Rapunzel in the classroom
Shohhana Bhattacharji

The Grimm Brothers’ first collection of stories appeared in 1812, but variations of “Rapunzel” had existed in Europe long before then. It has been published repeatedly since 1812, sometimes in radically altered aspects.

The basic story remains more or less the same. The baby daughter of poor parents is given to a rich woman in exchange for a herb — rampion / rapunzel / rhubarb — which the mother craves in her pregnancy. When the girl is 12 years old, the woman locks her in a tower that has a window but no door or staircase. She climbs up Rapunzel’s long hair when she wants to visit her. A prince hears Rapunzel singing, they fall in love, and plan to elope, but then the foster mother discovers them. Enraged, she leaves Rapunzel in a lonely desert, and throws the prince into a thorn bush which blinds him. After many years of wandering about, he hears Rapunzel singing, and follows her voice. Her tears of joy fall upon his eyes and restore his sight. They return to his kingdom where they live happily ever after.

In its social topography, the rich and the careful live next door to the poor and the reckless. The high wall around the rich woman’s garden implies that individuals must guard their own property, the abundance of produce in her garden suggests that she is a careful worker. There is much hidden information here.

But the story’s variations especially fascination students, especially with regard to the foster mother whom they wrongly call a witch. In older versions, she is kind, clever, and possibly rich, vestiges of which continue in most modern versions. The woman doesn’t mistreat Rapunzel in the way that girls are mistreated in folk tales. She doesn’t starve her, or make her cook, sweep, scrub the floor, wash clothes and pots and pans, or fetch water and wood. Far from being her chattel, Rapunzel calls her “Mother” in many versions. Even though she locks Rapunzel in the tower, she visits her regularly. This doesn’t impress my students who point out that the older woman is Rapunzel’s only companion, and how can locking up the girl be a kindness? We discuss the social controls placed upon girls from the time of puberty, accompanied by the propaganda that the controls are for their safety. They identify with this. They discuss the fear of female sexuality, and the representation of women in popular and serious literature as monsters who tempt men from their true and heroic journey through life.

The foster mother is single, wealthy, lives alone, and apparently manages her land and wealth competently without male help. Possibly because she is so unusual, by the end of the 19th century when the ideal middle class woman was supposed to be feminine and submissive, she is called “enchantress.” By the end of the 20th century, she becomes a witch. After a discussion about the construction and persecution of witches, we notice that the kindness of Rapunzel’s foster mother is progressively underplayed until in the 20th century it disappears, and Rapunzel sleeps on straw in a dark, damp room. The development of the foster mother and her relationship with Rapunzel also coincides with the idealization of middle class childhood from the 19th century, a fallout of which is that children are sought to be insulated from unpalatable truths. E.g., They are not sent away by their parents but are kidnapped. The desire to protect children in this way at a time when many of them experience domestic rupture either directly or through the media seems odd. Earlier versions of “Rapunzel” do not flinch from the fact that parents do abandon their children, or that they can love each other more than they love their children, but recent retellings start with Rapunzel being kidnapped by a witch. Idealisation and dumbing down accompany the transition of “Rapunzel” from folk tale to children’s story. In the folk tale, Rapunzel becomes pregnant and has twins; in modern versions aimed at children, she is sexually chaste.

The curious figure of the rich female neighbour may be a remnant of an older matriarchal society. She certainly has something to do with selling daughters. Google produces 150 results for “Sale of a daughter,” but only 28 for the sale of a son, and these refer to selling a son in a film, the sale of the son of a horse, and the adoption of a male orphan by a childless male, which is less a sale than the child being born into a new family. Daughters, however, are actually sold, as ancient texts from many countries including India tell us. Fathers have Biblical permission to sell their daughters of a tender age as maidservants to rich men in order to eventually become their concubines (Exodus 21: 7-11). Mothers did not have similar authority. In the Middle Ages a European woman was convicted for selling her daughter for an acre of land. Poverty may have compelled her to sell her daughter, as poor parents from Japan to Africa continue to be. “Rapunzel” opens with the father bartering his daughter for a handful of salad leaves but there’s a twist. Fantasy, integral to folk and fairy tales, is evident in the story’s abrupt transitions, the disappearance of the parents and foster mother, and in Rapunzel’s efficiently having twins.
all by herself in the desert. But its finest fantasy is that Rapunzel is not given to a man as his concubine or chattel, but to a woman who treats her like a daughter. We could add it to the comforting aspects of this story reported by Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment.

Endnotes
1 Contemporary children’s stories are more realistic. They include the grief that modern children live with.

This is an extract from an actual correspondence between a Grandfather concerned about his seven-year-old grand-daughter’s questions about leprechauns and an Irish diplomat.

—— Original Message ——

To,

 Officer I/C Cultural & Literary Affairs
ABC Embassy, New Delhi.

Dear Sir,

I am 70 years, while my Grand Daughter Medha is 7 years old. I am at Faridabad while she is at Bostan USA. Studying in class 2 under an Irish teacher, Medha has been told about a legendary insect of Irish Fabler which is supposed to be very mischievous. She has written to me that it is called leprechauns which are tricky because they trick you when you want to get their gold. If you tell a leprechaun to promise you something. They want always do it. She thinks they have lot of gold. Leprechauns slide down rainbows. She wants to know “WHERE THEY GET THEIR GOLD FROM?

Well I don’t know the answer! Can you answer the question so that I could reply her!

Soliciting your esteemed reply

Mr. X,
Faridabad
Haryana 121006

Reply

Dear Mr. X,

Thank you for your recent enquiry. I apologise for the delay in replying but, because of the highly sensitive and secret issues involved, I had to refer to senior authorities in the Irish Government administration - the Department of Administration of Fairy Folk Issues (DAFFI), for guidance as to the level of ‘classification’ of information on this subject, and how much I was allowed to divulge to the public. I am sure a man with your background will understand the need for discretion in such matters of national and international security.

