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PART V

Humour In and Out of Context
No Laughing Matter: Fairy Tales and the 2016 US Presidential Election
Donald Haase

A funny thing happened on the way to this essay: The US presidential election of 2016. Politics inevitably provides grist for the mill of humor and satire, but the 2016 American election season produced an especially generous harvest. The marathon electoral process stretched from spring 2015, when the first major contender formally announced his candidacy, through the presidential primaries and the Republican and Democratic parties’ national conventions, to the November presidential election, the December vote of the Electoral College, and the inauguration of Donald Trump on 20 January 2017. With a deeply divided electorate, intense rancor between the political parties, and a cast of more than twenty major candidates—each in their own way colorful, controversial, or unconventional—the election season created not only a contentious but also comedic public spectacle that appeared both disconcerting and, at least for a while, entertaining. So frequently did the media compare the spectacle to a circus and the candidates to clowns that Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus issued a tongue-in-cheek press release proclaiming that “the 146-year-old circus officially denounces the comparison.”

If the circus and its clowns were apt analogies for the campaign and its candidates, the fairy tale also served as a fertile source of narratives and imagery for electoral comparisons, commentary, and critique. Already in early September 2015, Jeffrey Frank, writing in the New Yorker, framed the presidential campaign as a fairy tale by invoking “The Snow Queen” of Hans Christian Andersen.

In the prologue to “The Snow Queen” ... Hans Christian Andersen describes “an evil troll”—the devil—who fashioned a mirror with unusual qualities: “It would shrink everything that was good and beautiful to almost nothing and it would magnify whatever was worthless and ugly and make it seem even worse”; its effect on ordinary people was to make “their faces so twisted you couldn’t tell who they were.”

Andersen’s ingenious mirror, were it to exist, would hardly be necessary when looking at today’s Presidential candidates: the campaign, even at this early stage, has been doing the mirror’s work for it. In a rough count, there are twenty-two contenders, men and women, Republican and Democrat, each one seemingly prepared to keep going. It won’t take long for some of them to become unrecognizable.

In Frank’s analogy, the contentious campaign was doing the work of Andersen’s magic mirror by magnifying each candidate’s flaws and distorting their identities as they remade themselves and “reset” their campaigns in fierce competition for votes. “With every reset,” Frank predicted, “voters may begin to suspect that a candidate is really saying, ‘If you don’t like who I am, I’ll be someone else.’ If Andersen’s troll does his dirty work, that someone else will be less appealing than the original.” Framed in this way, the ensuing spectacle of the presidential campaign was not a form of entertainment—neither

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a circus with clowns nor a fun-filled house of mirrors—but an ugly and disorienting political and existential challenge. As a metaphor for the presidential campaign, the magic mirror of fairy tale, would serve both a cautionary and clarifying purpose. “As another Labor Day approaches,” Frank concluded, “fourteen months before the nation chooses its next President, here’s a thought experiment: imagine all the candidates reflected by Andersen’s imaginary mirror and try to see who is truly staring back.”

Frank’s analogy from early in the presidential campaign provides a fitting backdrop for examining the fairy tale’s political use in the 2016 presidential election. Weaponizing the fairy tale in the discourse of political persuasion and propaganda is a well-known phenomenon, whether used to elaborate an argument, illustrate a point, or short-circuit reason through humor and satire. In wide-ranging studies Wolfgang Mieder has shown how fairy-tale motifs have been adapted for political satire and commentary in a variety of popular media, from poetry and protest songs to caricatures and cartoons.

That same diversity is evident in the political discourse of the 2016 election. Moreover, thanks to the Internet, the fairy tale has been politically repurposed in a broad public discourse created not only by the mainstream media but also by “private” individuals without institutional affiliations or wide visibility, who express themselves publicly via blogs, forums, websites, and social media. While commentary and political critique typically employ the fairy tale satirically, the 2016 election and its aftermath have not always been a laughing matter, especially since the controversies, ideological disputes, acrimony, and extreme anxiety that characterized the presidential race from 2015 to 2016 have continued seamlessly and even more intensely into 2017. Accordingly, I will examine not only the fairy tale’s satirical role in political critique and advocacy during this period, but also how it has been used by a defeated and shaken opposition to conceptualize resistance following the election and inauguration. Although I have collected over 250 examples, I do not focus on documenting every tale type and motif and the manifold ways these have been repurposed for the presidential race. Instead, I examine several categories that move us beyond motif-spotting and allow us to recognize the fairy tale’s ultimate capacity as a political tool in times of conflict.

