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Slipping into a new skin: Robin McKinley's *Deerskin* as reclamation of the feminine tradition in
fairy tales

By: Diana Dominguez, Ph.D.

The prevailing view of classic fairy tales is that they are timeless tales for children handed down orally from one generation to another among the “common folk” until they were eventually written down by the “masters” many have come to revere: Charles Perrault in France; Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany; and Hans Christian Andersen in Denmark. Many of the best-known fairy tales can be traced to the collections produced by these men: *Snow White*; *Sleeping Beauty*; *Cinderella*; *Hansel and Gretel*; *Rumpelstiltskin*; *The Princess and the Pea*. While many fairy tales do have some foundational elements that probably existed in oral folk traditions, most originated as *written* products designed to establish a specific literary genre intended for a primarily adult audience. Although the literary fairy tale can be traced back to two Italian writers, Francesco Straparola in the mid-1500s and Giambattista Basile in the 1630s, Jack Zipes writes that it was the literary circles of France in the 1690s, primarily composed of aristocratic women, that “institutionalized” the fairy tale, that is, created the literary genre of the fairy tale (1-4). Elizabeth Wanning Harries explains that most of the fairy tales written by the women in these circles were complex and intricate and often questioned and subverted the social status quo, especially as it applied to gender roles (17). Alongside these often subversive complex tales, shorter and more simplistic tales appeared as well, many of which acted as socializing agents, reflecting and reinforcing prescribed social and gender norms of the age; Charles Perrault was among this group of writers (17). Zipes comments that these more simplistic and didactic tales eclipsed the standards set for the literary fairy tale by the members

of the literary salons: “Despite the fact that [the salon writers’] remarkable fairy tales set the tone and standards for the development of most of the memorable literary fairy tales in the West up to the present, they and their utopian visions are all but forgotten, not only in English-speaking countries but also in France itself” (4).

It was the more compact, “traditional,” or “classical” model of the fairy tale that eventually became the norm, making its way across Europe and England in the next three centuries, culminating in today’s widespread concept of what a fairy tale *should be*. Especially representative of the fairy tale genre today is Perrault, writes Zipes, but his “tales are not indicative of the great vogue that took place [in the French literary salons], nor are they representative of the utopian (and sometimes dystopian) verve of the tales” (4). Terri Windling notes that the generation of what she calls “fairy tale collectors” like the Brothers Grimm not only prized a more “peasant” style of story-telling but also subscribed to the common gender bias of the day and, therefore, were suspicious of the more subversive style found in the tales of the *salonnières* (especially those written by women) (pars. 14-15). “By the 19th century, children’s books had become a thriving industry, and the French salon tales were plundered as a cheap source of story material. The tales were shortened, simplified, and given a gloss of Victorian propriety” writes Windling, “while the real women behind the tales were slowly disappearing” (par. 15). However, the *salonnières* were not entirely forgotten, and in the last three decades their tales were not only rediscovered, retranslated, and analyzed by feminist scholars, but also gave rise to a new generation of literary fairy tale authors focused on not only reclaiming the original *salonnières* but also dismantling the rigid gender and social standards the “traditional” or “classic” fairy tales often tend to codify (par. 16). This paper focuses on Charles

Perrault's 1697 prose version of *Peau d'Ane* (Donkeyskin) and Robin McKinley's revision of the tale, *Deerskin*, first published in 1993, as an example of that reclamation process.

