Anti-Tales in Question: A Study on "Cinderella" of *The Grimm Variations* (2024)

Karşıt Masallar: *Grimm Varyasyonları*'nın (2024) "Külkedisi" Bölümü Üzerine Bir Araştırma

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Abstract

The Grimm Variations is an episodic anime series released on Netflix in April 2024. The series is composed of six classical stories of fairy tales inspired by the Brothers Grimm stories, from *Cinderella* to *Little Red Riding Hood*, from *Hansel and Gretel* to the *Town Musicians of Bremen*. The nature of the variations in the series does not come from the transfer of the stories as they are, but rather from certain changes in their content. The shifting rendition in each episode, however, comes with what we might call "a dark twist" and poses the question of "what if" Cinderella was not depicted as a passive heroine, and the Little Riding Hood was the one that hunts the wolf? These varied questions and answers are what classify this series as the composition of *anti-tales*, a phenomenon that is succinctly utilised by the feminist subversions of classical misogynistic stories. A comprehensive study of all episodes would be such a vast subject for this article. Therefore, this article limits itself to the critical standing of the first episode, "Cinderella". The purpose of this article is to investigate the critical feminist standing of the Cinderella story as an anti-tale in its 2024 rendition on a comparative basis with the classical story of the Brothers Grimm version.
Keywords: Cinderella, Brothers Grimm, *The Grimm Variations*, anti-tales, fairy tales, feminist retellings.

Öz

Grimm Varyasyonları, Nisan 2024'te Netflix'te yayınlanan, epizodik bir anime serisidir. Seri, *Külkedisi* adlı öyküden *Kırmızı Başlıklı Kız* masalına, *Hansel ve Gretel*'den *Bremen Mızıkacıları* gibi masallara kadar Grimm Kardeşler hikayelerinden ilham alan altı klasik peri masalından oluşuyor. Ancak serideki varyasyonların niteliği öykülerin olduğu gibi aktarımıyla değil, aksine içeriğine yapılan belli başlı değişikliklerden gelmektedir. Bununla birlikte, her bölümdeki değişen yorum, "karanlık eğilim" diyebileceğimiz değişiklikleri getirmekle beraber "Ya Külkedisi pasif olarak tasvir edilmeseydi?" veya "Ya Kırmızı Başlıklı Kız kurdu avlayan konumda olsaydı?" gibi soruları gündeme getirmektedir. Buna benzer sorular ve cevaplar bu seriyi karşıt masallar olarak sınıflandırılmasını sağlayan özellik olmakla beraber bunlar aynı zamanda klasik eril hikayelerin tersyüz edilmesinde feminist yazarlar tarafından kullanılan stratejilerden bazılarıdır. Tüm bölümlerin kapsamlı bir çalışması bu makale için çok geniş bir konu olacaktır. Bu nedenle bu makale kendisini ilk bölüm olan "Külkedisi" adlı hikâyenin nasıl eleştirel bir tutum takındığını analiz etmekle

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sınırlandırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu makalenin amacı "Külkedisi" bölümünün bir karşıt masal olarak eleştirel feminist duruşunu, Grimm Kardeşler versiyonunun klasik öyküsüyle karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Külkedisi, Grimm Kardeşler, *Grimm Varyasonları*, karşıt masallar, peri masalları, feminist (yeniden) yazımlar.

Introduction

As a counterbalance to patriarchy, the subversive female figure is one of the most enduring images. These kinds of figures have been reappearing as the silent heroines from classical fairy tales are reimagined in contemporary intermedial mediums. Known as anti-tales, the reimaginations contest traditional narratives and offer new possibilities for female agency and empowerment. This article takes the most recent of this kind of reimagined heroine, Cinderella, appearing in a Netflix anime series titled *The Grimm Variations* as the focal point. This contemporary reception and reinterpretation also refer to Gilles Deleuze's theory of simulacrum in *Difference and Repetition* (1994) (Akgün, 2020) in a way that the avatar of Cinderella's actions is depicted as the opposite of the positive and proper to undercut the discourse of the oppressor. According to Berndt, anime ensures a conductive domain for the reconceptualization of what has been formerly marginalised:

> [T]he academic study of manga, and anime, must contribute to revising naturalized preconceptions of culture, identity, authorship, society, subversiveness and so on instead of ennobling or legitimizing the new subject by means of already established authoritative, and as such safe, tools. (2015, p. 28)

It is also telling that when Japanese visual art and storytelling are combined with the Western mode of folkloric context, the product deals with a wider range of audience, which gains an impactful level of reinforcing female restructuring. Especially after having grown into the second wave feminist discourse, Preston argues that anti-tales add up to reconfiguration as such an attempt to "redefine gender boundaries" and "respond to the last thirty years of feminist critique of gender construction" (2004, pp. 203–206). The Netflix adaptation's use of the Cinderella story as an intertext, yet with a different focalisation and manner, recalls the same incentive of contesting and subverting the classical gendered ideology within fairy tales.

