

SKELETONS, RAG DOLLS, AND AMBIGUOUS SWAMP CREATURES:
GENDER IN TIM BURTON'S *THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS*
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Fairytales and folk tales have long been a way to engage children in the rules of society without lecturing them. Children will hear a story and on multiple levels, both consciously and unconsciously, apply it to real life and how they view and interpret the world. Aside from teaching right from wrong they often teach domesticity, compliance, submissiveness, and silence to girls, and ingenuity, valiance, bravery, honor, and chivalry to boys. This essay is intended to analyze the continued occurrence of fairy tales' effect on gender concept formation through the analysis of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Fairy tales tell of legendary deeds and creatures in a way that is intended to teach some lesson to children. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a modern a fairy tale, telling the legendary deeds of Jack Skellington, a skeleton who rules over Halloweentown, which is where the holiday is created. It has a moral: One should find happiness in whatever one is and not try to be someone or something else. But it is also littered with gender references and roles, present on many levels. They are overtly displayed in the direct actions of characters, or appeal to a more hidden aspect of the human psyche. Although the characters of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* display a number of traditional gender roles in some respects, they also do much to undermine those same roles in other respects, paving the way for a new, more egalitarian fairy tale and therefore a redefinition of gender roles for their audiences.

The Nightmare Before Christmas addresses many qualities that feminists argue are most problematic of fairy tales. Its main female character, Sally, is a living domestic rag doll, who is practically, and at some points literally, imprisoned in the home of Dr. Finklestein, the mad scientist who created her. In the third scene, Dr. Finklestein reprimands her for having run away by saying, "You're mine, you know! I made you!"(Burton). Feminists have repeatedly attacked this submissive portrayal of women as the wrong message to send to young children and "have denounced the fairy tale as a particularly effective tool in perpetuating repressive stereotyping" (Segel 30). Throughout the film, Sally engages in behaviors that follow the stereotypes to which these feminists are referring. She can be seen cooking for others. Her ability as a seamstress is a common theme: she is not only enlisted

to sew Jack's "Sandy Claws" suit, but she actually sews herself back together after jumping from a window. The furnishings in her room reflect the way Dr. Finkelstein views Sally. Her room is small and contains a table, her bed, a sewing machine and a broom. The last two items are also commonly found in the fairy tales that feminists see as teaching the wrong lesson to young girls. In her discussion of women's roles in the fairy tale compilations done by the Brothers Grimm, Maureen Thum sums up "Frau Holle" by saying that the young woman "is rewarded for proving her capabilities as a good housewife who knows how to cook, clean and carry out her daily chores with thoroughness and consistency" (13). In a way, the furnishings in her room set up the conditions under which Sally is to be rewarded. If she cleans and does the household chores, then she continues to receive shelter in the form of her room. The way Dr. Finkelstein treats Sally can be viewed as placing her into the same repressive stereotyped role seen in the interaction of Cinderella and her Stepmother.

It is, however, through the performance of these gender-oriented tasks that Sally subsequently breaks from gender stereotypes. In scene seven, we see Sally make Dr. Finkelstein's soup, into which she slips deadly nightshade. This assertive, aggressive action is a behavior that belongs to the "intensified prescriptive stereotypes" category of male actions. This category contains the things that people should and must do to be acceptable to society. According to a study done at Princeton University, "The intensified prescriptions and proscriptions for women reflected traditional emphases on interpersonal sensitivity, niceness, modesty, and sociability, whereas the intensified prescriptions and proscriptions for men reflected traditional emphases on strength, drive, assertiveness, and self-reliance" (Prentice et al. 275). Looking at Sally's character in this light, she is driven to escape Dr. Finkelstein and gain freedom, and is definitely assertive. So does this make Sally masculine? Sally's actions toward Dr. Finkelstein are indeed very masculine, but her actions toward other characters, especially Jack, are warm, caring, and nurturing, which are highly associated with femininity. The overall portrayal of Sally is rather ambiguous in terms of teaching children that gender stereotypes are not relevant. In an article on children's intertextual knowledge and gendered storylines, Elizabeth Yeoman found that, "Hollywood films . . . while sometimes functioning to uphold dominant discourses of gender (e.g. romantic love and the importance of looking good), could also contribute in an important way to disrupting discourses of the passive female" (435). The children, especially the girls in her study, made repeated references to a heroine in a movie that broke out of assigned gender

roles, which suggests that these are the characters children will remember. Sally, throughout the movie, functions to both uphold and disrupt dominant gender discourses. She sends the mixed message that it is acceptable for girls to be aggressive, so long as they are publicly docile and only aggressive through acts of subterfuge.