Peau d'Ane first appeared in 1694 in verse form, but Perrault rewrote it in a prose version for his best-known collection of tales published in 1697, *Contes du temps passé* (Tales of times past). The following synopsis is based on the translation by D. L. Ashliman, found on his web site *Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts*. The story focuses on the daughter of a king described as the wealthiest and most powerful ruler in the world. His possessions include a beautiful wife and a marvelous donkey whose droppings are made of gold. His wife falls ill and on her deathbed makes the king promise he will not marry again unless and until he finds another woman who is as beautiful as she is. As the story unfolds, the daughter grows in beauty and grace, and the king eventually decides that he must marry his daughter in order to fulfill his wife's dying wish. The princess asks for help from a fairy godmother, who instructs her to ask her father for what seem to be impossible gifts: a dress the color of the sky, a dress the color of the moon, a dress as bright as the sun, and finally, the hide of his marvelous donkey. The king is able to fulfill all of the requests, and the fairy godmother then instructs the princess to flee, disguised by the donkey hide, hence her name in the rest of story, Donkeyskin. She takes with her a trunk filled with her three fabulous dresses. She eventually ends up at another kingdom, where she becomes a scullery maid. The prince of that kingdom spies at her through her bedroom keyhole one evening when she is trying on one of her dresses, and he falls instantly in love with her. He becomes sick with longing for her, and Donkeyskin is asked to bake him a cake to try to heal him. Her ring falls into the cake batter, the prince finds it when he eats the cake, and he declares he will only marry the girl on whose finger the ring fits. Donkeyskin

reveals herself to be a princess, not a scullery maid, and her father, now cured of his madness and remarried, attends the wedding, and Donkeyskin readily forgives him. The story ends with the requisite happily ever after scenario.

Although Perrault's tale includes “symbolic descriptions of the emotional and physical problems that might plague a sexually abused child throughout her lifetime,” it also emphasizes “patriarchal privilege . . . illustrated by the ease with which storytellers absolve fathers of responsibility for their acts” writes D. L. Ashliman in his article “Incest in Indo-European Folktales.” Like many such tales, the father's incestuous desire for his daughter is absolved by claiming it was temporary madness and by shifting the blame elsewhere for his unnatural desire. In *Peau d’Ane*, the blame rests squarely on the queen, for she extracts a promise from her husband that he will only marry if he finds another woman as beautiful as she is; of course, that woman can only be her own daughter (Ashliman). The incest is diverted, in Perrault's tale, by having the daughter flee after having made impossible demands of her father, whose power is shown by his ability to meet those demands. When she flees, she disguises herself in the donkey skin, appearing to others as a beggar and given a job as a scullery maid at the castle of a neighboring king. The choice of donkey skin as a disguise, Marina Warner writes, “degrades [Perrault's] heroine utterly” (324) and “marks the daughter with her father’s sin: the sign of the donkey conveys his lust. She becomes a beast, after her father has behaved like one” (325). There is an emphasis in the tale on good breeding and appearances, for the prince catches a glimpse of her in one of her dresses one night, and falls so much in love with her that he is at risk of dying for love of her (a symbolic mirror of her father's own “mad” love for his own daughter). In the end, patriarchal social and gender norms are firmly in place when the princess marries the

prince, and the father is forgiven for his earlier madness and willingly hands his daughter over to the prince (a symbolic replacement of the father). In essence, *Peau d'Ane* illustrates the status quo gender/social traditions of a woman going from the control of her father to the control of her husband.

Robin McKinley makes some critical changes to her 1993 “revision” of *Peau d'Ane*, that Helen Pilinovsky describes as “a skillful [blend of] imagery which depicts a world which never was, whose reflection nonetheless can be seen both in the world of reality and in the symbolic world of traditional fairy tales” (2). The first noticeable change is that the princess gets her own name: Lissar. As in Perrault’s tale, the mother can still be blamed for her husband’s unnatural desire for his daughter when she exacts a promise on her deathbed that he will only marry a woman at least as beautiful as she is. However, unlike Perrault’s tale, McKinley deals with the incest head-on. In *Deerskin*, the father’s lust for his daughter leads him to rape her so violently she almost dies. No fairy godmother appears to help her with her problem. It is only Lissar’s concern for her wounded beloved dog Ash, who her father has kicked brutally across the room, which propels Lissar to escape any further onslaught from her father. Lissar finds her way to a cabin in the woods, and in another touch of brutal reality, McKinley’s protagonist finds she is pregnant with her father’s child and suffers a miscarriage. It is at this point in the story that McKinley’s more magical elements enter the story; Lissar is visited by a supernatural entity she calls the Moonwoman, who heals Lissar, clothes her in a deerskin dress that never stains or rips, and endows her with special gifts: healing and the ability to find lost children, as well as the gift of time to let her memory and psychological wounds heal. Lissar and Ash find their way from the woods to a neighboring kingdom, where Lissar is given a job as a caretaker to the prince’s

