

Three forgotten women who wrote fairytales that subverted the Grimms' gender norms

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Rapunzel, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty—these well-known stories and others, first published by the Brothers Grimm in [*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*](#) (Children's and Household Tales, 1812), have become shorthand for what we collectively think of as fairytales. They are stories with a strong moralistic undertone in which humble and obedient women are rewarded while transgressive women suffer—all before an

interchangeable background of castles, kings and sorcery.

But these stories are only one iteration of fairytales. Stories that were collected and continuously edited by men to [reinforce bourgeois values](#), which often marginalized women.

In the ongoing success story of the Grimms' fairytales, repopularized by big film corporations [such as Disney](#), women who collected and wrote fairytales have long been overlooked.

Three such authors were Karoline von Woltmann, Carmen Sylva, and Laura Gonzenbach. Their stories are a far cry from the Grimms," asserting women's agency and addressing their needs.

1. Karoline von Woltmann (1782–1847)

Born the daughter of a Prussian privy councilor in Berlin and highly educated, Woltmann spent most of her life writing historical fiction as well as [works on social propriety](#). In these works, Woltmann presented herself in a light that would not be seen as particularly enlightened in our time. She endorses a gendered division of societal roles, and advocates for the importance of marriage as a societal institution.

But her fantastical writings give us a more nuanced insight into her views. In *Der Mädchenkrieg* (The Girls' War), from her collection [Volkssagen der Böhmen](#) (Folk Tales of the Bohemians, 1815), Woltmann retells a bohemian legend following the death of the legendary queen Libuše.

The women of the court, led by Wlastislava, oppose the men's wish to rule Bohemia and use women solely as wives and servants. An increasingly violent conflict between the sexes ensues, which ends in a final battle in which Wlastislava dies. But through the diplomatic efforts

of two peace-loving couples, the conflict is ended. Wives return to their husbands, and the husbands vow to honor their wives.

While the status quo is restored at the end of this tale, Woltmann's main message is that marriage is built upon equity and respect. She criticizes those men who use it as a tool of oppression, and asserts that the sexes must cooperate in matters of governance.

2. Carmen Sylva (1843–1916)

Elisabeth zu Wied—more widely known under her pen name, Carmen Sylva—was a German princess who, through the coronation of her husband Carol I, became the first queen of Romania in 1881.

The new dynasty, however, got [off to a troubled start](#). Their rule was repeatedly questioned, and the queen and king faced a series of droughts and social unrest. It was during this time that Sylva published [Pelesch-Märchen](#) (Peleş Fairy Tales, 1882)—a collection of 12 fairytales, largely of her own invention.

In these stories, Sylva fashions herself as a mothering "[poet queen](#)" who, by befriending the Romanian river Peleş and writing down its stories, is able to compile a collection of fairytales taken directly from the Romanian landscape's mouth. The tales function as a guide to the most prominent features of the landscape of the Peleş region.

Each [story](#) explains how a certain landmark, for example, a local mountain or a valley, came by its name. The tales also subvert gendered stereotypes employed by the Grimms: instead of meek and well-behaved girls, Sylva's protagonists are often queens or hard-working, courageous peasant women.

Through these tales, the queen [signaled to her readership](#) that she had a

special relationship with the Romanian landscape. She was therefore able to assert herself as a female ruler, and provide a new collection of national tales that conveniently circumnavigated her foreign origin.

3. Laura Gonzenbach (1842–1878)

Very little is known about Laura Gonzenbach's life and circumstances. According to the [few sources that exist](#), she was born into a Swiss-German mercantile family in Messina, in Sicily. Gonzenbach was highly educated and spoke multiple languages. Much of her young life was spent in the rural countryside of Sicily, where she was most likely taught the Sicilian dialect by servants as one of her first languages.

It was for this reason that the prominent German fairy tale scholar Otto Hartwig approached her and asked her to collect and translate local fairy tales for him to publish in a collection—the [Sicilianische Märchen](#) (Sicilian Fairy Tales, 1870).

At a first glance, these 92 tales appear close in [tone and format to those of the Grimms](#). They imitate an oral style and use similar vocabulary. However, it quickly becomes apparent that not only are the protagonists overwhelmingly female, but they also challenge patriarchal power structures.

In Zafarana, for example, a cross-dressing heroine gives such a convincing impression of being male that the resident princess falls in love with her.

Taken together with Gonzenbach's informants being overwhelmingly female, these tales present as "Grimmian," in their style, language and structure, while in fact undermining the exact societal models the Grimms promoted.

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