Sally and Shock, a young girl dressed as a witch, represent the two classic tendencies in fairy tales with regard to the representation of female collaboration. When Michael Mendelson analyzed collections of Grimms' fairy tales looking at trends of collaboration, he found that the majority of female heroines "are on their own, sometimes admirably independent like Cinderella, or All fur, or Maid Maleen, but more often isolated and abandoned in a way similar to such tragic heroines as Medea, Dido, or Desdemona" (112). Further he found that, "There are, for example, a sizable number of what we can call *evil women's groups* in which, typically, older sisters and/or stepmothers collaborate to victimize either a younger heroine or an unsuspecting male" (115). The implication is that women who work in collaboration are, by necessity, up to no good. If their intentions are pure, however, they are left to struggle alone. Shock belongs to the former group; she works in collaboration with Lock and Barrel to kidnap Sandy Claws. This group, collectively referred to as Boogie's Boys, is indeed not the all-female group, but it does further this notion that women collaborate with others only in the evil pursuit of victimizing someone. In this case, the unsuspecting male is Sandy Claws. Sally, by contrast, works alone both in her efforts to free herself from Dr. Finklestein and to get Jack to understand before it is too late that he is making a mistake. She is the only person in all of Halloweentown to not get caught up in the excitement of Christmas, and as such she works alone to stop Jack and fix the situation. She is one of the fairy-tale women who is very independent. She works alone but never succumbs to the isolation and abandonment that accompanies this independence. Even in the present day, there still remains an odd attachment to the idea that women work together only to the detriment of others, and that righteous women must suffer alone. Young people who watch the movie may assimilate this idea that women in groups can only be conspiring to act maliciously.

The Nightmare Before Christmas has two lead characters, Sally and Jack, whose archetypal bases are less than stereotypical. Austrian psychologist Carl Jung proposed the concept of the "collective unconscious," which is a set of "archetypes, or primordial images, myths and evolutionary symbols that represent inborn and universal ways of perceiving and

comprehending the world" (Enns 127). These archetypes are as diverse as human culture, but are useful ways the unconscious mind makes sense of abstractions such as literature, films, and other such media. Gender partisans have long pointed to archetypes, especially those in mythology, to drive their ideas of what men and women should be. Sally is a hybrid character of the archetypes that exemplify modern feminist intellectuals. Elaine Showalter's essay on modern feminist intellectuals can be viewed in light of three mythical or archetypal roles, the Cassandra, the Messiah, and the Dark Lady. Sally is a hybrid of the Dark Lady and the Cassandra. The Dark Lady is described as "the token woman or exceptional intellectual in a community of men" (Showalter 136). Sally is the only overtly "feminine" woman in all of *Halloweentown*. Cassandras "are 'very unhappy at present' because their intellectual style does not fit into the expectations of the masculine world" (Showalter 134). Further, Cassandra, as the prophetess cursed with sight is also the archetype of the wise woman who is doomed to be disbelieved. While Jack is attempting to understand what makes Christmas so special by empirically examining it in his study, Sally, who is in the graveyard below, receives a vision in which a flower turns into a beautiful Christmas tree and then spontaneously ignites, leaving the "tree" in ashes. She makes repeated attempts to tell Jack of her disastrous vision but he will not listen to her and neither will anyone else. She is the only person who understands that nothing good will come of the attempt to be something other than what one is, the lone intellectual among men who is wise but yet disbelieved. She is the Dark Lady and, both figuratively and in a literal sense, Cassandra. But because she is the heroine, the young girls who view this movie may assimilate these stronger views of women as intellectuals into their personalities and become less like the traditional submissive female stereotype.