dogs because of her seemingly magical way with animals. Prince Ossin does fall in love with Lissar, but McKinley avoids the trope of love at first sight; their relationship grows into a comfortable friendship from a mutual love of dogs and the outdoors, and their respective awkwardness in matters of romance. During her stay at the castle, Lissar (whom everyone calls either Deerskin or Moon Woman) is called upon several times to help the community with either her healing powers or her ability to find lost children. She becomes loved by not only Ossin and his family, but by the entire community as well, as opposed to the ridicule that Perrault's Donkeyskin character experiences.

In contrast to many traditional fairy tales, in which the female protagonist is often rejected or even mistreated by other women in her life (stepmother, stepsisters, or even biological mothers and sisters) and generally aided only by a kindly and usually older fairy godmother, McKinley introduces a cast of "othermothers" who nurture and guide the protagonist, as she does in many of her novels. The term is particularly common to African-American traditions and denotes females who "substitute for a lack and absence that is missing to the daughter from her maternal mother" (Crew 14), but the concept of other- or foster-mothers can be seen as far back as medieval literature and society, where these relationships between women "exhibit the qualities of protectiveness, solace, consolation, and succor. One woman takes care of another" (Stiller 95). *Deerskin* provides such a network; as a naïve princess in her father's castle, Lissar is nurtured by Viaka, a lady-in-waiting not much older than she is, and the herbalist midwife Rinnol teaches her about herbs and gardening, knowledge she will need after she escapes into the woods. Once in the kingdom of King Goldhouse, his wife Queen Clementine provides Lissar with an example of confidence, compassion, and care for

her children that Lissar's own mother never exhibited. Lilac, a stable hand at the Goldhouse castle, takes Lissar under her wing and helps her adjust to life as a servant in the service of the king and queen. This network of othermothers helps Lissar (as the disguised Deerskin) grow into a more self-sufficient and trusting young woman, setting the stage for a powerful ending that reverses Perrault's primacy of the father, allows Lissar a reclamation of her identity and voice, and even rescues her mother from her role of evil instigator.

In the most dramatic revision of Perrault's tale, McKinley provides Lissar (and readers) with an opportunity to confront her father in order to finally "accept the truth that what was done to her was just that — done to her — and not a thing for which she was responsible" (Pilinovsky 2). Toward the end of the novel, Ossin openly declares his love for Lissar, prompting her to run away into the woods because she feels unworthy of his love because of her past. In the woods, with the aid of the supernatural Moonwoman, Lissar moves toward the final phase of healing. Lissar finally decides to return to the Goldhouse kingdom to apologize to Ossin, and on her arrival in the city, her friend Lilac tells her that princess Camilla, Ossin's sister, is about to be married to a man she recognizes from Lilac's description as her father. Lissar's initial thought is to save Camilla from a rapist, but this forces a confrontation that will allow Lissar to complete her healing process. The confrontation is full of magical elements that serve as metaphors for a rape victim's ability to express her rage, recover her voice, and reclaim her identity. In a dramatic twist, the Moonwoman appears only to reveal that she is actually the spirit of Lissar's mother, pushing Lissar to this final confrontation. This element of the novel seems hard to reconcile, given that it was the mother's dying words to her husband that instigated what culminated in Lissar's rape by her father. However, this element can be read as the mother's way

