



Are Traditional Stories Sexist?

Article Author:

[Rosalind Kerven](#) [1]

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Rosalind Kerven looks at the role of women in traditional tales.

The National Literacy Strategy decrees that children must study myths, legends, folk tales, fairy tales and fables almost right through primary school: in Reception, in Years 1, 2, 3 (5-8 year-olds) and in Year 5 (9-10 year-olds). But many teachers, striving to teach the girls and boys in their care mutual respect and equal opportunities, may have strong reservations about this. It is true that traditional stories include many rollicking great yarns; but aren't most of them blatantly sexist? **Rosalind Kerven** investigates. <!--break-->

Many of us worry about stories that disparage female characters as passive, feeble victims, dependent on men and obsessed by vanity, whilst males have a monopoly on strength, cunning and courage, enjoying unlimited access to exciting adventures. Such stories glorify aggression and physical prowess as 'male?', whilst females are expected to be gentle and compliant. Characters who deviate from these norms are denigrated as sinister, worthless, dangerous and evil.

But how prevalent are these stereotypes in myths, legends and folk tales? And is it possible to avoid them?

Familiar stereotypes

Most children first encounter traditional stories through the well known fairy tales. Stories such as Snow White, Cinderella, The Sleeping Beauty and Beauty and the Beast indicate that for a girl to advance as a heroine she must be both beautiful and sweet natured. When struck down by misfortune, she should not attempt to help herself: instead she must suffer uncomplainingly until a hero arrives to rescue her and guarantee her future safety through marriage. Although other more active female characters do lurk in the background of these stories, their negative qualities subtly imply that as women age and lose their looks, they are likely to degenerate into jealous, scheming stepmothers or dangerous witches. Even the achievement of motherhood is dismissed, since the heroine's mother either dies in childbirth or fades into the background at the beginning of the story.

As they get older, many children encounter the Greek Myths, which present the classical ideal of manhood. Arrogant heroes such as Herakles, Jason, Odysseus, Perseus and Theseus win acclaim by seeking vengeance against enemies, fighting, killing and completing difficult physical tasks. Meanwhile the gods go about ravishing vulnerable women and girls (and occasionally youths), whilst the goddesses idle away much time comparing their beauty. One of the most retold Greek stories is Pandora's Box, which uncompromisingly lays the blame on the female sex for bringing misery into the world.

Alternative women

However, this is certainly not the whole picture. Turning away from the most familiar stories and cultures, there are many alternative viewpoints.

One of the most important and memorable characters in ancient Egyptian mythology is the goddess Isis. She is

knowledgeable, wise, innovative and resourceful. When the world is young, Isis teaches women all the skills they need to be productive members of society. She also introduces the institution of marriage, setting the example of a wife who is capable and active as well as devoted. When her husband, the god Osiris, is murdered and his body stolen, she does not hang about weeping helplessly. Instead she undertakes a successful search across the world to find it. Later she uses her knowledge of magic to invent the important art of mummification, thus giving her beloved's spirit and that of all the Egyptian people the gift of 'everlasting life'. Above all, Isis enjoys power: in another myth she enhances her own powers through an elaborate trick on the mighty sun god Ra.

Equally admirable goddesses appear in the stories of many other cultures. Indian mythology gives us Durga, a formidable warrior goddess and mistress of shape-changing, who overcomes demons by mounting a lion and wielding ten weapons in her multiple arms. From Polynesia comes Pele, awesome, explosive goddess of Hawaiian volcanoes; and her sister Hi'iaka of gentle disposition, yet a fearless and daring adventurer.

Of course, there are many different kinds of female 'strength'. A Chinese myth about the popular Buddhist goddess Guanyin sets the example of a woman who knows what is 'right', and who courageously refuses to compromise her values. Guanyin is originally born as a princess, whose parents destine her for an aloof life of luxury and an empty marriage. But she throws it all away for a simple lifestyle close to nature, outraging her father and even overcoming the mighty King of Death. Guanyin is a fine role model for self-belief and the potential for spiritual achievement. The Native American deity Spider Woman, the focus of many enchanting stories, fits into a similar outlook. She rescues both innocent victims and confident heroes from troublesome adventures, but her main role is to provide a moral framework and to demonstrate the benefits of self control and considerate behaviour.