Fairy-Tale Narratives

In 2016, author Gini Graham Scott published 2016 Election Fairy Tales, a short book based on a series that appeared on her Huffington Post blog, where she used nine classical fairy tales to explain the spectacular conflict among the candidates in the presidential primaries. As she writes in the book’s introduction,

2016 Election Fairy Tales was inspired by watching this crazy election unfold, as the conflict turned into a circus and prize fight. … This growing conflict led me to think of the way traditional fairy tales can help to explain what’s going on and suggest possible outcomes.


since these tales recount in a simple way the battle between good and evil from the perspective of the less powerful who are up against the more powerful. Then, they commonly manage to outwit the villains and win, though the outcome of this election is still unknown. It’s in that spirit that I wrote these fairy tales describing what’s going on in the election today.

Scott does not retell tales in strictly narrative form but mixes narrative summaries and her own commentary to make explicit political points about the candidates and the campaign. She even identifies and paraphrases her textual sources (e.g., from Hans Christian Andersen, Robert Chambers, Walt Disney, the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Robert Southey) to set the stage for her own, sometimes strained allegorical application of the tales.

In “Snow White and the Seven Candidates,” for example, Scott constructs “the whole campaign as something of a fairy tale” and reads the contest among candidates as an idiosyncratic version of the Snow White tales by Disney and Grimm:

In the original story, the seven dwarfs are trying to protect her after she falls asleep from eating a poisonous apple, so the evil step-mother queen can’t kill her. But in the quest for the White House fairy tale, the seven candidates are in a heated battle to be the knight to dispatch her.

Lest the point be lost on anyone, she offers the reader this allegorical explanation as political commentary:

Obviously, Hillary Clinton is Snow White, and the evil witch might be akin to the Republican Party, which is trying to get rid of her and the Democratic Party, so it can be chosen by voters as the fairest in the land.

Scott doesn’t miss the opportunity to follow Disney’s humorous example of naming the seven dwarfs/candidates. Critiquing each candidate in turn, Scott casts Donald Trump as the leader Doc, Bernie Sanders as Grumpy, Ben Carson as Sleepy, Chris Christie as Dopey, Ted Cruz as Sneezy, John Kasich as Bashful, and Marco Rubio as Happy (and eventually Angry, Dazed, Confused, and Lost). In Scott’s view of the campaign, this turbulent team of dwarfs fight “among themselves to see who will win the right to take on Snow White and win it all for the Evil Queen—AKA the Republican Party.” Recalling that the Evil Queen falls to her death in Disney’s version (while ignoring that Grumpy/Barney Sanders was running for the Democratic, not Republican nomination), Scott concludes her interpretation of the fairy-tale campaign by hazarding that the Republican Party seems to be succumbing to the same fate.

Such direct commentary and allegorical reading are common, if not entirely humorous, in Scott’s collection. In “Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Trump,” Scott encourages us to “perhaps think of grandma being like the Democratic Party giving Hillary Clinton her mantle to run” and the huntsman as “any of the Republicans who are going after Trump, so they can get rid of him.” In “Hansel and Gretel and the Gingertrump House,” the children lost in the woods represent for Scott those “anti-establishment voters who ... have been beaten down by the economy and want changes to the way things are.” Lured by Trump’s “promises and claims of greatness and success,” they “think it will be just great in the gingerbread house built by Trump” (which, Scott advises, “is, of course, like one of Trump’s many real estate properties”). Finally, in a moment of wishful thinking and anticipatory allusion, Scott explains that “in the end, the witch is burnt up, much like Trump might feel burned should he lose the nomination to Cruz, Rubio, or other establishment Republican, or should he lose badly to Hillary in the election in November.”

While Scott repurposes fairy-tale narratives to support her explicit political commentary on the 2016 campaign, feminist writer Kit-Bacon Gressitt lets her narrative adaptation of “Little Red Riding Hood” speak for itself. Published on her website in December 2016, one month after the election, Gressitt’s “Little Red Riding Hood and Mr. Wolf: A Trumped-Up Tale” recounts Little Red’s encounter with Mr. Wolf on her way to visit Crooked Granny, whose “bad liberal
judgment ... had put [her] on the road alone, with a basket of booze." When she comes across "Mr. Wolf expounding his many virtues and heaping promise upon promise onto a gathering of lowly forest dwellers," she is taken in by his impudent rhetoric and classy appearance:

Although she couldn’t put her finger on it, he had a certain je ne sais quoi. Maybe it was his commoditized tan, the classy platinum and diamond cufflinks, his audacious howl imparting words she’d never dared whisper in public. She was uncertain, but the sight of him left her both wanting some of that and well entertained.