The lead male character, Jack Skellington, on the other hand, embodies two archetypes of men that are often viewed as incompatible. Jack, a skeleton, is the ruler of *Halloweentown* who dreams of something more than that which he has always known. The mythopoetic men's movement arose in response to the rise of feminism and sought reclaim the masculinity of the "soft male." They claimed the soft male was in psychological pain caused by the oppression of women. They called for a return of the archetypal roles of warrior and king to redefine manliness. Carolyn Enns offers criticism to the movement saying, "It is unlikely that images of warriors and wild men and experiences of fierceness will help men feel more positively about sharing power with women in the work world,

become more comfortable with emotions related to vulnerability and responsiveness, or assume greater responsibility for providing emotional nourishment to the next generation" (Enns 130). Critics of this movement point to the lack of emotional attachment on the part of these archetypal men, and the ease with which they reinforce traditional gender roles. Jack Skellington's crisis reveals himself to be a hybrid of the king and this softer male. The crisis that drives his growth is emotional in nature. In his song "Jack's Lament," he sings of all his accomplishments and yet it ends with, "the fame and praise come year after year does nothing for these empty tears" (Burton). Jack is displaying an ability for men to rule and still have emotional needs. This quality would activate a more sensitive archetypal male in the collective unconscious and allow for the possibility of integration into the conscious of the young boys who watch it. Jack represents a character that provides a role model that works against the mythopoetic men's movement, disrupting the dominant view of how men should be, and offering an alternative of sensitivity for the young boys who watch him.

The non-human characters are as easily ascribed genders by those who watch the film as the more human-like characters. Jack Skellington, Dr. Finklestein, Lock, Barrel, and the Mayor are masculine. Sally, Shock, and the witches are feminine. What then is to be made of the rest of the characters, who are not quite so human? In doing research on the attribution of gender to Halloween costumes, Addie Nelson discovered that "[m]asculine costumes were also more likely than feminine costumes to depict a wide range of villainous characters (e.g. Captain Hook, Rasputin, Slash), monsters (e.g. Frankenstein, The Wolfman), and, in particular, agents of death (e.g. Dracula, Executioner, Devil Boy, Grim Reaper)" (141). This suggests that we have been culturally biased to view even imaginary things with a gendered eye. With this in mind, the town meeting called to discuss Jack's discovery of Christmasland should have an overwhelmingly masculine audience, and indeed most of the characters are decidedly masculine in appearance. Sitting in the audience we see a mummy, a pumpkin head, a devil, and a Cyclops. All of these characters are more powerful and represent more imposing monsters than the female creatures. The overtly female characters are vastly underrepresented at the meeting and seem only to include Sally, a few witches, and a monster whose role in the movie is to be the mother of a young male monster. The only creature that is not immediately classifiable is a rather ambiguous sea creature, whose voice is somewhere in the vocal range between an adult male and a female. The creators of the film have attempted to undo some of these pairings of gender to imaginary creatures. To this

end they gave titles and names to some characters that impart gender like Undersea Gal and Man Under the Stairs. However, these designations cannot be inferred from the movie and must be found in a list of the cast of characters. The town meeting reinforces two problematic views of men and women and the social roles they play. First, males continue to be shown as more imposing, powerful, and better represented than females. Secondly, the under-representation of females in the town meeting reflects the belief that females do not belong in politics. This message would be processed on an unconscious level, possibly affecting the way the film's young viewers think.

On a more psychological level, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* appeals to gender archetypes in the collective unconscious of children during the time period when they are most likely to be in the process of integrating the qualities of these archetypes into their own conscious.

Research by Taylor (1996) suggested that children younger than age 9 or 10 tend to believe in gender stereotypes (i.e., that biology is destiny), and, at around age 9 or 10, children generally begin to consider social environment and other influences on development. Implications of such research . . . include support for the notion that developmental and individuation processes include an increasingly sophisticated understanding of gender to the extent that the possibility of nonstereo-typed behavior can be considered. (Ryback et al. 153)

This statement implies that at a relatively young age, children are better able to open up to the idea that gender stereotypes are not set in stone. Further, if children at this age are exposed to gender non-stereotypical conduct they may come to understand this as acceptable behavior. Sally's independence and ability to persist in her goals despite adversity would be encouraging to a young girl who has begun to consider the social environment's effect on how girls, and therefore women, should behave. Sally models a positive role for young women, one of independence and perseverance. The MPAA film's rating of PG, as well its content, places the film in a range that allows these children to view it.