There are also plenty of fairy tales in which girls and women take strong, proactive roles. For example, amongst the lesser known stories from the Grimms we meet an intrepid princess who travels beyond the edge of the world to rescue her seven brothers who had been transformed into ravens. In the well known Norwegian tale, East of the Sun, West of the Moon, a young woman stoically quests to save her helpless prince from bewitchment and the horror of marriage to a female troll. From Scotland comes the tale of Tam Lin, dominated by a duality of both good and evil female characters: it tells how a feisty laird's daughter rescues a youth from the vicious spells of a domineering fairy queen. Even The Arabian Nights yields two unforgettably powerful heroines: Shahrazad, who uses her intellectual prowess and literary talent to tame her misogynist husband; and Farizad, whose calm spiritual strength enables her to succeed on a quest where both her brothers have failed.

Definitions of masculinity

But what about the boys? Are there any traditional stories with male characters that avoid the raw macho aggression typical of the Greek heroes? This is a trickier question. Obviously negative, wimpish male characters will not do: what we need are stories in which men display strength of character, thoughtfulness and compassion as valued aspects of being masculine.

In the myths and folk tales of Native America there are many heroes who balance courage and physical strength with patience, honesty and respect for both other people (particularly the elderly) and the natural world. A number of these stories open with the predicament of a boy or young man who is belittled or bullied by his fellows. He does not react by lashing out in anger or going on a monster slaying binge. Instead he sets out to 'prove himself' in a quieter fashion. He may undertake a long and challenging journey of discovery, as in the story about a bullied orphan who discovers the first horses below the 'Great Mystery Lake'. Or he may embark on a more spiritual quest, like the disfigured youth who wins the love of his sweetheart by seeking out the awesome sun god and convincing him that he is worthy of her. In these stories, laddish qualities such as arrogance, greed and mindless violence are punished, whilst the greatest glory goes to men who have survived ordeals with humility and fortitude.

Closer to home, you may have dismissed Britain's most famous legend, King Arthur, as being dominated by swashbuckling sword fights and damsels in distress. However, in some ways the king and his followers are remarkably like 'new men'. Of course, Arthur initially wins the crown by defeating his rivals in battle: but the key to his continuing

success is his love of peace, courteousness, generosity and democratic willingness to 'listen'. He encourages his queen, Guinevere, to play an active role in the court; and even after he is finally betrayed, he continues to act with selfless dignity and to follow the course of justice and the law. Moreover, his Knights of the Round Table are universally admired by the people because they protect the weak and diligently adhere to the code of chivalry.

Another legendary hero of the same ilk is the Irish warrior-chief Finn MacCumhaill, who has a whole cycle of stories attached to him and his men, the Fianna. Membership of this elite band of warriors is attained by passing tests of skill and endurance, but it can only be kept by adhering to strict rules of civilized behaviour. Incidentally, Celtic heroes such as these see no shame in letting a woman lead the way into adventure.

An open approach

So the answer to my question 'Are traditional stories sexist?' is a qualified one. It all depends on which stories you choose to study, and also on how you approach them. Certainly if you are prepared to explore beyond the obvious and to look below the surface, there are plenty of myths, legends and folk tales to fit even the most enlightened agenda.

Rosalind Kerven has been researching, collecting and retelling world traditional stories for children since 1985 and has written over thirty books on the subject for many leading publishers. Her latest book is **The Enchanted Forest**, ill. Alan Marks, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 1352 6, £10.99 hbk. Her handbook, **Traditional Stories ? A Practical Guide for People Sharing Books with Children** (0 9537454 0 6) is available at £10 (inc. p & p) from Swindonburn Cottage West, Sharperton, Morpeth, Northumberland NE65 7AP.

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