Isabel Franc Revisiting and Subverting Gender Roles and Sexuality in Traditional Western Folktales

Garbiñe Vidal-Torreira
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Isabel Franc opens her collection of stories and fables called Cuentos y fábulas de Lola Van Guardia with a section called “De corte clásico”1 in which she introduces her first three stories “El cuento de la princesa frígida”2, “La ejecutiva durmiente”3 and “El príncipe impotente”4. These are classical western folktales that have been altered to form a new paradigm in which the main characters are homosexual. She elegantly blends homosexuality, humor and sarcasm within the traditional structure of a fairytale creating a new viewpoint and a new literary piece. Within English literature, it is not rare to revisit traditional stories; this is a commonly practiced idea in Spain as well, but Franc offers a new viewpoint by trying to subvert gender roles adding homosexuality to the stories together with sarcasm and social critique. This paper will explore the ways in which Isabel Franc revisits and subverts gender roles in western folktales as well as how, despite maintaining a traditional frame and settings, she adds sexual elements to these stories. It will also answer the question of whether these subversive stories could be considered feminist or not.

In “La ejecutiva durmiente”, Nastasia is the main character, a female executive working in an office. Mauricio is a male homosexual coworker who envies Nastasia for her beauty, her figure, the way she dresses and her position in the work place. One day Mauricio cannot control his envy anymore and goes to a bar where he tells his problem to a hypnotist. This man gives him a flash drive and tells him it contains an e-mail that will make the reader fall asleep until he or she is given a kiss of true love. The flash drive comes with some rules, one of which is to return it. Here Franc compares the flash drive, a modern 21st century object, to a bottle of poison or the spindle that pricks Sleeping Beauty’s finger. Mauricio follows the instructions of the hypnotist and programs Nastasia’s computer to proceed with the spell. Nastasia opens the e-mail and falls into a deep sleep. Discovering what has happened, all the men in the office try unsuccessfully to kiss her to wake her up, except for Mauricio since he is a homosexual. Her boss is very upset and declares that if she is not awake in a certain amount of time she will lose her job. All her coworkers go for lunch, except for Florinda. Florinda is a lesbian who has feelings for Nastasia, but is not sure whether she should kiss her or not for nobody at the office knows of her homosexuality. Finally, after much meditation and thought of the possible consequences that the kiss may imply, she kisses Nastasia and she awakens. When Nastasia finds out what happened “En ese momento, se encendieron estrellitas de colores, que parpadearon a su

1 Classical Style.
2 The Frigid princess’s Story.
3 The Sleeping Executive.
4 The Impotent Prince.
alrededor como bombillas de navidad” (37) and she realizes that Florinda is in love with her. Here Franc reverts to a movie cliché by making an intimate lesbian moment resemble the heterosexual peak of romance. This moment of the magical awakening kiss is crucial for Florinda needs, as its colloquially said, to come out of the closet and make public at the office and in front of the woman she loves her homosexuality. The end of the story is full of irony and humor.

Y como en todos los cuentos, al final hubo enlace. Nastasia y Florinda decidieron vivir su relación y, aunque no eran partidarias del matrimonio, solo para joder a la iglesia y a la derecha conservadora, se casaron en el Ayuntamiento de la ciudad y tuvieron su lista de boda, sus quince días de permiso y su viaje de bodas. (39)

In this story, Franc deconstructs the idea of a fairy tale and makes a new product, a new story with variations of the old one. She situates it in a different point in time, closer to the present and uses technology to alter an old folktale. The subversion of gender roles only occurs when Mauricio does not kiss Nastasia, as he is a homosexual, and when Florinda, who was secretly in love with her, does.

In “El principe impotente” the story is set in a far-away time. The author goes back to a time of princes, princesses, queens, kings and knights. She narrates the tale of a prince who was very sad because he did not like any woman. In desperation, his mother consults the court’s physician but she says that there is nothing wrong with him. He is physically capable of having a sexual relationship, but still his penis does not become erect. The queen blames herself for this terrible situation and thinks that she must have done something wrong. One day a beautiful woman and her brother arrive at court. The woman talks to the queen and tries to comfort her. The prince and the woman’s brother go into a chamber and have sex. They want to get married because they have fallen in love. Finally it is decided to conduct a referendum to decide if they should be allowed to marry, and they end up doing so.

In this tale, Franc uses more sexual content. She explicitly says that the two men shut the door behind them and that the prince was still naked when he asked the queen for permission to marry his lover. Also, they fall in love right after having sex without having known each other for a significant amount of time. This is a characteristic very typical of a fairy tale, but in this case love is based on sex, as it will be in “El cuento de la princesa frígida”.