The Nightmare Before Christmas is a fairy tale in which children will see many different aspects of gender concepts. Some of these aspects, such as Jack as scientist and Sally as homemaker, play into stereotypical norms. Still others point to more depth of character, such as Jack's emotional vulnerability and Sally's intellectualism. The world of

Halloweentown is a world of opposites, where horrible is a good thing and the word "jolly" makes the mayor frown. This may allow children to recognize that gender stereotypic behavior in Halloweentown is to be regarded differently as well. Therein lies some hope that overt gender norms will become seen as the odd prescriptions they truly are. "[Stories] can both contribute to the reproduction of limiting meanings and challenge them in the language of possibility and hope" (Yeoman 439). This film offers hope for a new type of fairy tale that will teach future generations to move against gender norms into a society of egalitarianism.

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COMMENTARY

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When I rented the *The Nightmare Before Christmas* in preparation for editing Alan Bond's "Skeletons, Rag Dolls, and Ambiguous Swamp Creatures," I discovered that the emphases of those who assembled its DVD extras coincided with my prior associations with the film. As I anticipated, the "bonus materials" of the special edition DVD version focus on director Tim Burton's characteristically eccentric vision for the film and the technical intricacies of realizing his vision. Having already given Bond's paper a careful reading, however, when watching the film itself, I came to appreciate his illumination of a hitherto overlooked element of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. As Bond astutely observes, the emotional depth with which Burton imbues the characters Jack and Sally, by extension, often challenges the narrow gender roles usually depicted in fairy tales.

Bond begins his essay by admitting that, at first glance, one might not expect *The Nightmare Before Christmas* to score many points with feminists in terms of its progressive potential. Indeed, the film seems to replicate the clichés of fairy tales' patriarchal history: the lead female character, Sally, appears to invoke the "Cinderella" stereotype of the oppressed domestic cooking and cleaning for a tyrannical master. Bond is quick to debunk such a facile (mis)interpretation of the film, however. Sally is not the passive female rescued by a fairy godmother and, ultimately, by a handsome prince. Instead, she takes her freedom into her own hands by boldly poisoning her captor, Dr. Finklestein. At the same time, Bond concedes, Sally is not quite a modern liberated woman. Despite the subversive subplot of her escape from Dr. Finklestein, her narrative purpose is primarily to support the male protagonist, Jack. She not only sews for him as she did for Dr. Finklestein; she also forsakes realizing her own goals and instead channels her energy into saving Jack from the consequences of his misguided attempt to establish Christmas in Halloweentown.

As Bond widens his analysis to include Jack and the other equally "ambiguous" characters of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, one begins to imagine that the film viewer's

unconscious mind must be quite uncertain how to process the contradictory gendered messages the film sends. In the final portion of his essay, Bond speculates that the sensitivity of children, in particular, will prove a double-edged sword in this regard: children will be more receptive to the film's subversions, yet they are less able to interrogate the stereotypes invoked by *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

The single characteristic of Bond's essay that might be considered problematic is indicative of the magnitude of the broader implications of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Re-reading Bond's essay, it strikes me again that he attempts to enlist too many theoretical concepts from his research sources. Yet this "flaw" is also owing to the fact that the case material is too rich to be fully analyzed in a short essay; the progressive—and regressive—potential of modern fairy tales requires a much lengthier study.

When I returned to rent *The Nightmare Before Christmas* in preparation for writing this commentary, I also checked out a second DVD which I had noticed during my initial visit to the video store. *Barbie: Fairytopia* is an animated film in which Mattel's plastic waif "comes to life" as "Elina"; initially persecuted because she is the sole wingless fairy in Fairytopia, Elina is rewarded with a pair of wings after she successfully completes a perilous journey to save the kingdom from the villainous clutches of Laverna. Watching the fairy-tale stereotypes Bond described so well being mapped onto a computer-animated version of Barbie's already problematic feminine body, I was grateful to him for raising my awareness. If he does not undertake that lengthier study, perhaps I will!