

FEMINISM & FAIRY TALES

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“‘SOME DAY MY PRINCE WILL COME’: FEMALE
ACCULTURATION THROUGH THE FAIRY TALE”

Jack Zipes, Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England (Routledge, 1989)

- Through reading tales, children “learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems,” and gender/sex roles (187).
- Close reading “reveals certain patterns” in how women and girls are represented in fairy tales; these patterns are often instructional and impress upon children “the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person’s chances of success in various endeavors” (187).
- “Many feminists accept nothing as ‘given’ about the nature of female personality” or gender roles and we should take seriously how fairy tales “have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls” (187)

fairy tales are
tools that
acculturate
women to
traditional
gender roles

Beauty Myths: “Beautiful girls are never ignored” (187); beauty is treated as a girl’s “most valuable asset” and almost always associated with “docility, gentleness and good temper” (188)

Female Rivalry: beauty contests (in the tales) work to “promote jealousy and divisiveness among girls” and appearance or attractiveness becomes “a major source of anxiety, diffidence, and convictions of inadequacy” (188)

Reward: “being beautiful is being chosen” and a “beautiful girl does not have to do anything to merit being chosen” (188); marriage is the reward (though sometimes a punishment) for beauty and passivity (189)

Marriage: closely linked with class; getting married “is associated with getting rich” (189); because the heroine’s beauty is viewed “as the family’s sole asset...she is sold, like a commodity” or a prize to be won (190).

Central Themes and Lessons

“Alison Lurie suggests that perhaps fairy tales are the first real women’s literature,” reflecting an older “matriarchal society in which women held power”—based on the rare examples “of an active, resourceful young heroine” (such as Gretel or some versions of Cinderella and Red Riding Hood) (190).



More often, though, the heroine typically exhibits these traits (191):

“succumbs to curiosity (the common trap for women...)”

“attempts to look” or “forgets to remain motionless”—“good girls sit still”

“She knows what to do, but does not act herself.”

“The system of rewards in fairy tales, then, equates these three factors: being beautiful, being chosen, and getting rich” (190).

“So many of the heroines...are locked up in towers, locked in a magic sleep, imprisoned...or otherwise enslaved, and waiting to be rescued by a passing prince, that the helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale” (192).

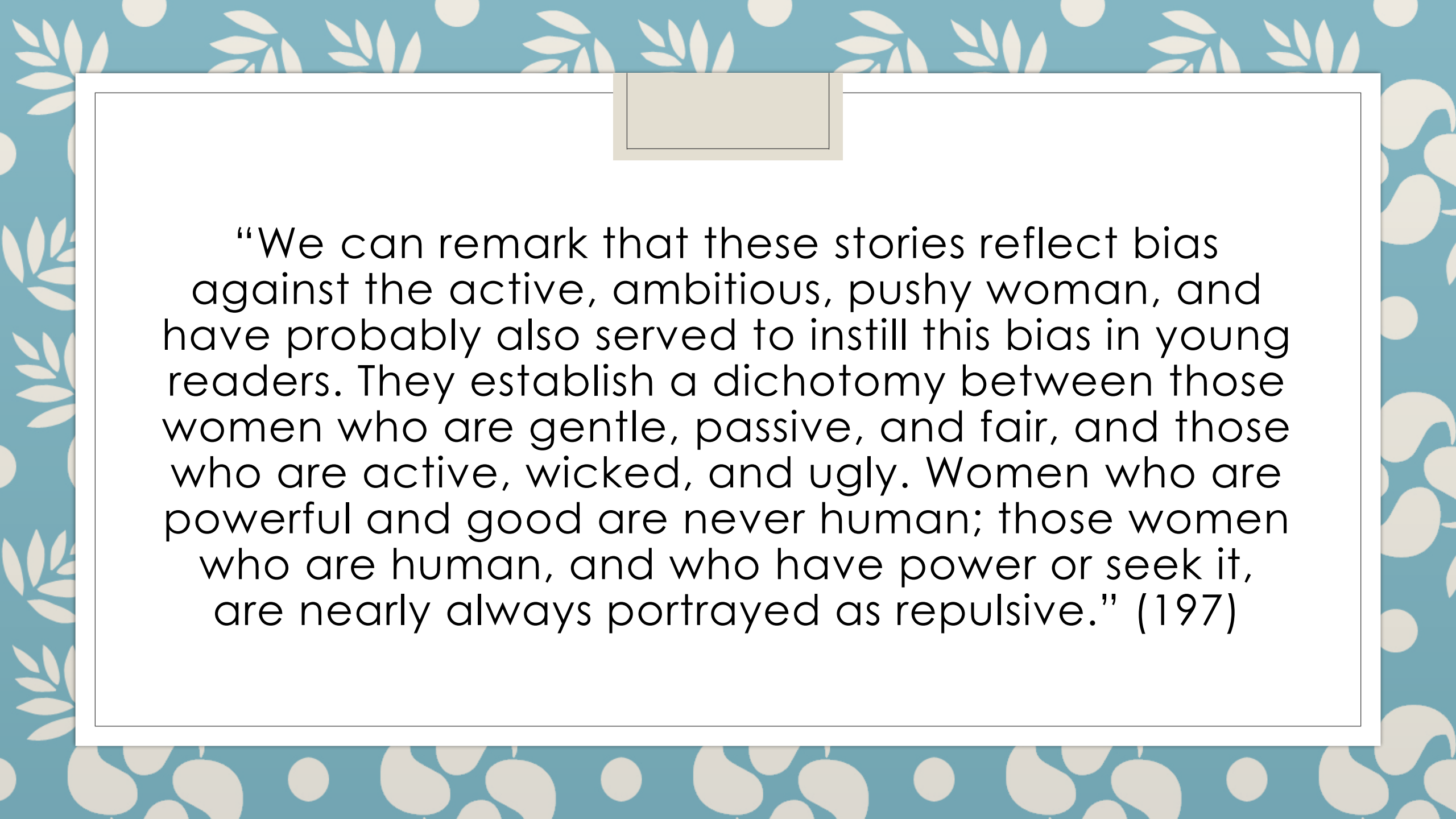
“The victimized girl...is always the interesting girl, the special girl, who is in trouble” (193)