This story, “El cuento de la princesa frígida” is the one that will be analyzed most thoroughly in this paper, and is the one that has the greatest resemblance to “El principe

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5 In that moment, little colored stars that twinkled around them like Christmas lights lit up.

6 And as it happens in all tales, at the end there was union. Nastasia and Florinda decided to live their relationship and in spite of them not being in favor of matrimony, only to piss off the church and the conservative right, they got married in the town hall of the city and they had their wedding list, their fifteen days of leave and their honey moon trip.
impotente” for its placement in time and the repetition of some patterns. Before analyzing “El cuento de la princesa frígida” in depth, it is important to start by acknowledging the fact that fairy tales are a mirror of old values and traditions that have changed nowadays. Catherine R. Stimpson states

Modern ideologies demand that we break up ossified hierarchal structures and knit up new ones that incarnate the values of liberty, autonomy, and equality. The position of women dramatizes the tension between hierarchal practice and more individualistic, egalitarian theory. Scholars quarrel about the universality of male dominance and female subordination, but not about its presence – in past and present. (155)

It is partly through folktales that were passed down orally for many years that children learned what was expected of them in society. These tales therefore, had a didactic purpose that was in accordance with the time in which they were told. Modern ideologies and values of equality have changed drastically in the western culture since the time that fairy tales were first narrated.

Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm explain the impact that literary pieces such as folktales may have on children nowadays saying that

Literature in general, and fairy tales in particular, gender children. The characters depicted in stories help children to determine what it means to be male or female as it applies to behavior, traits, or occupation within a child's culture. In this capacity, fairy tales can be powerful cultural agents, telling the child who reads them how they should behave with regard to gender. (38)

This shows how important this particular type of literature is and how much it can influence the minds of young readers. Not long ago, only traditional versions of these stories were available with few alternative retellings that reframed gender roles. This had devastating consequences, such as those stated by Marcia Liberman when she explains that “Millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales” (385). These ideas create imaginary false boundaries that determine what is appropriate and what is inappropriate and dictate what to expect from men.

Along this same line of thought, Kay Stone claims that early feminists of the 50s and 60s already found fairy tale stories “an unfortunate source of negative female stereotypes . . . [and] . . . one of the many socializing forces that discouraged females from realizing their full human potential” (229). Women have two major roles in these kinds of tales; they can either be the devil woman who is evil and is never praised based on her beauty but who does have some form of power, or the angel woman. This is the good woman who is objectified constantly and only admired because of her beauty. These two opposing roles of women have been portrayed since the beginning of time and are found even in the oldest of tales, the Bible, where the devil woman is represented by Eve who gives Adam the apple, and the angel woman is the Virgin Mary.
Linda T. Parsons explains how in folktales women are portrayed as “weak, submissive, dependent and self-sacrificing while men are powerful, active, and dominant” (137). This duality of roles leaves few options for women who do not desire to fit either model.

However, the expectations and roles imposed on women are anachronical for they are in agreement with the social realm of a distant past. Nowadays women have much more complex roles to fulfill and their opportunities and choices have considerably broadened since the time of the folktales. The existence of anachrony in folktales is supported by Hilary S. Crew who believes that “Feminist rewriters of fairy tales have reworked the conventions of the genre so as to encode discourses that contradict or challenge patriarchal ideologies that are increasingly viewed as anachronistic in today’s society” (77). Consequently Kuykendal and Sturm assure that “It has long been recognized that the traditional European canon of fairy tales, those that have survived to the present day, are tales that reflect and reproduce the patriarchal values of the society that crafted them” (39). The society that crafted them is not the society that we want to craft the fairy tales of the present. By modifying old fairytales and creating new ones, Isabel Franc is partly breaking apart some of the anachronism created by traditional storytelling.

From an early age, women empathize with the tales they are told as young girls where they grow to believe that Prince Charming will come and rescue them from their miserable life. Life is miserable not in of itself, but because this knight in shining armor has not made his entrance yet. When he does, he will be mounted on a white horse and will rescue the princess, the woman. From this we deduct several things: First that a woman is intended to be weak and not self-sufficient since she needs someone else to rescue her. Secondly, this person that will rescue her will be stronger than her, and will be a male. Thirdly, after the union is made there will be a happy ending. These types of stories have a traditional pattern; the setting is located in a far-away kingdom where there is happiness. There is a conflict; something troubles the good king or queen, which is always a matter related to a son or a daughter. Finally the conflict is solved and the kingdom can be truly joyful.