When Crooked Granny later mistakes Mr. Wolf for "a buffoon," he gobbles up the "crooked crone" and climbs into her bed, where he rehearses "the glib promises of greatness he would deliver upon [Little Red] and her family." After she arrives and climbs into bed with him, Mr. Wolf's hungry thoughts are interrupted by Heroic Huntsman, "with his mighty sword in hand and satellite dish on his back." Hearing Mr. Wolf’s "audacious howling, rich with sound bites and swagger," Heroic Huntsman puts down his sword, takes out a pen, and writes "The Ballad of Mr. Wolf," which ... he carried forth, following Mr. Wolf’s paw prints to all points of the compass, helping entice a huge minority of the populace to lend their ears to Mr. Wolf’s howls and applaud them, every one."

Alerted already by the subtitle, "Trumped-Up Tale," we are left to infer that this clever retelling of "Little Red Riding Hood" describes Donald Trump's (Mr. Wolf's) path to victory over Hillary Clinton (Crooked Granny) by seducing not only the electorate (Little Red) with his promises and unconventional behavior, but also the mainstream media (Heroic Huntsman), who acted as enablers as they chased profitable ratings. The tale, which ends happily for Mr. Wolf and "not so much" for Little Red and Heroic Huntsman, reflects sardonically not simply the widespread belief that a man of audacious speech and excessive appetites had won the presidency by duping the people but also the recognition that his opponent and the press had contributed in their own ways to his victory.

Not every satirical fairy-tale published on the Internet or as an e-book engages the election as effectively or with as much critical insight as Gressitt’s does. "Political Cinderella," a tale posted by the pseudonymous writer Chestnutia on Wattpad, an online storytelling community, is a good example. "Political Cinderella" tells the story of Hillary, a Cinderella-figure who is dubbed Clintonella by her stepmother, former Republican presidential candidate Sarah Palin; her stepsister, Republican primary candidate Carly Fiorina; and her stepbrother, Chris Christy, another Republican candidate. With little alteration, the conventional Cinderella plot unfolds quickly and predictably until Clintonella’s fairy godmother, Democratic National Committee chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, appears and sends Clintonella to the ball hosted by Prince Trump, where she predictably ...

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loses her shoe. The twist comes when Prince Trump arrives the next
day to find the maiden whom the shoe will fit:

Carly tried the flats, but they were too big. Then, Clintonella tried
them on and they fit perfectly. Prince Trump looked at her with tender
eyes. "Mom, I want to try on the flats!" Chris Christie complained.

Prince Trump's eyes met Christie's. "I'll take this one," he said
pointing to him.

Clintonella kept cleaning the house. Carly kept going to balls, Christie
and Prince Trump married. They lived happily ever after—except that
Clintonella was heartbroken. The end.

While the non-partisan tale spares none of the political actors in its
modest mockery, there is—despite its confused stab at the politics of
gender and sexuality—little political insight or critical point to the
adaptation.11

The most interesting, coherent, and sustained fairy-tale adaptations are
those published in December 2016 by the pseudonymous N. T. O.
Zamboni in his collection Make Fairyland Great Again: Fractured
Fables for a National Nightmare.12 Written after the November
election, Zamboni’s twenty-one satirical retellings embody the
incredulity and widespread urge to resist that many Americans
experienced following Trump’s surprising victory. Zamboni’s profile
on his Twitter account states that he “coped with this hellocution [sic]
by writing 21 Anti-Trump Fairytales,”13 indicating—even if tongue in
cheek—that the satirical retellings functioned as a post-election
coping mechanism. Therapy for political trauma, however, is only part
of the story. “I’m not sure if satire helps,” Zamboni tweeted on 18
December, “but I updated fairytales for the Trump era: Bedtime
Stories for #TheResistance.”14 As a form of post-election resistance,
Zamboni’s tale collection bookends the election process along with
Scott’s 2016 Election Fairy Tales, which expressed liberal critique
and hope for a different outcome at the outset of the campaign.

Zamboni’s adaptations effectively integrate political allusions and
critique into classical tales in a way that is neither too covert, nor too
overt, but just right. The lead story, “The Ant and the Grasshopper,”
protests the very legitimacy of the 2016 election, in which the winner
of the popular vote (Hillary Clinton) actually lost due to the Electoral
College system. The fable depicts a self-serving Grasshopper who
cons the hardworking Ants out of their winter stores by making empty
promises. When their situation becomes dire, some Ants still believe
Grasshopper’s promise that he will improve their lot if they put him in
charge: “You’ll have so much eating you’ll get bored of food. Look at
me, how my abdomen bulges. I’ll get you so much food. So, so
much.” The other Ants, however, support the Ant Queen:

So they held a vote.
The ants who supported Grasshopper marched into a warm and spacious chamber nearby. The ants who supported the Ant Queen marched into a cold and cramped one across the colony.

