



# Women's Resistance and Rebellion in Giambattista Basile's Fairy Tales

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Giambattista Basile's fairy tales are noted for their depth, creativity, and regional flair. From the mysterious transformations in 'The She-Bear' to the enchanted quests in 'The Three Citrons', and the profound brotherly bond portrayed in 'The Enchanted Doe', Basile's narratives offer more than mere whimsical adventures: they provide a nuanced exploration of societal norms, power dynamics, and identity. Through the lens of feminist and post-colonial perspectives, these tales reveal layers of meaning and symbolism that resonate with contemporary discourse on gender, race, and colonialism. 'The She-Bear', 'The Three Citrons', and 'The Enchanted Doe' challenge and subvert prevailing social norms, offering distinctive perspectives on the intricacies of human existence. These tales delve into the intersections of gender, power, and identity, defying conventional notions while providing fresh insights into the complexities of human condition. An analysis of these texts reveals the enduring relevance of Basile's tales and their capacity to inspire critical dialogues about gender roles, racial equality, and societal empowerment.

'The She-Bear'<sup>1</sup> (ATU 510B)<sup>2</sup> navigates through an intricate maze of societal norms, patriarchal structures and preconceived notions about femininity and beauty. It is a compelling tale that embraces the theory of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>3</sup> and a feminist critique of patriarchal norms that invites readers to question traditional perspectives on gender, beauty and identity. The tale commences with a distressed king fervently seeking a wife as beautiful as his deceased queen. The king's obsessive quest exemplifies Laura Mulvy's theory of the 'male gaze',<sup>4</sup> which describes how women are often subjected to the objectifying gaze of men, reducing them to passive objects of male desire. His propositions to his daughter Preziosa are an extreme manifestation of the patriarchal authority that views women as a means to fulfill male desires.

Preziosa's subsequent transformation into a she-bear is a potent metaphor for her escape from patriarchal norms and a critique of the societal expectation placed on women. The transformation challenges the rigid confines of femininity prescribed by her society and underscores the constructed nature of gender, implying that gender

norms can be negotiated, contested and redefined. It embodies Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity'<sup>5</sup> as she assumes an entirely different identity to navigate her life and claim her autonomy. Preziosa's transformation resonates with Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Her experiences are influenced not only by her gender but also by her multiple intersecting identities – as a woman, a princess, and a she-bear. Each identity presents unique challenges and shapes Preziosa's experiences differently. This underscores the importance of considering multiple intersecting layers of identity when examining experiences of oppression or privilege. Moreover, her life in the forest and later in the royal court of the King of Acquacorrente adds an extra dimension to her intersectional identity.

As a she-bear, she experiences a life devoid of the luxurious comforts of her royal past, only to be reintroduced to it when a prince takes her in. Her transition across class boundaries emphasises the significance of intersectionality, suggesting that our identities and experiences are not just shaped by gender but also by other social categories, such as class and species. Furthermore, her acceptance and subsequent affectionate treatment by the prince, who is unaware of her true identity, disrupts traditional norms of beauty and attraction. His non-traditional attraction towards Preziosa as a she-bear defies conventional standards of beauty, a concept widely discussed in contemporary queer theory. Upon reverting to her human form, Preziosa reveals a resilient and virtuous character that captivates the prince. Her transformation challenges patriarchal norms of beauty and underlines the importance of recognising women's worth beyond physical attractiveness. This aligns with ideas of societal beauty standards as tools used to undermine women's empowerment.

'The She-Bear' provides a powerful narrative that weaves together a critique of patriarchal gender norms and a celebration of the intersectionality of identities. The tale reveals the constraints of societal norms and advocates for the appreciation of individual autonomy, resilience, and multi-dimensional identities. In doing so, it aligns with modern feminist discourse and intersectional theory, imploring readers to look beyond simplistic categorisations, embracing the complexity and diversity of individual experiences.

The prince's affection towards Preziosa, even when she assumes the form of a she-bear, challenges 'heteronormativity'<sup>6</sup> and the 'heterosexual matrix',<sup>7</sup> which limit our understanding of gender and sexuality. His ability to recognise and appreciate Preziosa's kindness, service and, eventually, her physical beauty, disrupts conventional norms and redefines the standards of attraction. Her ultimate acceptance and celebration in the court of the king assert her diverse identities, serving as a testament to the possibilities that emerge when the intersections of identity are acknowledged and respected.