Glamorized suffering sends the message “that women in distress are interesting” (194)

Women, especially if they are beautiful, passive, and suffering, exist to be rescued and they are invariably rescued by men (195)

What about the powerful women?

- “Powerful **good** women” tend to be fairies, rarely seen, and “they do not provide meaningful alternatives to the stereotype of the younger, passive heroine” (195-96).
- “Powerful, bad, older women” are “wicked” and associated with “extreme ugliness” and “being unwomanly” (196-97).
- “Evil” women are “active, ambitious, strong-willed” and “jealous of any woman more beautiful than they” (197).
- “The moral value of activity becomes sex-linked” (197)
- “What is praiseworthy in males...is rejected in females; the counterpart of the energetic, aspiring boy is the scheming, ambitious woman” (197).



“We can remark that these stories reflect bias against the active, ambitious, pushy woman, and have probably also served to instill this bias in young readers. They establish a dichotomy between those women who are gentle, passive, and fair, and those who are active, wicked, and ugly. Women who are powerful and good are never human; those women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive.” (197)



KAREN E. ROWE
“FEMINISM AND FAIRY TALES”

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"...fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspiration's deemed appropriate to our 'real' sexual functions within a patriarchy. As long as fairy tale paradigms accord closely with cultural norms, women can and have found in romantic fiction satisfying justifications for their conformity." (211)

However, when juxtaposed with contemporary feminist views of gender and sex roles, "fairy tale fantasies come to seem more deluding than problem-solving." (211)

