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## **WHEN DISCOURSES OVERLAP: AMBIGUITY OF FEMALE POWER IN JAY WILLIAMS' *A THE PRACTICAL PRINCESS AND OTHER LIBERATING FAIRY TALES***

**Abstract:** Jay Williams was among the first writers of literary feminist fairy tales, with some of his tales appearing even before the feminist debate over the messages embedded in traditional fairy tales began in the 1970s. Being a male with a feminist view of the world at a time when this was not a common occurrence, he positioned himself among the most progressive writers of the era. However, he was also the product of his time, brought up in a patriarchal culture like the rest of his contemporaries and functioning within the terms that the largely patriarchal society allowed, which is why the six tales in his collection *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales* (1978) contain overlapping discourses. Viewed superficially, the tales do overtly promote an egalitarian worldview in terms of gender roles, but they also feature content that undermines the intended messages, imperceptibly reinforcing patriarchy through characterization and the use of language which is limited by originating in a patriarchal culture. This competition of discourses in the texts results in a cacophony of voices, of which sometimes, unfortunately, those which were not intended to be heard gain prominence in the process.

**Key words:** literary fairy tales, feminist fairy tales, discourse, worldview, patriarchal culture, gender roles, gender stereotypes

### **1. Introduction**

Jay Williams (1914–1978) was one of the first authors who embarked on the task of purposely writing feminist fairy tales aimed at young audiences, even before “the feminist discussion about the social and cultural effects of fairy tales began in the early 1970s” (Zipes, 1989: 4) with Alison Lurie and Marcia R. Lieberman’s debate on the influence of fairy tales on female socialization. His *Philbert the Fearful* (1966) and *The Practical Princess* (1969) both capitalized on the inversion of gender roles at a time when such reading material was scarcely published, featuring protagonists whose personal traits and actions subvert stereotypical notions of what constitutes power for both girls and boys, and other tales in his collection from 1978 followed suit. Nevertheless, there are not many academic studies that even lightly touch upon his fairy tales (Stone, 1975a, 1975b; MacDonald, 1982; Zipes, 1982, 1989; Winston, 1994), let alone those that concentrate solely on them, and, except the occasional



inclusion of individual tales in feminist or children's literature anthologies (Moss and Stott, 1986; Zipes, 1989), they no longer occupy a prominent place in the domain of children's literature.

Although little information is available on the details of Williams's private life, his liberal attitude with a feminist slant is made clear in his fiction as well as his non-fiction writing, where, as early as 1947, he states that "the progressive writers' central problem is that of portraying the true picture of the modern world for young people" (Williams, 1947: 11). He discusses a juvenile series about an independent female nurse with a direct reference to its formative influence on the female readership, stating that, for a girl, this series "presents a possible career without glossing over its obstacles, and in addition it allows the reader to place herself in circumstances outside the orbit of her own life" (11). Such thinking, especially on the part of male authors, was relatively rare at the time, so the appearance of *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales* (1978) on the feminist literary scene was all the more important, "caus[ing] a minor sensation, and as a result both readers and writers now approach fairy tales in new and interesting ways" (Lurie, 2002: 552).

### 2.1. *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales*

Williams's approach to fairy tale writing has been disputed by some and glorified by others. Jack Zipes praises him "as a male writing to question present gender arrangements", his goal being "the rearrangement of gender and social roles so that power is not used to gain advantage but to resolve contradictions" (1989: 17). On the other hand, Joe Winston criticizes his tales, claiming that their "self-conscious didacticism and parodic nature leave no room for the mysterious and the magical" (1994: 103), thus robbing them of their allure. This didacticism is evident in the very title of the collection, which is self-proclaimed as 'liberating', but this does not reduce its value. On the contrary, it is significant to note the use of this adjective, and not 'feminist', because such non-gendered characterization in the title does not limit the audience to either girls or boys. Also, the organization of the texts within the collection, with an equal number of tales with female and male protagonists, which are distributed in a balanced way, makes *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales* one of the rare fairy tale collections aimed at the readership of both genders, as opposed to other, more modern ones, such as Jane Yolen's *Not One Damsel in Distress: World Folktales for Strong Girls* (2000) and *Mightier Than the Sword: World Folktales for Strong Boys* (2003), which do not avoid readership segregation.