When the votes were counted, sixty-two ants supported Grasshopper. Only sixty-five ants supported the Queen, though, so Grasshopper won!

“Wait a second,” the first Ant said. “Isn’t sixty-five more than sixty-two?”

“Not how we do math,” said the other ants.

“Isn’t that a problem?” the first Ant asked. “For a shining city on an anthill?”

“It’s a huge problem,” said the ants whose votes counted more than anyone else’s. “We’re sick of feeling powerless.”

In “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” Zamboni targets not only the vain ruler’s self-delusion, as we might expect, but also the propaganda machine and other actors that enable him. The fractured tale tells of a peddler—not a fishmonger, but a hatemonger—and his clever customer Bartholomew (aka Bright Bart), who devise a plan to exploit the Emperor for their own ends:

“The Emperor,” Bright Bart said, “is a shallow, vain man. He loves nothing except himself, and is loved by nobody except himself.”

“How can a man like that help our cause?” the hatemonger asked.

“We are men of principle and purpose, not self-regard.”

“We’ll use his vanity to make him our puppet.”

So they bought two looms and began to weave a web. Not of cloth, but of lies. They spread word that they were super-classy weavers, the most popular and high-energy weavers in the city. Soon the palace buzzed with the news, and the Emperor summoned the ‘weavers’ to meet him in the throne room.

Promised a fabric that “cannot be seen by losers or clowns, ... nor by anyone who is third-rate,” the Emperor orders an outfit so that he can “easily check if any of his people were losers or dum-dums.” When he later sends the “old guard” and Scribe to check on the garment’s progress, they fear being exposed as losers and, despite the evidence of their eyes, confirm the cloth’s existence. The Emperor, whose “self-regard was so mighty that it painted a breathtaking picture for him,” could also see the cloth on the loom, “shimmering with his favorite colors: red, white, and blue ... but mostly white.” Since “Nobody in the city wished to be proven a loser or clown,” nearly everyone praised the Emperor’s clothes as he paraded through the streets: “Praise and exultation sounded all around ... except from the costermonger. ‘He’s naked!’ she blurted. ‘He’s not wearing anything!’” Soon half the crowd was shouting “The Emperor has no clothes!” while the other half jeered, “Liars! Crooked liars! He is wearing clothes! The best clothes!” Urged on by the Emperor, the hatemonger and Bright Bart beat the costermonger: “While the costermonger bled to death, Bright Bart took the old guard’s place at the Emperor’s side. He bowed his head in perfect deference, whispering assurances of loyalty into his puppet’s ear. ... And the Emperor led the procession away, his new clothes resplendent in the sunshine.”

Crafty wordplay generates a fresh satirical adaptation that does more than simply rehearse or awkwardly distort the basic plot of Andersen’s well-known tale to make its point. “Bright Bart” cleverly evokes the Breitbart News Network, the “fringe right wing” website that became “a powerful voice, and virtual rallying spot for millions of disaffected conservatives who propelled ... Trump to the Republican nomination for president.”15 The “old guard” conjures up the Republican Party’s political dinosaurs, powerless to govern and too cowardly to speak truth to power. Similarly, the cautious “Scribe” recalls the journalists—the mainstream media—whose “coverage” of candidate

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Trump was faulted even before the election for its failure to pursue the truth.\textsuperscript{16}

Zamboni’s collection abounds in verbal and narrative ingenuity that satirizes and critiques troubling aspects of Trump’s rise to power. In “Little Red Riding Hood,” the tale’s conventional wolf is replaced by Fox, who tells the girl that he is “fair and balanced to meet you,” echoing the motto of Fox News, a right-wing cable and satellite news channel overtly supportive of Trump. The first line of “The Frog Prince”—“In the old days, when dreams still came true, there lived a princess who loved life, liberty, and the pursuit of her favorite toy, a gleaming golden ball”—adapts the familiar opening of Grimm’s “Der Froschkönig” in a way that mocks America’s trivialization of the “inalienable Rights” enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, namely, the rights to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”\textsuperscript{17}

The curse put on the princess in the adaptation of “Sleeping Beauty” requires that she sleep not for 100 but four or eight years, cleverly consistent with the presidential election cycle and hopeful that the new president’s term in office will be brief. In a critique of Trump’s xenophobic campaign promise to rigorously curtail immigration from Muslim countries, the tale of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” ends abruptly mid-sentence after only a few paragraphs, followed by an officious notice that the narrative has been “DISCONTINUED IN ACCORDANCE WITH ‘EXTREME VETTING’ GUIDELINES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE.” A similar fate awaits another migrant tale adapted from the 1001 Nights, “Sinbad [sic] the Sailor,” which is “DISCONTINUED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE HOMELAND.” In these last two examples, literary censorship not only stands in for the xenophobia and anti-Muslim immigration policies of the Trump camp, but—by using well-known tales from the 1001 Nights, aka Arabian Nights—also exposes the absurdity of alt-Right thinking that American culture was ever “pure.”\textsuperscript{18}