of atoning for her guilt at her role in Lissar's rape. Pilinovsky adds the following comment: "Incest and physical abuse frequently follow familial patterns, passed down from generation to generation like malignant genetic markers. McKinley never states directly that the queen was abused by her own father, but the implication is there in the text" (2). Indeed, the first chapter of McKinley's novel focuses on how the queen's father "was not eager to part with her. And so he looked to drive her suitors away . . . But who could blame him? For she is the most beautiful woman in seven kingdoms, and he died of a broken heart eight months after she married your father and left him" (McKinley 4). The language here is one of obsession and even erotic love; the relationship between Lissar's mother and father is also described as obsessive and all-encompassing, but perhaps we need to read between the lines there, too, and suspect that the queen married her husband in order to escape her father, only to have her marriage be as suffocating as her life with her father. Her husband's abuse of Lissar is, then, only a re-enactment of her own abuse at her own father's hand.

It is only after her death that Lissar's mother is finally able to escape the hold her husband had on her, and, in guiding her daughter to confront and expose her father's crime, Lissar's mother avenges her own abuse. McKinley's final scene reconciles both mother and daughter "with their lost selves" as Adrienne Rich describes it (240). This mother-daughter reconciliation is emblematic of what Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope describe in their 1981 *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* as a crucial stage in the development of a distinctly feminine or feminist heroic cycle (177). Like their male counterparts, female heroic protagonists must come to terms with uncomfortable truths about their fathers and accept them as human and fallible, rather than worship or demonize them, before being able to fulfill their

destinies, during the phase called “at-one-ment” (atonement) with the father, as described by Joseph Campbell, the most well-known proponent of the male-centered heroic cycle (126-148). However, Pearson and Pope claim that for the feminist or female hero, that quest has another component: "Having discovered the powerful father [and initially rejected the mother early in the quest], she reconsiders her original repudiation of the mother. Her quest becomes a search for her true, powerful female parent" (177). In *Deerskin*, Lissar can only fulfill her destiny - confronting her father, regaining her identity and name, and saving Camilla in the process - after she has achieved “at-one-ment” with her mother. McKinley gives readers a powerful, visceral scene of atonement that is not easily forgotten.

McKinley's *Deerskin* and other “revised” fairy tales in the same vein (especially those by Jane Yolen, Angela Carter, Tanith Lee, and Terri Windling) accomplish more than reversing patriarchal tropes, however. Pilonovsky writes of McKinley's novel: “Possessing the luxury of over three hundred pages in which to work, she adds a number of details which are not present in the older, shorter versions. McKinley makes mock of the self-deception that people employ when they put too much faith in the concept of ‘happily-ever-after’” (2). Such a complex and subversive plot and writing style actually leapfrogs over the compact perception of the “original” fairy tale many people have to the more complex tales that originated with the women writers of the late 17th century French literary salons. Harries describes such tales as “long, intricate, digressive, playful, self-referential, and self-conscious” and states that their authors, “the *conteuses* played with earlier romance patterns and sometimes called them into question” (17). Windling writes that “each *salonnière* was called upon to retell an old tale or rework an old theme, spinning clever new stories that not only showcased verbal agility and imagination, but

also slyly commented on the conditions of aristocratic life” (par. 5). She adds:

The rococo language of the fairy tales also served another important function . . . disguising the subversive subtext of the stories and sliding them past the court censors. Critiques of court life (and even of the king) were embedded in flowery utopian tales and in dark, sharply dystopian ones. Not surprisingly, the tales by women often featured young (but clever) aristocratic girls whose lives were controlled by the arbitrary whims of fathers, kings, and elderly wicked fairies . . . as well as tales in which groups of wise fairies (i.e., intelligent, independent women) stepped in and put all to rights. (par. 6)

All are descriptions that can be applied to *Deerskin* as well, written 300 years later. Her novel, then, can be read as a reclamation process on several levels: Lissar reclaims her voice and identity, serving as a role model for readers struggling to recover from their own traumas; Lissar and her mother reclaim what Rich describes as a “subliminal, subversive, preverbal” bond (220), the “recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture” (237), severed by the primacy of the father; and the *conteuses* of the literary salons of Paris reclaim their much deserved spotlight as the mothers of the literary fairy tale.

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