'The She-Bear' also brings to life the complex intersections between class, gender, and species. Preziosa's capacity to navigate various class spaces from the forest to the royal court, while commanding respect and authority in both, illustrates

the fluidity of identity and the potential for individuals to defy their predetermined social roles. Her interactions with different species, whether as a human among animals in the forest or as a she-bear among humans in the court, further delve into the exploration of identity beyond the anthropocentric perspective, a concept frequently discussed in contemporary post-humanist theories (cf. Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti).<sup>8</sup>

Basile's narrative not only exposes the underlying patriarchal norms but also lays the groundwork for envisioning a world that recognises and honours diverse intersecting identities. By challenging prescribed standards of beauty and subverting traditional gender roles, this tale illuminates the path towards a society where identity is not confined to binary notions but is understood as fluid, complex, and intersecting.

In 'The She-Bear', the contrasting names of the two kingdoms, Roccaspra ('Dry Rock') and Acquacorrente ('Running Water'), suggest a shift from rigidity to fluidity, from stagnation to flow. 'Dry Rock' represents a place characterised by rigidity of thought and action, while 'Running Water' symbolises a realm of enlightenment and renewal, where ideas and emotions flow freely like water.

'The Three Citrons' (ATU 408)<sup>9</sup> offers a fertile ground for applying a postcolonial feminist lens, providing insights into the socio-political constructs of gender, race and power that underpin its narrative. The story's main protagonist, the Prince, serves as an emblem of patriarchal and colonial hegemony. His relentless quest for a bride who fits a narrowly defined ideal of beauty (white as cheese and red as blood, 'a wife who becomes the object of his appetite')<sup>10</sup> is indicative of what Naomi Wolf describes as the beauty myth.<sup>11</sup> This obsessive fixation reinforces a Eurocentric standard of beauty, thereby marginalising women who do not conform to this aesthetic. The prince's criteria and aspirations, characterised by colour and class-based biases, mirror the Eurocentric biases that define the civilised and the savage, as proposed by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism*.<sup>12</sup> This Eurocentric gaze not only contributes to an aesthetic hierarchy but also perpetuates a socio-economic one, manifested in the subjugation of women, especially those of colour. The tale depicts the 'other' as magical, exotic, and in need of salvation. The portrayal of the black slave woman, who tricks the fairy – freed by the Prince from the citron – into revealing herself, and subsequently frightens her away – transformed into a dove – by piercing her head with a pin, reflects this dual subjugation, operating under the yoke of race and gender. The black woman, ultimately vilified and punished for her ambition and transgression, embodies the experience of intersectionality. She is subjected to a narrative that reinforces racial and gender stereotypes, echoing Gayatri Spivak's concept of the silenced subaltern.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, the fairy emerging from the citron presents an exotic spectacle, fulfilling the prince's aesthetic fantasy. Her emergence from the foreign and enigmatic citron fruit, along with the prince's desire to treat her as a queen,<sup>14</sup> reflects a form of cultural

imperialism reminiscent of the notion of the 'Exotic Other', a trope prevalent in Western colonial literature. It reminds us of the painting 'The White Slave' (1888) by Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte du Nouÿ (Fig. 2). The narrative's treatment of the fairy as a coveted object to be possessed and ultimately domesticated underscores Butler's concept of performativity. This is exemplified by the fairy's transformation into a bird, signifying her limited agency within the prince's heterosexual matrix.

Despite the evident patriarchal and colonial undertones, 'The Three Citrons' can be perceived as softly subversive when scrutinised through a postcolonial feminist lens. The fairy's transformative emergence from the citron fruit symbolises the theme of rebirth and resistance common in post-colonial narratives, suggesting an underlying resilience in the face of oppressive forces. Moreover, the denouement of the tale, where the prince gains a more profound understanding of the unfolding events and punishes the deceitful slave, could hinder potential criticism of prevailing patriarchal norms. However, it is noteworthy that despite his perceived transformation, the prince's newly found empathy doesn't significantly disrupt the status quo, nor does it provide a truly liberating space for women. The tale perpetuates Eurocentric beauty standards, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and using racialised characters to augment these narratives. Nonetheless, it also offers subtle instances of subversion and avenues for resistance. Although these moments are not transformative in radically withdrawing the established power relations, they hint at potential disruptions to patriarchal and colonial hegemony.