However, female power as presented in the six tales of this collection is relatively ambiguous if observed from a modern point of view. Thus, although the tales feature prominent female characters in an equal number of protagonist and sidekick roles, these characters demonstrate varying degrees and kinds of heroism, from the typically masculine type to the more stereotypically feminine ones, and not only that which "involves forging on in the face of insurmountable odds and great personal danger" (Campbell, 2010: 58). What is more, one of the characters,

the sidekick in the tale “Philbert the Fearful”, does not display any heroism at all, her only accomplishment being the inclination to actively vocalize her opinions and wants, which, in itself, does not have to be viewed as a demonstration of power. Nevertheless, if observed from another point of view, one which regards the possession of speech as the possession of power, and if compared with the position of female characters in traditional fairy tales, many of whom have had their power of speech reduced or entirely taken away (Bottigheimer, 1986), then, speaking one’s mind freely and without restraint can indeed be seen as a form of power, and not an insignificant one, for that matter. In light of this, this paper will present a detailed analysis of the representation of the six female heroes in Jay Williams’s *The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales* and the ways in which their actions and characteristics undermine or perpetuate gender stereotypes in fairy tales and the distribution of power, as well as the wider context within which these female characters function.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Double discourse: ambiguity of female power

In her seminal article “Fairy Tale Liberation” (1970), one which started an avalanche of academic thought on fairy tales and feminism, Alison Lurie decidedly claims that many traditional fairy tales suggest a society in which women are as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class” (42), and, indeed, there are, as various collectors have shown in their compilations of unearthed folktales featuring strong female heroes. Jay Williams took another route, reinventing the tales to produce novel creations, and for his female heroes, class is not a defining feature either in terms of power possession. Social status in general does not play a significant role in advancing the plots of the stories, except in the sense that two thirds of them end up married to partners of the same social rank, and two marry either above or below their station with no special emphasis on the fact. Four out of six heroes are princesses, but only Bedelia, the protagonist of “The Practical Princess”, uses her royal position to a certain extent to influence the events affecting her life, by being able to attend the meeting of the king and his councilors and confronting them in order to avoid being sacrificed to a dragon. Much more importantly, however, both Bedelia and other princesses, as well as the two members of the lower social class, exercise other forms of power, entirely disconnected from their rank. In fact, in these tales, female power is mostly synonymous with activity, of any kind, which is almost always connected to the power of proactive thinking. The use of mind by female heroes in the stories stands in stark contrast to the customary use of physical force by

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term ‘heroine’ will be used only to denote the female protagonist of the canonical fairy tales of patriarchal tradition, such as “Sleeping Beauty”, “Cinderella” and “Snow White”, to connote a sense of passivity, helplessness and dependence on others, as well as on their own physical beauty for the achievement of success in life, usually through marriage, while the use of the term ‘female hero’ will signal a strong female character, who actively seeks her own destiny, in any way which is consistent with her character traits.



male heroes in canonical fairy tales, but is in line with the way strong female heroes are represented in noncanonical fairy tales from the nineteenth century collections, such as “Kate Crackernuts” or “Molly Whuppie” (Jacobs, 1890). However, what makes these tales stand out is the fact that female and male power are equalized to a great extent, with other forms of power aside from physical aggression being celebrated in male protagonists, as well.