Isabel Franc uses the same pattern suggested above in two of her stories but she deconstructs the second assumption made from folktales by portraying lesbian and gay main characters. In her story “El cuento de la princesa frígida” she deconstructs “Sleeping Beauty”. The story is set in a far-away kingdom where peace and happiness reign. The king is troubled only by one matter, his daughter cannot be sexually satisfied. The princess in this case is therefore a young woman who cannot enjoy sex. Her father decides to offer her hand to the man who can give her pleasure. The king is so caring that he inspects all the men before they enter his daughter’s room, in search of what he thinks is talent. All the men in the kingdom try unsuccessfully to please the princess, later even men from other countries try with the same luck.

Finally, one man comes surrounded by Amazons but he refuses to let the king inspect him and says his majesty will only be allowed to inspect him if he succeeds. The king accepts this demand saying “Mi última esperanza está dentro de esa armadura. No me queda más
remedio que aceptar las condiciones que vuestra ilustre figura me imponga” (25). The man walks into the chamber of the princess fully clothed and the king waits outside. In a comical moment, the knight comes out of the chamber and requests a tampax. He then goes back into the princess’ chamber. Here it is clear that Isabel Franc is very conscious of the anachronical element discussed before. She does not set her action in a specific time or place so she is literary allowed to introduce this element. Finally the princess screams and her screams are heard:

[…]) poco después, un alarido de placer salió de la regia garganta de la muchacha. Un alarido que duró, en sucesivos altibajos, algo más de una decena de minutos, para culminar en una especie de estallido aRONador que retumbó por todo el palacio como si un enorme volcán acabara de hacer erupción en el interior mismo de la estancia. (27)

Up to this point the reader can see a great change in the way fairytales are told and how this one in particular is intended to be. Despite keeping the format and some of the language of a children’s story she introduces sexual elements. It is shocking that the king decided to ask all the men in the kingdom to have sex with his daughter until she enjoys the act. Here Franc is demanding the right of women to enjoy the sexual encounter defying the general phallocentric view. This perspective that she is criticizing and opposing is the one that was common in the 60’s, which, for example, led to studies such as the one by Wallin in which he is assured that “Intercourse can be a satisfying and enjoyable experience despite a usual lack of orgasm” (197) and also states that despite the lack of orgasm the woman experiences a “complete relief from sexual desire” (193).

After Franc makes the importance of female sexual enjoyment clear—the argument reaching its climax in synchronism with the princess—the very curious king asks to fulfill his part of the verbal agreement. He expects to be allowed to inspect the man that made his daughter so happy. The knight consents to this and starts taking his armor off; the king is surprised to find out that the knight is a woman.

-Pero, ¿cómo? ¿Dónde está vuestro instrumento? ¿Cómo qué habéis hecho gozar a la princesa si carecéis del preciado miembro, solo él capaz de dar gusto a una dama? -¡Qué equivocado estáis, majestad! – sonrió quien había superado el reto que tantos y tantos varones intentaron sin éxito. -¿Acaso con el tampaX? – Insistió aturdido el rey. –No – respondió la heroína-, el tampax era para mí – y extendiendo las manos hacia él, prosiguió con absoluta serenidad – Mis utensilios son estos – mostraba aquellos dedos tibios y afilados -, con ellos le he dado placer, y con la dulzura esponjosa de mis besos, y

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7 My last hope lies inside that armor. I have no choice but to accept the conditions that your highness imposes.

8 [...] Not very much longer after that, a shriek of pleasure exhaled from the royal throat of the girl. A shriek that lasted, in successive highs and lows, a little longer than a dozen minutes, to culminate in a type of thunderous explosion that resounded in the whole palace as if an enormous volcano had just erupted inside the very chamber.
con el húmedo tacto de mi lengua, y con el trotar acompasado de sus caderas, y con la
ternura de ambos sexos, y con el reloj de su cuerpo. (28)

Franc deconstructs here yet another general phallocentric view. Not only does she introduce the
idea that a woman can enjoy sex but also that it is possible to enjoy it without a phallus, explaining in her story how this can be achieved.