**Fairy-Tale Fragments and Memes**

Fragments of fairy tales occur more frequently in political discourse about the 2016 election than complete narratives. In addition to being a common form of contemporary fairy-tale intertextuality, narrative fragments and allusions to characters, motifs, and other extracted elements of classical tales lend themselves well to other formats and non-narrative media that require concision, compact critique, and immediate humorous effect—from headlines and op-eds to tweets, cartoons, and jokes.

In an opinion piece titled “Terrifying Trump Fairy Tales,” Alexandra Petri offers, ironically, “happy” fairy-tale endings as candidate Trump might tell them.\textsuperscript{19} These alt-endings, as they might be called, mimic Trump’s style of speaking and turn not only on his politics but also on the character flaws, questionable values, and repugnant behavior attributed to him in news, commentary, and public discussion. The imagined ending for “Pinocchio,” for example, mocks both Trump’s mendacity and obsession with asserting his masculinity: “Whenever Pinocchio engaged in truthful hyperbole, his nose got bigger. This was


\textsuperscript{18} Although Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, which does not belong to the Arabic manuscript tradition, and the tales of Sindbad were first introduced into the 1001 Nights by Antoine Galland in his eighteenth-century French translation, they are popularly viewed as representative of Arab culture. I am grateful to Gary Jones, despite his reservations, for discussions about these tales in popular culture and American politics.

fine: just another potent reminder of how virile and great he was!” The happy ending for “Beauty and the Beast” plays on Trump’s misogyny and beastly treatment of women, which, in his world, is justified by the appeal he believes women (and in this case his wife) find in his power and wealth: “In spite of everything, Belle learned to love the Beast. This was important because it meant that she could have access to the West Wing over the next four years.” In a politically oriented example, Trump’s “Rapunzel” ends with the moralizing conclusion that “A young father was justly punished for climbing a wall to try to provide for his family.” Here Petri zeroes in on the candidate’s xenophobic promise to build a wall to prevent Mexicans from illegally entering the US and his indifference, even antipathy, to the difficult conditions that drive immigration.

Petri’s take on Trump’s fairy-tale endings has a counterpart in a satirical meme that emerged on Twitter during the presidential debate of 19 October 2016. While watching the televised debate, Antonio French tweeted that “Trump’s foreign policy answers sound like a book report from a teenager who hasn’t read the book. ‘Oh, the grapes! They had so much wrath!’” As reported by Rolando Zenteno, “Twitter tagged on to the literary allusion, merging Trump’s latest scandals with some of the classic and not so classic works of literature.”

Tweets imagining how Trump, who is not an avid reader, would summarize classic fairy tales were among those tagged #TrumpBookReport— including these, which ridicule Trump’s outrageous statements about women and his own sexual prowess, his serial lying, his campaign rhetoric, and his juvenile debate performance (e.g., “You’re the puppet”):

Sleeping Beauty? The Prince just started kissing her. Didn’t even ask. When you’re a prince they let you do it. #TrumpBookReport

I think little red riding hood was asking for it. Why else would she be walking through the woods alone. [sic] I’m with wolf. #TrumpBookReport

Snow White = nasty woman. She lived with 7 midgets. 7! She was unconscious but the prince saved her? Consent is overrated. #Trumpbookreport

Alice is hot. Maybe in ten years I will be dating her. Just grab her by the Cheshire Cat. Make Wonderland Great Again! #TrumpBookReport

Pinocchio. He’s a liar. A li-ar. Crooked Pinocchio calls me a puppet. I’m not a puppet—no puppet. You’re the puppet. #TrumpBookReport

These examples demonstrate not only how fairy-tale allusions work in non-narrative contexts but also how hashtagging and Internet memes

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mobilize resistance virtually by crowdsourcing political humor and satire.

**Disney Fairy-Tale Villains and Princesses**

Throughout the campaign, individual bloggers and commentators also invented formulas or conceits that they recycled in variations drawing on multiple tales. Petri’s variations on the concept of Trumpian endings comprise just one example. In November 2015, the head illustrator at the website CollegeHumor, Nathan Yaffe, posted nine cartoons under the title “If the 2016 Presidential Candidates Were Disney Villains.” The formula paired caricatures of candidates portrayed as classic Disney villains with captions explaining the disparaging visual mashups. Four of the non-partisan cartoons feature candidates depicted as villains from classic Disney fairy tales:

Clinton as Queen Grimhilde from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, who is “very concerned with her personal image. Goes to great lengths to try and get youth to trust her (and swallow what she’s feeding them).”