Bedelia is, again, a notable exception to this tendency, since she uses a ‘masculine’ form of aggression, in addition to logical reasoning and knowledge acquired in the course of her education, to literally kill the life-threatening dragon by blowing him up using gunpowder hidden in a straw doll, a fake representation of herself. Significantly, though, she has two males perform the act of throwing the straw doll at the dragon, which emphasizes the fact that only the idea of aggression is hers, while she remains incapable of doing the actual act of violence herself, being both physically weaker as a woman and lacking the necessary incentive. This, in turn, strengthens the overall message that female power lies exclusively in the realm of mind. Nevertheless, reader response from the time when this tale was first published shows that, for contemporary women, even this was too much, as Kay F. Stone found out while doing research via interviews for her doctoral dissertation. A majority of her informants “reacted favorably to [the] rewritten version of AT 300 (‘The Dragon-Slayer’), in which an unintimidated princess destroys her own dragon and leaves the men to clean up the remains” (Stone, 1975b: 49–50). However, many respondents “find this heroine too violent”, while one suggests that “something in-between her and the more passive heroines would be acceptable” (Stone, 1975a: 188), and, indeed, other female heroes in the collection are presented as “something in-between”, and often, their power is undermined by various devices.

Sylvia, the sidekick in “Stupid Marco”, claims control over her life by deciding on her own to set on adventure in order to overcome boredom, albeit on another’s quest. She joins Marco, the prince of Lirripipe, on the conventional task of rescuing princess Aurelia, making all the decisions in the course of their journey herself. The extent of her mental dominance is best illustrated by Marco’s question to her: “What now?” (Williams, 1978: 33), which he poses after putting on the seven-league boots obtained with a view to arrive more quickly to the tower where Aurelia was imprisoned. Just like Bedelia, Sylvia uses her wit to figure out how to save Aurelia instead of Marco, and enters the tower courageously passing by a two-headed giant with the words: “The monster has instructions to bash any young man who comes to the gate. But I’m a girl” (35). Similarly to her, Prudence, the protagonist of “The Silver Whistle”, sets on a quest which is not her own. Although forced to do so by her mother’s death, she takes control over her own life and actively looks for employment, learning new and interesting things while performing the tedious and menial tasks in service of an old witch. In the course of her quest, she saves a man’s life, again as a part of her employment with him, completing the initial task successfully. However, her personal power is undermined by being largely dependent on magic inherent in the whistle that provides her with animal helpers at key points in the tale, but this magic still represents female power, as the whistle is the last gift from her mother.

Female power is further made ambiguous in “Forgetful Fred”, where Melissa performs the role of a benevolent helper who provides knowledge, advice, and magical gifts at critical moments, but otherwise does not do much, except a little bit of ordering to prompt Fred into action, and she does not even leave the house of the witch who she works for throughout the tale. Again, real power lies in magic, in the objects Melissa gives Fred to aid him in his search for the Bitter Fruit of Satisfaction that would earn him a half of all his employer’s riches, but this time, it is the paternal gifts that are being used as an aid to the male hero, while maternal magic was the source of help for the female hero in Prudence’s case, which may or may not be viewed as coincidence. Similarly, Victoria, the damsel in distress in “Philbert the Fearful”, does not contribute much to advancing of the plot in a literal sense, except providing Sir Philbert with a mirror, which he uses to trick a monster, but she does actively seek help, by yelling from the window and not simply waiting to be rescued in silence and despair. Also, she shows assertiveness when she insists on accompanying the knights on their journey, after being rejected by two of them following the rescue, as well as the ability to communicate openly and to accept other people without judgment when they do not fit the stereotypical gender roles, as is the case with the intelligent Sir Philbert, whose main preoccupations are not bravery and violent adventures, as might be expected from a manly knight, but rather his personal health and staying alive.

Petronella, the protagonist of the tale with the same title, is the only one who makes a decision both on her own terms and to set on her own quest. She chooses not to conform to social expectations, and decides to look for a prince to rescue and later marry, in keeping with the royal family tradition according to which the youngest born in the family, generally a male until Petronella’s birth, “always rescued a princess, brought her home, and in time ruled over the kingdom” (Williams, 1978: 65). Her feisty spirit is, however, focused on only briefly at the beginning of the story, when she refuses to be dissuaded from pursuing her adventure. The rest of the story emphasizes entirely different forms of power vested in her, mostly those considered ‘feminine’ in nature, such as kindness, when she selflessly thinks of the wellbeing of an old man instead of her own as well as of the hungry and unkempt horses, and talent for singing, which she used to calm down the hawks that she had to spend a whole night with as a challenge from the enchanter who she believed kept a prince as his prisoner. Nevertheless, she also exhibits what was termed ‘bravery’ by Williams, when faced with fierce hounds, and what could also be called assertiveness, since, “instead of backing away, she went towards the dogs [and] began to speak to them in a quiet voice” (71). Her physical assertiveness is even more evident in the episode when she ‘rescues’ the prince who is unwilling to leave the enchanter’s comfortable house, when “she grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him out of bed, [. . .] haul[ing] him down the stairs” (74). The power of creative thinking, however, is undermined in her case, both by her requiring instructions for everything she does from the old man she saved by her kindness, and by her earning all stereotypically feminine magical objects from a male figure as the source of power, since she obtains a magic comb, a mirror and a ring from the enchanter for the challenges she overcomes.