The King does not want to give his daughter’s hand in marriage to another woman, but the princess pleads “-Concédesela – suplicó la princesa -. Y concédeme a mí la suya que no hay
mano en la tierra capa de transportarme a tan altas cotas de deleite” (29). Here Franc uses humor and language once more to express the irony in the set phrase “to give someone’s hand in
matrimony”. The knight, who also wants to marry the princess, tells the king “- Majestad-
interrumpió el escudero-. Todas las leyes se cambian al cabo de un tiempo. Vos mismo lo
dijisteis”(29). Here Franc introduces an idea that she will fully develop later in the story. The
king is concerned about for dying without heirs, but the knight assures him that in the future, this
subject may not be so important. The knight suggests that there might be no kings, and people
could just take care of one another. Here Franc is subtlety addressing the issue of homosexual
adoption. She is suggesting that maybe homosexuals could adopt children and treat them as their
own so the line of succession is clear. She is also questioning the monarchy itself and the
necessity of a line of succession, which is a very sensitive subject in Spain since the country still
has a monarchy. Finally the King agrees to the marriage by saying

¡Cuán atrevida y progresista me habéis salido, hija mía! – Y más entusiasmado que
nunca, prosiguió: - ¡¡Sea!! Que cambien las leyes, que salgan nuevos decretos, que se modifique
la Constitución si es necesario. Mi hija ha gozado, es más, yo diría que hasta se ha enamorado. ¿Hay mayor motivo de festejo en un reino? (30)

At this point Franc reverts back to the fairy tale paradigm. The princess and the knight
have had sex once, they did not know each other beforehand, and the only time they have spent

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9 But, How? Where is your instrument? How could you make the princess enjoy if you lack the precious member, the only one being able to pleasure a lady? – You are very wrong Your Majesty! Smiled who had over come the challenge that so many other males had attempted to achieve unsuccessfully. – Could it be with the Tampax? – Insisted the stunned king. – No – responded the heroin –, the Tampax was for me – and stretching her hands towards
him, she continued with absolute seriousness – My utensils are these – she showed those warm and long fingers –, with them I have provided pleasure, and with all the spongy sweetness of my kisses, and with the humid touch of my
tongue, and with the compassed trotting of her hips, and with the tenderness of both sexes, and with the clock of her
body.

10 Grant it (her hand) to her – begged the princess –. And grant me hers because there is no hand on earth that could transport me to so high elevations of delight.

11 Your Majesty – Interrupted the knight – All laws change after some time. You yourself said so.

12 My dear! How daring and progressive you turned out! – And more enthusiastic than ever, he continued: Let it be!! Let the laws change, let new decrees be made, let the constitution be modified if necessary. My daughter has enjoyed, furthermore, I would even say that she has fallen in love. Is there a better reason for celebration in a
kingdom?
together was the limited time of the intercourse. However it is clear that they are in love. By doing this Franc deconstructs the idea that women must be virgins when they get married. She does not link sex to marriage any longer, she deconstructs the idea to create a new relationship between sexual pleasure and marriage. By doing this she attempts to break the dilemma underlying the possible duality of becoming either a angel woman or a devil woman. The princess is no angel, she is no virgin, she has had sex with most of the kingdom, but she is innocent in the sense that she only enjoyed sex with the person who is to become her future wife. Franc changes the conception of the sexual act itself and makes it valid only if there is pleasure involved. If we are to follow this paradigm Franc attempts to deconstruct the dualism but by changing the fundamentals of it she rebuilds the same dilemma. The princess therefore becomes an angel woman despite the fact that she has had intercourse with thousands of men. She only enjoyed sex with her future wife and it is through this enjoyment that Franc sees love as pure.

The story concludes with the voice of the narrator, returning once more to the traditional tone and ways of the old folktale

Y así fue como en aquel reino, lejano y pequeño, se dio paso al libre retozar de las parejas al margen de su sexo, gozando de idénticos derechos todas aquellas uniones establecidas libremente sobre lo sólidos e indestructibles cimientos del verdadero amor. Solo en aquel reino lejano y pequeño. (30)13

The last sentence here is yet more proof of the intense and scattered humor in the writings of Franc. She ironically adds that only in that remote and tiny kingdom were same-sex couples respected and allowed. Could this be an allegory to Franc’s own country, Spain? It may be since in Spain there is a monarchy and same-sex marriages and adoptions are legal. If so, here we see the portrayal of the solution to one of the main problems that we stated at the beginning of the essay, there would be no anachronism. The story is narrated in such a manner that despite the lovers and the palaces, the concepts and ideas of the 21st century are clearly the pillars of the tale.

Franc argues in this folktale for the right of women to enjoy sex, and for the possibility of achieving this without a male presence during sexual intercourse and for the possibility of adoption. Can “El cuento de la princesa frígida” still be called a folktale? This is a difficult question to answer for while it does contain some crucial elements of a folktale, it subverts others. It may be determined, however, that this is not a bedtime story for children since it entails a high content of sexual connotations. It may be considered, therefore, a folktale for adults. This leaves open the question of creating fairy tales that are adequate for children and still consistent with the values of the present time.