The role of the black woman, for instance, while ultimately tragic, nevertheless showcases a form of resistance against her subjugated position by appropriating the prince's love interests and assuming her role. She employs subversion as a means of survival. This act of resistance, while it does not end in her favour, is a testament to agency within her confined circumstances.

Equally compelling is the fairy's own resistance to the prince's attempted control. Her transformation into a bird can be read as a rejection of the prince's possessiveness, thus asserting her own autonomy. The act of shapeshifting, a motif often associated with fluid identities, emphasises the fairy's ability to transgress the rigid boundaries of the prince's heterosexual matrix.

Another form of subversion is reflected in the prince's own journey. Although the tale remains ensnared in patriarchal and colonial discourse, the prince's learning journey and subsequent transformation imply a critique of these oppressive systems. His initial fixations on specific aesthetic criteria gradually evolve into a more nuanced understanding of love and companionship, defying the narrow confines of beauty myth. While these instances of resistance and transformation are neither comprehensive nor entirely liberating, they underscore the importance of unpacking such narratives through a postcolonial feminist lens. It is through this lens that we can critically examine the socio-

Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte du Nouÿ,  
'L'esclave blanche'  
(*'The White Slave'*) (1888).



political constructs within these tales and discern the subtle moments of resistance and subversion that emerge within them. This lens not only allows us to pinpoint the oppressive structures embedded within such tales but also to envision the potential for alternate narratives that challenge and resist these structures.

'The Enchanted Doe' (ATU 303)<sup>15</sup> tells the story of a king named Giannone, desperate for a child, who follows a pilgrim's advice to have his wife consume the heart of a sea dragon prepared by a young maiden. Both the queen and the maiden give birth to identical boys named Fonzo and Canneloro. The tale reflects patriarchal power structures, wherein male characters like the king and Canneloro hold authority over female characters like Fenicia and the queen. The queen's jealousy of Fonzo's affection for Canneloro over her, and her manipulation in trying to kill Canneloro to ease her jealousy, can be seen as responses to her limited agency within a society dominated by male rulers. Moreover, the ogre's attempt to overpower Canneloro and Fonzo represents a form of masculine dominance and control.

Traditional gender roles shape the characters' actions and relationships in the tale. Women are often portrayed as objects of desire or sources of conflict, as seen in the queen's jealousy and Fenicia's role as a prize in the tournament. These gender roles are reinforced by societal expectations that dictate women's behaviour and constrain their agency.

Despite facing oppression and adversity, female characters in the tale demonstrate resilience and agency. Fenicia's loyalty to Canneloro and her eventual recognition of his true identity highlight her agency and capacity for independent thought. Similarly, the queen's attempts to assert her authority, albeit through nefarious means, can be interpreted as acts of resistance against patriarchal norms.

Examining the interplay of gender, race and power enriches the analysis, offering a deeper understanding of the narrative's complexities. While gender dynamics form a focal point, factors like social status and lineage also wield significant influence over characters' behaviours and interactions. Delving into how these intersecting identities shape characters' experiences enhances our comprehension of the narrative's underlying themes and messages.

'The Enchanted Doe' highlights how the actions of the jealous queen and the journey of the 'twin' brothers reflect gender dynamics and power relations within a patriarchal society. The queen's resentment of Canneloro and her subsequent attempt to kill him demonstrate the harm caused by patriarchal norms and expectations. In such a society, women often face pressure to conform to certain roles and expectations, including the desire to bear male heirs and secure their husband's favour. The queen's jealousy and subsequent actions against Canneloro highlight the destructive consequences of these norms, as she seeks to eliminate a perceived threat to her own power and status. The brothers' journey and their eventual reconciliation illustrate the power of

brotherhood in challenging patriarchal norms. Their joint journey symbolises a collective resistance to patriarchal structures in various forms. Firstly, their unwavering solidarity in the face of adversity symbolises the strength derived from collective action and mutual support, countering the divisive tactics often employed in patriarchal societies. Secondly, their prioritisation of their brotherly bond over societal expectations of male dominance challenges traditional gender roles, highlighting the value of cooperation and mutual respect over competition and aggression. Additionally, the shared agency and decision-making between the two undermine patriarchal notions of male authority, fostering a partnership built on equality and collaboration rather than hierarchical power dynamics. Lastly, by sticking together and supporting each other, Fonzo and Canneloro empower themselves to overcome obstacles, asserting their right to autonomy and self-determination in defiance of oppressive norms.