Your grand-daughter’s teacher seems well-informed about Fairy Folk, and this is of course not surprising. Magical creatures tend to concentrate in areas of high magical power. Ireland is of course the global centre of magical power and has the highest concentration of magical creature populations. High magic concentrations are also found in regions which have large populations of Irish migrants, and Boston is one of these, so it is not surprising that Medha’s teacher should be more attuned to these issues.

However, she is wrong on one fundamental issue. Leprechauns are not insects, but are actually humanoid in form, although much smaller. In common with some insects, they are capable of flight and one leading theory is that they achieve their invisibility (for they cannot be seen under normal circumstances by humans with the naked eye) through the very rapid beating of their wings, which causes distortion in the transmission of light waves. Anyway, I do not want to get too technical; the point is that they are small (child-sized) flying humanoids, and are likely indeed to be highly offended if they come to know they are being called insects. Your granddaughter does NOT want to get a ‘leprechaun’ offended - they can, as her teacher points out, be quite ‘tricky’, and have the ability to inflict various curses and spells.

There are various theories about the nature of ‘leprechaun’ society. One is that they are ‘common/ women’ who embezzle gold from unsuspecting or gullible humans with promises of magical favours. However, our research indicates that this description better suits lawyers, real estate agents and plastic surgeons, and is disputed by much of the evidence to hand. We believe instead that ‘leprechauns’ are in fact the Police force of the ‘lower element’ and our archives indicate that the name actually derives form the term ‘LEP recon’ (LEP being an acronym for Lower Element Police and ‘recon’ short for reconnaissance), and that their main function is to regulate the boundaries between the Lower Element - the world inhabited by dwarves, goblins, trolls and other Fairy Folk - and the human dimension. Their gold, according to this school of thought, is honestly come by, and is used as a power source for their transport devices (known as ‘rainbows’).
necessary for travel to the ‘surface’ (the human world) in order to re-charge their magical potential (this is done in rituals at certain high-magic locations such as the Hill of Tara in Ireland, the Bermuda Triangle etc). The gold may also be retained as ‘ransom’ in case of an incident of Fairy Folk being captured or abducted by criminal humans (shocking, I know, but it happens). All of this information comes from DAAFFI documents, and I would be grateful if you could treat it confidentially. You may of course share it with your grand-daughter, who sounds like a sensible and questioning young person, and her teacher (who clearly needs some clarifications in her ideas on Fairy Folk issues), but please do not spread this around too widely.

The reason I ask for discretion is that the quest for Leprechaun gold has been known to lead to ‘gold-hunting’ expeditions by unscrupulous humans, and these adventures have the potential to disrupt serious research into these important matters and, more worryingly, to augment tension between the Lower Element and the human world through, for example, the kind of abductions mentioned above. It is not widely known, but a number of potential human-fairy folk wars have been narrowly averted over the centuries, confrontation having been triggered by such ‘gold-hunters’. I am sure you will agree that we diplomats have enough to do in trying to stop human neighbours from going to war with each other without having to worry about smoothing ruffled feathers (or wings at least) of our fairy cousins! Even for Irish diplomats, relations with the wee folk are a sensitive challenge.

Medha is, I think, at an age where she could read and appreciate some of the better written works concerning Fairy Folk and Leprechauns and I would advise that she pursue further research in the works of Eoin Colfer. His books offer a superb (and very entertaining and amusing) insight into the world of the Lower Element, and will tell her (and her teacher) all she needs to know about the subject. More information can be found at www.artemisfowl.com and I recommend that she click her way along there as soon as possible.

In the meantime, I hope the foregoing is of some help, and please do not hesitate to contact us again if we can be of further assistance in this or any other matter.

Yours faithfully,
Mr. Z
First Secretary
(Science, Technology and Fairy Folk issues)
Officer I/C Cultural & Literary Affairs
ABC Embassy, New Delhi.

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Bengali Folklore and Children’s Literature

Barnita Bagchi

Is there anything more swadeshi than Thakurnar Jhuli, the Grandmother’s Bag? But alas, in recent times even this bag full of sweets has come already manufactured from the factories of Manchester. Nowadays, fairy tales from the West have become almost the sole recourse of our boys. The Grandmother Companies from our own country are bankrupt. If one rattles their bags, perhaps a copy of Martin’s Ethics or Burke’s notebooks on the French Revolution might pop out—but where are our princes, our magic birds byyangama and byyangami, or the gem of seven kings that lies beyond seven seas and thirteen oceans?

Thus wrote Rabindranath Tagore, in the preface to Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s distinguished and beloved collection of Bengali folk and fairy tales, Thakurnar Jhuli (1907). In this short piece, which will necessarily unearth only the tip of a huge ice-berg, I shall be looking at the way in which the vast treasure-house of mostly oral Bengali folklore was both recovered and recreated/ reinvented by educated Bengali middle-class writers, mostly male, in the twentieth century. As Rabindranath’s preface shows, there was a distinct political and nationalist edge to this enterprise of recovering the heritage of patlibAngla or rural Bengal, an edge which fitted neatly into the steadily growing anti-colonial and anti-British movement in Bengal, embodied most famously in the 1905 movement against bangalibanga or the first attempted partition of Bengal. The yearning to capture a pastoral of innocence and folkiness for the ‘boys’ (note the gender) of Bengal is part of a modernizing Bengali bourgeoisie’s attempt to recapture a world of tradition, which seems always to be eluding the grasp of the jaded urban middle-class man.