13 And this is how in that far away and small kingdom the free romping of couples regardless of their sex was permitted, enjoying identical rights those unions established freely on the solid and indestructible grounds of true love. Only in that far away and small kingdom.
This tale, however, could not be considered a feminist tale. Agreeing with Kuykendal and Sturm I believe that “Feminist fairy tales must be stories in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender” (41). I previously established three things a reader deducts from a traditional folktale, three elements normally associated with all fairy tales. First, a woman is intended to be weak and not self-sufficient since she needs someone else to rescue her. Secondly, the person who rescues her will be stronger than her, and will be a male. Thirdly, after the union is made there will be a happy ending.

Franc succeeds in subverting part of the second assumption since it is not necessary that a male rescues the princess. However she does not succeed in portraying a self-sufficient woman who does not need to get married. The princess does not get married because she is in love but because she is urged to do so by her father. She has sex first and then falls in love immediately after as a consequence. She appears weak in front of her father, agreeing to sleep with all of the men in the kingdom and outside of it to find the right male. The princess has no willpower until she meets the knight and even then, she falls in love just by having a satisfactory sexual experience with her. On the same line of thought, and going back to the dualism of the angel and the devil woman and having established that the princess is an angel woman Dworkin explains:

The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified. . . . [the ending of these tales] tells us that happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep. . . . It tells us that the happy ending is when we are ended, when we live without our lives, or not at all. (48-9)

Franc gives her princess no willpower, she makes her weak and a woman of few words who blindly obeys her father’s desire, even though he has the best of intentions, that she marries someone she enjoys being with. Only when the princess has had sex with most of the kingdom and many foreigners, only after this humiliation does she have a happy ending. The princess does not sexually enjoy these experiences that she must have with so many men and Franc explicitly illustrates this when she writes “Entró el caballero armado en la estancia donde la heredera con cara de “¡oh cielos, otra vez no!” esperaba la llegada del Nuevo candidato, y tras su esbelta y acorazada figura se cerró la puerta” (26)14. It is clear in this quote how the princess does not desire any intercourse, she just wants to be left alone, it is her father’s desire to find her a husband not hers, she just accepts her father’s wishes humbly.

The knight is stronger than her, so there is a stronger figure that comes to rescue and marry her. At the end of the sexual intercourse the knight is still dressed when the king comes into his daughter’s chamber. This implicitly states that the knight gave the princess pleasure but she did not reciprocate. Once more the princess is objectified, she is given pleasure to obtain a

14 In came the armed knight in the room where the heir with an expression of “oh my God, not again!” was awaiting the arrival of the new candidate, and behind his slender and shielded figure the door shut.
crown, for she and the knight cannot possibly be in love after spending so little time together. Hence, the knight probably wants to marry her to become queen of the kingdom.

Finally there is still a happy ending and although we are not told that their love lasted forever, we are told nothing to the contrary. The whole idea of love in this story is obsolete, because despite the innovation introduced by Franc of making the princess’ orgasm a cause for marriage, love is a more profound word than that, it involves time, it is not as simple as a fairy tale. The message transmitted here is that if an individual has a positive sexual experience there is cause for marriage and he or she is instantly going to fall in love.

Agreeing with Dworkin, it is not until the princess has had countless bad experiences that she is given a happy ending. Should it be considered a happy ending if to achieve happiness a woman such as the princess must undergo so much? Why don’t male characters have to undergo these circumstances? Only when the princess is sad and miserable is she allowed happiness. Can the princess be happy if she has no will of her own? Can she be happy if she is portrayed as a woman with very little personality who just follows her father’s wishes? Is she depicted as a woman or as an eternal child? Because these questions offer grounds for debate and different opinions I understand that Franc is partly, but not completely, breaking the anachronism of fairy tales and I do not consider this story a feminist fairytale despite the opinion of Parsons who assures “There is no genuine or authentic version of a fairy tale” (138).

She does however succeed in revisiting and subverting gender roles and sexuality in traditional western folktales but she does not portray men and woman equally and she does not finish bending the rules of fairytales to make them egalitarian. She represents homosexual relations, but within the confines of what it is understood as traditional heterosexual relationships. We as readers are left with the question of whether a fully equalitarian folktale could be still called a folktale if some of these anachronisms and stereotypes were not incorporated as part of its crucial structure. To solve this question we must reflect on what is a fairytale or folktale, what are its characteristics and what makes a literary piece be classified under this category. However if Parsons’ theory of authenticity is to be followed there are no parameters to enclose folktale.

Works cited


