' tales it is very difficult to determine whether a character's alleged stupidity can be classified as an intellectual disability. This is due to the fact that the most common German word used by the Grimms to describe characters with less than average intellect is "dumm", which, similarly to its English equivalent "dumb", originally referred to being mute or deaf (Schmiesing 2014). Furthermore, fairy tales, including the Grimms' ones, are characterized by what Luthi refers to as "depthlessness" meaning that their characters are "figures without substance, without inner life, without an environment" (1982:11) and are usually painted with very wide strokes. Nevertheless, the main character of "The Three Feathers" is a good example of how persons with seemingly below-average intellect are often underestimated by normative people. The protagonist of this tale is considered by others so simple-minded that the only name he is given is "Simpleton". One can argue, that due to his below-average intellect the Simpleton is treated like less than a human to the point where he does not even deserve a proper name. Since he is constantly undermined, nobody considers him as a competitive contestant for his father's throne. As a result of these misconceptions, everyone is surprised when it is the Simpleton who successfully completes all his father's tasks. Schmiesing (2014) points out that the Simpleton is misjudged by other characters and, in fact, his intellect is not impaired at all. Indeed, while the Simpleton's success in completing his father's tasks could be attributed merely to his good luck, toward the end of the tale the Grimms mention that when the Simpleton became the king he ruled wisely for many years.

The main character of "Crazy Pietro" by Straparola also experiences a transformation into a wise man. At the very beginning of the tale he is described as a person who is considered silly by all his neighbors. This may be caused by his non-normative behavior: even though he never manages to catch a single fish, he always acts as if he has just caught a boat full of fish. Again, similarly to "The Three Feathers", due to the paucity of details it is difficult to state unanimously that Crazy Pietro is, indeed, intellectually disabled. While his behavior may seem odd, there are no clear signs of his intellectual disability. Moreover, similarly to the main protagonist of "The Three Feathers", he also succeeds in life by marrying a beautiful princess and becoming a wise man. Given the happy endings of both tales, one could argue that the message that the Grimms and Straparola try to convey is that people who behave differently or seem to have less than average intellect should not be misjudged and underestimated.

7. The loss of a limb (or limbs)

Although some researchers maintain that the focus of "The Brave Tin Soldier" by Andersen lies not really on his disability (he has one leg since there was not enough melted lead to finish him), but on his steadfast behavior in the face of challenges and obstacles, Yenika-Agbaw argues that "the missing leg reinforces this behavior" (2011:96). Therefore, it seems that the Tin Soldier tires to compensate for his missing leg with his courage and resilience throughout all his trials and tribulations. At the same time, he is aware of his limitations and falls in love with a cut-out paper dancer whom he believes to be one-legged too. Yenika-Agbaw points out that this is an attempt "to link up with someone who shares his physical disability" and "serves as a motivating factor that enables him to survive the abuse he suffers at the hands of the humans" (2011:98). Like many other fairy tales characters with disabilities, the Tin Soldier is mocked and persecuted because of his bodily difference.

Similarly to "The Brave Tin Soldier", the Little Mermaid is also driven by love through the painful process of obtaining a pair of human legs. In order to win the prince's love, she even sacrifices her beautiful voice. Despite her sacrifices, the prince does not love her back. Even though he seems to appreciate the Little Mermaid as a friend, due to her muteness he still treats her like a less-than-a-human creature by making her sleep on a velvet pillow in front of his bedroom or, as observed by Yenika-Agbaw (2011), by ignoring her body language. The fairy tale seems to suggest that certain forms of communication, namely a spoken language, are superior to others, non-normative forms such as gestures and body language among others. Even though the Little Mermaid is beautiful and loyal, the prince ultimately decides to marry a princess who does not possess any observable impairments. Similarly to the trials and tribulations of Thumbelina, Andersen uses the Tin Soldier's and the Little Mermaid's disabilities "construed as 'an alien condition' to heighten their otherness,



and consequently ranks them at the bottom of the social ladder, even below able-bodied animals” (Yenika-Agbaw 2011:92).

Schmiesing (2014) notes that in current illustrated editions of the Grimms’ fairy tale, the main character of “The Girl without Hand” is usually depicted before her hands are chopped off or, if the illustrations depict her after the event, the fact that she has no hands is usually obscured. It turns out that “no one... wants to depict the Maiden without Hands as a maiden without hands” (Schmiesing 2014:85). Schmiesing (2014) argues that the comparison of two versions of this tale suggests that the girl’s disability, that is missing hands, symbolizes here actual physical and sexual abuse experienced by the female protagonist at the hands of her own father. After losing her hands, the girl escapes her father’s place and meets a young prince who ultimately marries her. However, despite his love for his new wife, her lack of hands must be disturbing enough for the prince, who ultimately offers her a pair of silver prostheses. One could argue that by providing his wife with the prostheses the prince fulfills his own aesthetic expectations toward the girl without hands. Moreover, the tale of “The Girl without Hands” is another example of a fairy tale, where the main character’s disability is erased and the initial state of “ability” is restored. In the case of the girl with no hands, it is God who makes her natural hands grow back. Therefore, the tale seems to suggest that one’s faith and virtue can erase one’s disability, which, again, positions a disability as a negative trait that has to be cured.

8. Conclusion

With an exception of “The Happy Prince” by Oscar Wilde, all fairy tales analyzed and discussed in this study portray disability as a trait that brings those characters who possess it abuse, ridicule, and other painful experiences, which supports the theory behind the social model of disability arguing that it is hostile environment that is responsible for disabling people with disabilities. They also reflect social reality, in which happy endings are always about a person with a disability becoming transformed, and not her or his environment. Many disabled characters discussed in this paper compensate their disabilities with some other traits that are supposed to make them more “likeable” and thus ensure their survival in the cruel world. For example, Little Thumb and Ricky of the Tuft compensate for their bodily differences with wit and shrewdness, while the Beast – with patience and good heart. Moreover, in the majority of the tales the characters’ disabilities are ultimately erased and the able-bodied state is restored through such means as prayers and good deeds. This can suggest that in the majority of the fairy tales disability is associated with evil and sinful actions, the notion exacerbated by the fact that in several tales such as “Cinderella” and “Rapunzel” among others, disability is used as a form of punishment. In addition, there exist certain gender differences in how disability is portrayed in those tales. For instance, only female characters become mute, which might be related to the contemporary expectations toward women. Furthermore, unlike Little Thumb, Thumbelina, despite having the same condition, is granted less agency and wit that would help her conquer the world. Another theme that keeps being repeated in the tales analyzed for the purpose of this study is the fact that many disabled characters are treated as not fully human. This happens to the Little Mermaid, who sleeps like a dog on a velvet pillow in front of the bedroom of her beloved prince; Thumbelina, who is treated by her “owners” like a pet or a toy, and Little Thumb, whose own parents constantly blame him for all their misfortunes. Moreover, even the tales that try to convey the message that what is on the inside is more important than what is on the outside, such as “Beauty and the Beast” or “Ricky of the Tuft” among others, suggest, by transforming their ugly characters into handsome men, that at the end of the day it is still helpful to look normative. To sum up, fairy tales provide disability scholars with a window into how literary depictions of disability and characters with disabilities have changed over the years.

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