Carly Fiorina as Mother Gothel from *Tangled*, who “claims to care about the wellbeing of children but really just wants to take away another woman’s freedoms.”

Donald Trump as the “womanizing egomaniac” Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast*, Shan Yu from *Mulan*, who is “obsessed with beating China,” and the “gold-loving racist” Ratcliffe from *Pochahontas*.

Chris Christie as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, for “no reason ... other than the striking resemblance.”

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29 The name Queen Grimhilde was used “in some old publicity material and comics, but the Walt Disney Company does not seem to acknowledge it as canon” (The Evil Queen. In: The Disney Wiki (n.d.). http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/The_Evil_Queen. (Accessed 20 Apr. 2017).

Yaffe’s satirical collection is not alone in casting presidential candidates as Disney characters. One month before Yaffe posted his Disney villains, Annabel Coe had published nine drawings of candidates as Disney princesses commissioned by *MTV News*. Just ten days earlier than that, *BuzzFeed* published the first of two collections based on Disney princesses—the first, by Jen Lewis, depicting a cross-dressed Donald Trump in Disney-princess clothing and the second, by Amanda Pentak, with Hillary Clinton’s face photoshopped onto Disney’s princesses. Because cross-dressing Trump suffices to undercut his boasted masculinity, Lewis’s illustrations need no captions. Pentak’s Clinton caricatures, on the other hand, may be humorous in appearance but are not politically critical. Accompanied by captions based on song lyrics from the corresponding Disney films, Pentak’s cartoons suggest the princesses’
heroic side and celebrate Clinton’s presidential ambition, with humor serving the cause of political advocacy. As if in reply to the images of a feminized Trump, Pentax captions her illustration of Clinton as maiden warrior Mulan with the declaration, “She’ll make a man out of you.”

Female agency was a significant theme in the 2016 election, the first presidential race to pit a woman against a man, and Disney’s fairy-tale princesses were repurposed by Pentak and others to engage that topic. In a blog post called “Hillary Clinton and Disney Princesses Share the Same Brain,” the author writing as orgirlinberkleley paired statements by Hillary Clinton with quotations from Disney princesses to have some fun with the cognitive dissonance created by aligning Clinton’s views with those of Disney’s diverse female characters:

Hillary Clinton and Disney Princesses are here to deliver your daily dose of optimism and inspiration. All these ladies are so fucking chipper! If I put Cinderella and Hillary Clinton in a room together, I would expect a clash, not a love fest. I am seriously unsettled by the stunning similarities between what these characters are putting out there for us to learn from. What effect does this kind of language have? Am I just being cynical?33

It’s one thing to find affinities between the feminist world views of Clinton and Princess Merida from Brave:

IHC: It is past time for women to take their rightful place, side by side with men, in the rooms where the fates of peoples, where their children’s and grandchildren’s fates, are decided.

Merida: There comes a day when I don’t have to be a Princess. No rules, no expectations. A day where anything can happen. A day where I can change my fate.

It’s another to equate Clinton’s advocacy for the principle of hope and Snow White’s inspirational platitude:


HC: The worst thing that can happen in a democracy – as well as in an individual’s life – is to become cynical about the future and lose hope.

Snow White: Remember you’re the one who can fill the world with sunshine.

Disney princesses were also recruited to highlight the political role of women voters. Bustle—a website “for & by women who are moving forward as fast as you are”—published two articles speculating how fictional Disney princesses might vote in the election.35

After all, the Disney Princesses we know and love wouldn’t be the type to weather the bizarre state of American politics quietly. Part of the reason the characters remain so popular even among adults is that we see ourselves in them, and the Millennial generation certainly isn’t quiet about our political engagement. If they were real, there’s no doubt that Pocahontas, Mulan, and Esmeralda would be on the front lines protesting cultural appropriation and deforestation.36

Taken together, the various princess formulas demonstrate how, in the context of the 2016 election, these Disney characters have been recuperated not only for political critique but also to affirm the role of women as agents of political advocacy and change. As Sarah Mirk put it in an article encouraging women to engage critically in public

36 Warner, op. cit.
debate about the primary candidates, “This is an election, not the plot of ‘Sleeping Beauty.”’

**Jokes**

As a staple of political humor, jokes also found ways of utilizing fairy tales for political critique in the 2016 election. One anonymous contributor to Jokes4us.com took a jab at Trump’s female supporters with this bit of fairy-tale wordplay:

What do you call a Disney princess that supports Donald Trump?