The ogre in 'The Enchanted Doe' might be interpreted as a manifestation of patriarchal norms, symbolising the deceptive and oppressive nature of gendered expectations. Its shapeshifting abilities, particularly its transformation into a female doe, represent the insidious ways in which patriarchal oppression operates. When the ogre lures Canneloro into its trap by disguising itself, it illustrates how individuals can be enticed into conforming to societal norms and surrendering their agency. However, Canneloro's eventual triumph over the ogre, with the aid of Fonzo and his dogs, symbolises a victory against patriarchal oppression, highlighting the importance of vigilance, solidarity, and resistance in challenging oppressive power dynamics.

To conclude, Giambattista Basile's fairy tales serve as powerful tools for enabling readers to engage critically with complex societal issues. Through narratives like 'The She-Bear', 'The Three Citrons', and 'The Enchanted Doe', Basile skilfully explores themes of gender, race and colonialism, prompting readers to question prevailing ideologies and power dynamics. By applying postcolonial feminist perspectives, readers uncover layers of meaning and symbolism that challenge dominant narratives and offer pathways for resistance and empowerment.

Basile's tales transcend mere entertainment, offering a nuanced examination of gender and race stereotypes, the dehumanisation of women, and the clash between culture and nature. For instance, 'The She-Bear' utilises animalisation as a metaphor to illuminate women's alienation in patriarchal societies while presenting nature as a source of empowerment. Similarly, in 'The Three Citrons', the portrayal of the white heroine's privilege alongside the suffering of the black slave exposes the intersections of race and gender, shedding light on societal inequities. 'The Enchanted Doe' vividly illustrates how the queen's jealousy serves as the catalyst driving the narrative forward. The sons' journey spotlights solidarity's potency in defying oppression.

Basile's fairy tales challenge readers to interrogate societal norms and power structures. By fostering a habit of critical inquiry, readers of all ages are empowered to

navigate the complexities of identity and social justice, envisioning a more equitable and inclusive future. Moreover, for readers and researchers delving into Basile's tales, the use of critical thinking techniques, as advocated by scholars like John Stephens and Maria Nikolajeva,<sup>16</sup> offers a pathway to empowerment. By employing these methods, readers can uncover the nuanced layers within Basile's narratives, exploring the construction and manipulation of subjectivity and its impact on their interpretation of the text.

As we continue to grapple with pressing issues of inequality and discrimination, Basile's tales serve as invaluable tools for inspiring introspection and empathy. Through these stories, readers learn to question, analyse, and challenge the status quo, ultimately guiding them towards greater understanding and empathy for marginalised communities.

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### Notes

1. Giambattista Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa (Penguin Classics, 2016), 160-7.
2. Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (FF Communications), no. 284-6 (Suomalainen Tiedekatemia: Three Parts, 2011). Other ATU tale types are also from this reference.
3. Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
4. Laura Mulvy, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.
5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).
6. First coined by Michael Warner in *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 2008).
8. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), 149-81; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013).
9. Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 443-53.
10. Cristina Mazzoni, *Golden Fruit: A Cultural History of Oranges in Italy* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 65.
11. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (Harper Perennial, 1990).
12. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978).
13. Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.
14. 'I do not want, dear heart, to bring you to my father's land without luxuries worthy of your beautiful person and without a train suitable for a queen. And so climb up this oak tree, where it looks like nature has made a cavity in the form of a little room that suits our very needs, and wait for me until my return, for without delay I'm putting on wings and before this bit of spit dries I'll be back to take you to my kingdom, dressed and accompanied as befits you.' (Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 448.)
15. Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 83-90.
16. John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (New York: Longman, 1992); Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (New York: Routledge, 2010).



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