These female heroes face various problems, from Bedelia's battle for survival and escape from both physical imprisonment and marriage with an undesirable partner, over Sylvia's search for entertainment, Prudence's providing for her own sustenance through employment, Melissa's escape from drudgery of every day life and menial housework, and Petronella's quest for a marital partner, to Victoria's need to be rescued from imprisonment. Those characters that perform the role of the protagonists in their tales also function as rescuers. Thus, Bedelia saves both her own life and her kingdom from a dragon, and she frees herself along with prince Perian who was imprisoned and put under a spell by the evil Lord Garp, her unwelcome suitor. Prudence saves a man, the Wazar, from death, but she also protects Prince Pertinel from an insincere marriage with a witch transformed into a beautiful maiden, and in doing so, protects her people from being ruled by an evil queen. Finally, Petronella goes to great lengths to rescue a prince, and she completes her self-imposed task successfully, only to discover that Prince Ferdinand is actually an intruder at Albion the enchanter's house, an unwelcome guest who the enchanter had been too polite to ask to leave. On the other hand, the three female heroes who are in a side character role use their power to be of help to male protagonists in the tales. Melissa shares magical objects in her possession and provides instructions for traveling, and she does so out of romantic interest in Fred, the young man who went on a quest on behalf of his employer, Bumberdumble Pott. Victoria, after being rescued from a damsel-in-distress position, acts also as a provider of a helpful object, a non-magical mirror, as well as psychological support and companionship to her savior. In Sylvia's case, though, the distinction between the role of a side character and protagonist is largely blurred, and her role as helper is intertwined with her role as a rescuer, since, in the end, she is the one who successfully enters the tower to save the other princess.

### **3. Mind and body: fairy tale heroine liberation (or is it?)**

The female heroes in Williams's tales were obviously meant to function as alternative role models for modern children in terms of gender roles, as he was "one of the first and best of the authors who responded to the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s" and although "his stories are traditional in their choice of episode and motif, they also overturn nearly all the conventions of the genre to illustrate new ideas about women" (Lurie, 2002: 552). His female heroes do not share common ground with the most popular fairy tale heroines purposefully, in order to emphasize the contrast and to expand the observed range of possibilities that exist for his young female, as well as male audience. Thus, the most prominent characteristic in Bedelia's case is her practicality, and, although she is also described as graceful and "as lovely as the moon shining upon the waterlilies" (Williams, 1978: 9), these stereotypically feminine traits are not capitalized on, but rather, her common sense is what moves the action forward, since all problem resolutions depend on her using her wit. Another character with superior intelligence is Sylvia,

who leads Marko through his adventure, making calculations and decisions that lead to their reaching his goal, and in her case beauty is not a defining feature, either, although she does sport a distinctly feminine look, with “smooth brown hair [which] hung in long plaits tied with golden bows” (26). However, although Sylvia shows as much initiative as Bedelia does in the course of the tale, and is highly protective of her male companion, what undermines the feminist message of her characterization is the motivation behind her actions. She was utterly bored before a man came into her life, and, although he follows her in a literal sense, she is the real follower in the story, because she is the one who conforms to a maximum, adopting his purpose in life and forsaking her own world to help him achieve his goals, which can be viewed as a standard patriarchal practice.