Snow White supremacist.38

On the website Hillary Clinton Jokes, another anonymous contributor expressed the popular belief in Clinton’s corruption with this riddle:

Q: What is horribly corrupt and wears glass slippers?

A: Hillary Clinton. (Okay, I made up the part about the glass slippers.)39

In an article on Odyssey, an online community targeting millennials, Ashley Childs published one-liners on the topic “11 Things That Would Be a Better President Than Trump.”40 Among her nominees was Sleeping Beauty. Why? “Because someone sleeping for four years would do more good for the USA.”

The 2016 election also saw the recycling of political fairy-tale jokes that had previously lampooned Barack Obama, now directed at Clinton. One example is this narrative joke from April 2015 on the online Conservative Tribune satirizing candidate Clinton as “the world’s greatest liar”:

Pinocchio, Snow White, and Superman are out for a stroll in town one day. As they walk, they come across a sign: “Beauty contest for the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“I’m entering,” said Snow White.

After half an hour she comes out and they ask her, “Well, how’d ya do?”

“First Place”, said Snow White.

They continue walking and they see a sign: “Contest for the strongest man in the world.”

“I’m entering,” says Superman.

After half an hour he returns and they ask him, “How did you make out?”

“First Place,” answers Superman. “Did you ever doubt?”

They continue walking when they see a sign: “Contest! Who is the greatest liar in the world?”

Pinocchio says, “This is mine.”

An hour later, he returns with tears in his eyes.

“What happened?” they asked.

“Who the hell is Hillary Clinton?” asked Pinocchio.41

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As clever as the joke may be, it does not do justice to the profound scorn and mistrust that motivate its telling, evident when the teller goes on to characterize Clinton as “a ruthless, conniving and manipulative liar who twists and distorts the truth at every turn so as to achieve her sordid goals.”

One variant of another joke taking aim at Clinton appeared on the conservative website Word Slinger Files:

The Seven Dwarfs were marching through the forest one day when they fell in a deep, dark ravine. Snow White, who was following along, peered over the edge of the steep chasm and called out to the fallen dwarfs. From the depths of the dark hole a voice returned, “Hillary Clinton is going to be President!” Snow White thought to herself, “Thank God… at least Dopey survived.”

Framed with the claim that “In Hillary’s world, the less moral you are the more moral authority you can claim,” the joke’s punchline reflects

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42 Saxena, op.cit.

not only the political opposition to Clinton but also the disdain for her supporters, implicitly characterized as dupes and dopes.

Like many of the examples discussed in this essay, these jokes and the ad hominem commentary framing them expose the disconcerting reality that the bitterly fought 2016 election manifested not only the profound political divisions among Americans but also their unshakeable conviction that the opposition candidates and their supporters were irredeemably corrupt and immoral. The outcome of the election did nothing to change minds or bridge the divisions. As David Frum, senior editor of the Atlantic, tweeted one month after the inauguration, “Trump is like a magic mirror in a fairy tale, that when you look at it, reveals who *you* really are.” When the nation looked into that mirror, many Americans saw something deeply disturbing, something that also distressed others around the world.

**Politics, Satire, Resistance, and Therapy for a Traumatized Nation**

Four days after Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of the United States, Danuta Kean reported in the Guardian that British author Howard Jacobson was to publish “a comic fairytale” titled *Pussy*, written after the November election “in what [Jacobson] described as a ‘fury of disbelief.’” According to Kean, *Pussy* is a novel “that the Man Booker prize winner hopes not only explains why

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Trump won, but provides the ‘consolation of savage satire,’ a phrase that recalls Zamboni’s statement that he had “coped with this reflection” by writing satirical “Bedtime Stories for #TheResistance.” Zamboni and Jacobson may have been writing from different sides of the Atlantic, but the idea of writing a fairy tale to offer the “consolation of savage satire” perfectly captures the intersection and contradictions of politics, satire, resistance, and therapy that are manifested in the fairy-tale humor of a people affected—whether agitated, angered, troubled, or traumatized—by the bitter struggles, ugly rhetoric, seemingly hopeless divisions, and contentious outcome of the 2016 US election.

It is telling that the election generated public discussion of satire’s role as a tool of political resistance. Just nine days after the election, the Economist published “In Defence of Comedy,” an article asserting, “A Trump presidency must also be a laughing matter.” Despite the failure of America’s late-night comedians “to sway voters,” the article contends that comedy now has the opportunity to reassert itself as “an important medium for political resistance.” As the Russian-born American satirical writer Gary Shteyngart tweeted in December 2016, “Satire was a major form of resistance in the USSR and should play a similar role in Trumpistan.”


confirm not only that irrepressible production of political satire but also ways in which the fairy tale continues to figure in that mode of resistance.