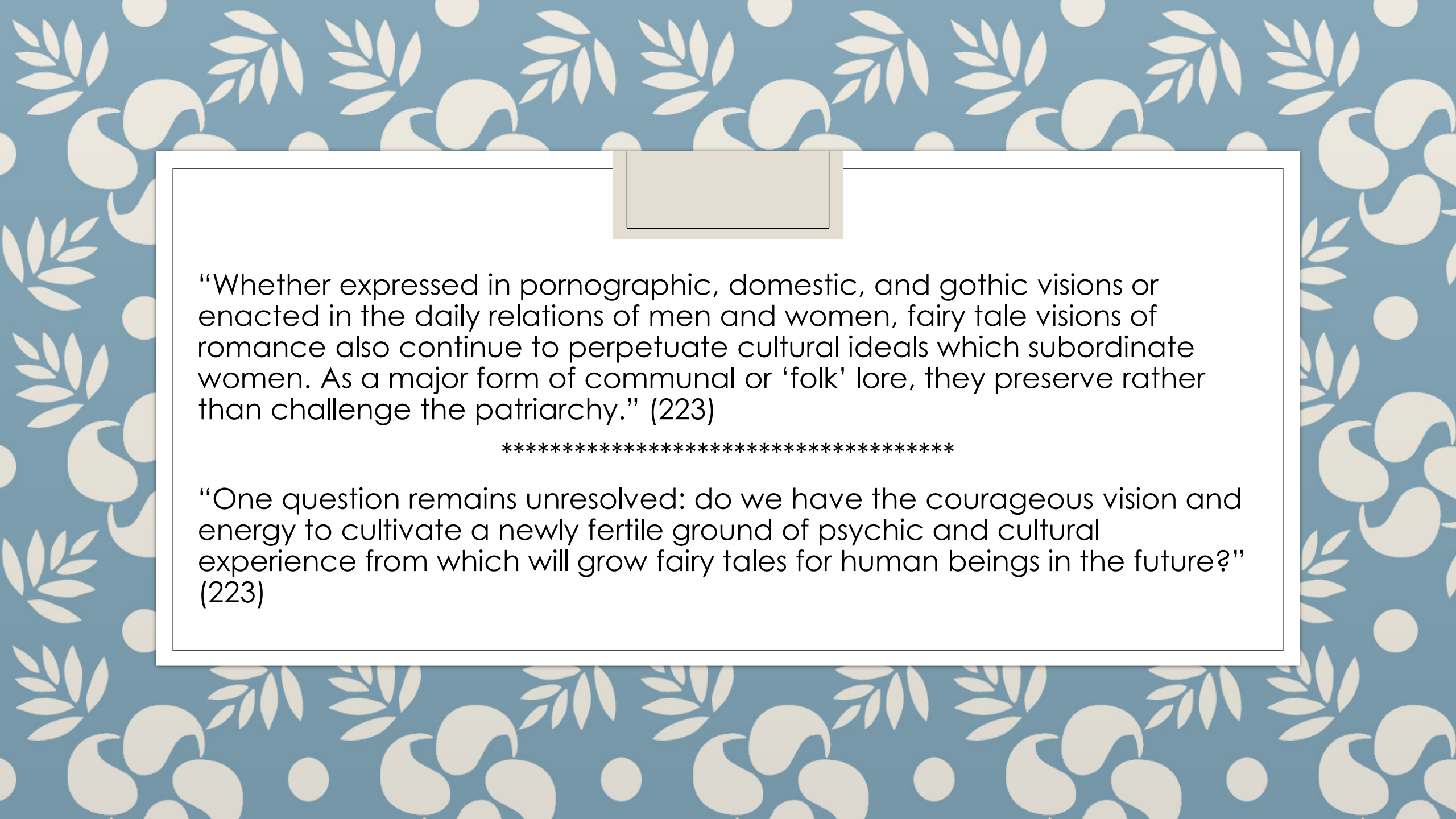
"Fairy tales, therefore, no longer provide mythic validations of desirable female behavior; instead, they seem more purely escapist or nostalgic, having lost their potency because of the widening gap between social practice and romantic idealization. It is a sign of our conflicted modern times that popular romances nevertheless continue to imitate fairy tale prototypes." (211)

fairy tales are
tools that set up
mother-daughter
rivalries, female
complicity with
patriarchy, and
conformity to
domestic roles

What do women want? Marriage, of course, and nothing else.

“But marriage is an estate long sanctioned by culture and theoretically attainable by all women; thus, the female may well expect it to provide a protected existence of happy domesticity, complete within an ever hovering male to rescue her from further dangers . As irrational as this translation of fantasies into ideals for real life may seem, it is often true that romantic myth rather than actual experience governs many women's expectations of men and marriage.” (221)

“Certainly marriage need not be a totally unacceptable or self-abnegating goal. Nonetheless, fairy tale portrayals of matrimony as a woman's *only* option limit female visions to the arena of hearth and cradle, thereby perpetuating a patriarchal *status quo* . Whatever the daily reality of women's wedded or professional life, fairy tales require her *imaginative* assent to the proposition that marriage is the best of all possible worlds.” (221)



“Whether expressed in pornographic, domestic, and gothic visions or enacted in the daily relations of men and women, fairy tale visions of romance also continue to perpetuate cultural ideals which subordinate women. As a major form of communal or ‘folk’ lore, they preserve rather than challenge the patriarchy.” (223)

“One question remains unresolved: do we have the courageous vision and energy to cultivate a newly fertile ground of psychic and cultural experience from which will grow fairy tales for human beings in the future?” (223)