Other characters follow this pattern, too. Melissa was also bored with her life, serving a witch day after day, and she welcomed the entertainment brought to her by Fred’s arrival. She enjoyed his singing and storytelling, and, because she liked him and “she was a good cook, [. . . she] fed him well” (59). Unlike Sylvia, she doesn’t follow the male protagonist on his mission, but stays at home, giving him her paternal inheritance, which, taking into account the fact that they marry in the end, can be interpreted as even giving dowry of sort. Victoria, the character who finds herself in the most standard damsel-in-distress fairy tale situation, apart from being assertive and inquisitive, does not do much to contribute to the plot development. However, her most important positive characteristic is her unconditional acceptance of a male with nonhegemonic masculinity traits, something equally important in a world of gender equality and something that not every woman is comfortable with due to being conditioned by patriarchal upbringing, which is quite evident in Ruth MacDonald’s criticism of Williams’s male characters as not “of manly or otherwise noteworthy virtues” (1982: 18). For Victoria and Melissa, physical appearance plays no role in the tale. Melissa is described as pretty, with blue eyes and black hair, but just as in Victoria’s case, who “had large, merry brown eyes and long brown hair in two braids down her back” (Williams, 1978: 84), this has no effect on the outcome of the tale, nor is it given any additional mention after the character introduction, which is not the case for the remaining two female heroes.

The description of Petronella’s unconventional physical appearance, with her flaming red hair and tallness, serves to set the stage for an unconventional spirit but, in the course of the tale, her kindness is what is emphasized as the most important, and not her feistiness. There is no reference to her beauty until the very ending, when the enchanter explains that he was chasing her because she was ‘just the girl’ for him, being “brave and kind and talented, and *beautiful* as well” (77; italics mine), thus overshadowing the importance of her personal achievements and putting emphasis on beauty, which weakens the overall message of the tale. However, the only tale in which physical appearance is intentionally put focus on and is the driving force of the tale is “The Silver Whistle”. If anywhere, this is the case in which Joe Winston’s (1994) criticism of Williams’s tales as overtly and overly didactic stands ground, as Prudence’s main power lies in her refusal to accept the cultural norms connected with beauty, embracing her ordinariness much in the manner of Amy, the protagonist

of Mary Margaret Kaye's *Ordinary Princess* (1980). Prudence is described "as plain as the day is long", with "a snub nose, a wide mouth, straight straw-colored hair, and so many freckles that it looked as if someone had sprinkled her with cinnamon" (Williams, 1978: 39). The plot revolves around beauty, as well, since Prudence goes in search of the magical mirror of Morna, which makes those that look into it beautiful, in order to provide the witch she works for with the means towards the marriage with Prince Pertinel. Her wisdom is capitalized on when she consciously refrains from looking in the mirror in her possession, saying: "I don't think I want to be beautiful. I might be different outside but I'd be the same inside, and I'm used to the way I am" (51). Nevertheless, although she shows honesty when she uses her whistle to break the mirror in order to expose the witch's deception, the prince does not decide to marry her on the account of her noble act, but rather, her physical appearance, because "as it happens, [he] prefer[s] freckles" (53).

Williams does not devote much space to the description of physical appearance, or any other character feature, for that matter, letting the characters develop through their actions and thoughts. However, the amount of space devoted to these direct descriptions is rather indicative of the importance that a character's looks have in the tale. Thus, the word count on Prudence's appearance is by far the largest among female heroes, with thirty-four words used, with Bedelia and Petronella following with twenty-nine and twenty-seven respectively, as opposed to the much lower count for nonprotagonists with only sixteen in the case of Melissa and Victoria, and twenty in Sylvia's, which directly corresponds to the character's importance in the tale. Nevertheless, all female characters are described in terms of their looks, whereas this is not the case for all male characters, regardless of their role in the tale. Of the three male protagonists, two are described using only one word, "handsome" for Marco and "good-looking" for Fred, while Sir Philbert's appearance is not paid attention to at all. Male sidekicks' looks are given a greater amount of space, with as much as forty-one word describing the ugliness of Lord Garp, the villain from "The Practical Princess", and twenty-five words describing the fearsomeness of the enchanter in "Petronella", but again, when it is good looks that is being described, in the case of Prince Ferdinand, only one word, "handsome", is used. Such practice undermines Williams's conscious intention of subverting the gender stereotypes again, and unknowingly ascribes greater significance to female physical appearance, much in the manner of the popular traditional tales which he intended to distance himself from.