However, resistance is not always a laughing matter, and the fairy tale does not depend on satire for its political relevance in times of conflict. Going beyond critique, the fairy tale has been used to conceptualize strategies for facing national trauma and envisioning strategies of resistance.51 Those grappling publicly with the post-election reality that Zamboni called “a national nightmare” have described it variously in terms of confusion, helplessness, darkness, division, devastation, terror, and trauma. Tellingly, some have turned to the fairy tale to find a way forward.

On the day following the election, Lisa Sadikman expressed her deep concerns about the results in a blog posting titled “Trump Won, Now What? Have Courage and Be Kind.” To her own surprise, she found

an answer to her question in thinking about the 2015 film version of Cinderella from Walt Disney Pictures, which her daughters had watched just days before the election. The first time Sadikman had seen the film, she “was pissed” because it did not depict a “subversive Cinderella,” one with “the pluck to change her circumstance” by leaving her home and troubled life. Now, however, “devastated, confused and scared” by the hatred and divisions that had emerged in the election, Sadikman sees herself in the role of Cinderella and uses the fairy-tale film to conceptualize her response to personal devastation and national divisions. Recalling the words of Cinderella’s dying mother to “have courage and be kind,” she envisions her own resistance as a praxis of courageous compassion:

I am scared and sad and sorry. I am worried about my daughters and neighbors and friends. I fear that a great wave of Conservatism will sweep over this country in the next four years, making it a place where I no longer feel comfortable living. The possibility is real, but just like Cinderella, I can hack it. I won’t abandon my home. I want to stay, dig in and help goodness take root in a real and concrete way. I want to reach out to the people around me, help where I can, listen with compassion, stand up for what I believe in and show my girls how to do the same.

I will have courage and be kind because no matter what, together we are stronger.55

Strength in solidarity is also the lesson of Sabine Heinlein’s autobiographical reflection on “Reading Out Loud in a Time of

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/hadani-dimars/breaking-the-spell-from-_h_b_1346488.html. (Accessed Jan. 6, 2017). A Canadian journalist, Ditmars mines a Vancouver performance of Engelbert Humperdinck’s Hansel and Gretel for hope that the “magic spell” of “the world’s recent sharp right turn” might be broken, especially “after the traumas of Trump and Brexit.”


Terror.” Recalling that her mother had once read to her the tale of Hansel and Gretel, influenced by Bruno Bettelheim’s claim “that fairy tales help children conceptualize and organize good and evil,” Heinlein goes on to describe how the nightly practice of being read to by her husband has taken on new meaning in these “dark days”:

Originally, the reading was supposed to calm us after an active day, but in recent weeks—in the post-apocalyptic times of Trump—our ritual has taken on a special dimension. With the election, we have struggled to conceptualize and respond to Trump’s hatred and his path of evil. Where to go from here? The forest appears darker now than it had ever been.

“Storytelling,” Michael Jones has said, “remains one of our most powerful techniques for healing ourselves and restoring order to a broken world.” Ultimately, for Heinlein, storytelling—specifically reading out loud—makes it possible to traverse the path through the dark forest, to move forward in a disordered, broken world:

These are dark days. The nights before we go to sleep my husband reads out loud to me.

For thirty minutes, we are in a position of tiny intimate power. On our warm island we don’t feel quite as helpless and paralyzed. My husband speaks the words of smart people loud and clear. I feel emboldened and safe. The existence of literature reassures me that I am not alone. Writers and artists and intellectuals are here. We are strong, we are smart, we are capable.


Conclusion

The political discourse of the 2016 presidential election demanded a great deal from the fairy tale. Utilized by every faction along the political spectrum, the fairy tale adapted itself equally to antagonistic ideologies, giving voice to both critique and advocacy. Conscripted into the service of political satire, it embodied both humor and rage. As America and the world respond to a new political reality, the fairy tale continues to play its part, displaying a remarkable capacity to move beyond basic forms of humor and critique, and even beyond individual coping and consolation. Ultimately the fairy tale can show the way towards healing and restoration by enabling a stunned people to conceptualize responses and modes of political resistance based on the strength of solidarity.

On the day following the election, Robert Mackey posted an article with the title “Liberals Wonder What to Tell Their Children. The
Truth: America Is Not a Fairy Tale. 58 Indeed. Yet, while the 2016 election may have finally put to rest the notion of America as a Cinderella story, the unassuming fairy tale itself still has much to teach us about finding our way out of the dark woods. 59

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59 On the idea that America is a Cinderella tale, see Haase, Donald: German Fairy Tales and America’s Culture Wars: From Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen to William Bennett’s Book of Virtues. In: German Politics and Society 13(3)(1995) 23.
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