In the descriptions, as well as elsewhere in the text, the term "young man" denotes male protagonists, while the term which is perpetually used to refer to the female characters is "girl" instead of "young woman", and this is one additional way in which female characters are deprived of power. Another is their occasional linguistic connection with delicate flowers, as floral imagery is used in their physical description. Especially in Petronella's case, linguistic choices are of significance, as she is depicted as "handsome" at the beginning of the tale, while she is acting strong-mindedly and in a nonconformist way, while at the end, when she is about to comply with the ways of patriarchy, she is presented as "beautiful". Nevertheless,



what must be stated in Williams's favor and what provides counterbalance to this tendency are the names given to female characters, as not a single one carries any reference to beauty, or any kind of feminine fragility. Instead, they provide powerful associations, to wisdom for Prudence, industriousness for Melissa, strength, both in terms of social status, for Bedelia, and nature, for Petronella and Sylvia, and victory in Victoria's case. Significantly though, only one out of three tales is entitled after the female protagonist, whereas all three titles of the tales with male protagonists contain their personal names, giving them due prominence and focusing the readers' attention to their character, even when the female sidekick takes over most of the action, as it is the case with Sylvia in "Stupid Marco".

#### 4. Conclusion

Functioning within patriarchal discourse and conforming to it in terms of characterization may be the reason why this particular set of feminist fairy tales hasn't received widespread popularity, as they send confusing messages to the audience, because "[w]hen several discourses are produced in the same text, . . . these discourses can be seen not just as 'jostling' together, but also as competing, or contradictory" (Sunderland, 2006: 52). However, this case is not isolated when it comes to discourse overlapping within the tales, as many other feminist fairy tales came into existence under similar circumstances, originating from what Dale Spender termed "man-made language", and, indeed, many are being opposed to on the ground that they do not offer adequate alternative role models to neither girls nor boys when compared to traditional fairy tales. Nevertheless, they still do present an effort to change people's schemata in the direction of greater tolerance and acceptance of diversity, which is why they should be incorporated into children's education, in order to provide balance and alternative points of view.

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### **KADA SE DISKURSI PREKLOPE: DVOSMISLENOST ŽENSKJE MOĆI U PRAKTIČNOJ PRINCEZI I DRUGIM OSLOBAĐAJUĆIM BAJKAMA DŽEJA VILIJAMSA**

#### Rezime

Džej Vilijams bio je među prvim piscima književnih feminističkih bajki, i neke od njegovih priča su se pojavile čak i pre feminističke debate o porukama inkorporiranim u tradicionalne bajke koja je započeta sedamdesetih godina prošlog veka. Kao muškarac sa feminističkim pogledom na svet u vreme kada to nije bila uobičajena pojava, Vilijams se pozicionira među progresivne pisce te ere. Međutim, kako je takođe bio i proizvod svog vremena, odrastajući u patrijarhalnoj kulturi kao i ostali njegovi savremenici i funkcionisajući u okvirima koje u velikoj meri određuje patrijarhalno društvo, šest priča u njegovoj kolekciji *Praktična princeza i druge oslobađajuće bajke* (1978) sadrže diskurse koji se preklapaju. Površno gledano, priče otvoreno promovišu egalitaristički pogled na svet u smislu rodni uloga. Međutim, njihov sadržaj takođe i podriva željene poruke, neprimetno podržavajući patrijarhat kroz karakterizaciju i upotrebu jezika koji je ograničen svojim poreklom iz patrijarhalne kulture. Ovo takmičenje diskursa u tekstovima dovodi do kakofonije različitih glasova, od kojih ponekad, nažalost, neki neplanirano dobijaju na značaju.

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