Among the reasons why this article painstakingly explores the Cinderella story*,* and its 2024 derivative are its global appeal, the number of feminist scholarly readers it might draw, and most importantly, its representation of *feminine mystique*. To Mei, "the Cinderella myth has functioned as a double-edged (or multiedged) ideological weapon […] the code of propriety is carefully woven into a myth that romanticizes woman's subordinate and domesticated role within the patriarchy" (1990, p. 25). Mei's word choice that relates to communal activities like *myth* and *ideology* should also be regarded in line with Kelly's words that depict Cinderella as "the assimilation of historical truth into metaphor and mythicization," so much so that Cinderella figure has become a niche of "collective memory" (2000, p. 3), a position that very few stories could have landed on—especially considering Colette Dowling's term, "the Cinderella complex" that she uses to theorise inherited female submission.

In the light of these truisms, first, I will try to navigate through the term *anti-tale* as a contextual framework of feminist discourse. Then, I intend to illustrate an outline of the classical rendition of the Brothers Grimm Cinderella story from an analytical point of view. The classical story will be addressed not only as the source for the ensuing adaptations but also as a haven for a patriarchal mindset. Lastly, I will turn to the Netflix adaptation's plot by comparing the narrative divergences from the original source in order to comprehend the token of "anti-" in seeing the bigger picture of gender subversions.

Fairy Tales and Anti-Tales: No So Ambivalent?

One of the general claims related to anti-tales is that they are the *riotous twins*, or the dark sides of the original material. This appeal stems from the fact that anti-tales stand out through their narratives of

differences from what is considered to be traditional. The seemingly innocent way of digression obviously lends itself to a much more radical way of challenging the patriarchal ideology, for when the official speech has been diverted in a Bakhtinian sense, what has been marginalised starts to speak volumes for itself because anti-tales "operate at an architectural level making them different and distinguishable from the original patriarchally fossilised fairy tales with their binary-orientated and stifling structures" (Reynold, 2020, p. 2). Reynold's peremptory statement urges us to outline the anti-tales' binary orientation with space, time, and generic differences so as to make a comparison to understand what anti-tales actually are in an identity-in-difference method.

A dialogue between fairy tales and their subversive counterparts emerged in the post-war era and has continued since. This dynamism was unequivocally shaped by Darwinist principles and compelled storytellers to adapt and evolve their narratives to mirror the target *zeitgeist*. In this context, the first noticeable change happened in the treatment of traditional stories after World War II. The folkloric stories were reworked, reinterpreted, and even reshaped by warfare subjects to find new enchantments of utopias in contrast to the catastrophic events of the war. The qualities of fairy tales were the safe troves for this purpose since the mythicization and mystification rendered a secure space to not only evacuate the harsh reality of the *warfare* but also question the "what if" scenarios in the imagined symbolic universe. Not only did Disney's early productions of fairy tales exemplify this performance, but they also contributed to the nascent seizure of fairy tales as mere objects of malleable material even though "conservatism still crept into Disney's oeuvre" (2020, p. 101), which was still noteworthy because Disney's productions "placed them [the audience] in a critical position" (2020, p. 101). By principle, this was the first present quality, if hardly noticeable, of the anti-tale genre in early productions.

On one hand, the folkloric reimagination instilled warfare subjects into a notion of a fairy bringing an abrupt end to war after a sleep in a blink of an eye or the discovery of a cupboard door and a mythical weapon capable of ensuring safety and victory until the restoration of balance was secured amidst global crises.[1] On the other hand, the symbiotic transmission between reality and fiction often gave rise to dark twists in the narratives, which were in fact based on warfare distress and pessimism. For this reason, "Wikipedia's definition of anti-fairy tale currently condones an unhappy or tragic ending as the only necessary requirement for the label," namely anti-tale, which is a "misconception" today and does not fit in the genre's contemporary establishment (2020, p. 1).

Then what is the factual conception of anti-tales? Let alone answering the question, the modern reception of such a concept started in the 1970s with the introduction of the second wave of feminism, which is both the answer and a correction in fact. The debate on gender with respect to fairy tales took on importance with Lieberman's 1972 paper, "Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale". The nascent observation in the paper eventually culminated in a specific focus on gender distinction in tales for the ensuing branch of feminist scholarship. Throughout the decade, fairy tales were used as a medium to ask questions (Buttsworth & Abbenghuis, 2017, p. 9) but no visible answer was present except for the patriarchal stamp impinged on female avatars.

The shift in conceptualising fairy tales from didactic tools to vessels of patriarchal values reached a crescendo point with their "anti-" orientations in the feminist search for answers. The hypothetical symbolic universe depicted in anti-tales answered the question of whether it was possible to deconstruct the patriarchal world order plagued on female heroines in classical fairy tales. In other words, fairy tales started to be used both as the thesis and antithesis in the target universe, and the postmodern reproductions of such self-reflexively lent themselves to parodies and even travesties for the context of the classical fairy tales because Reynolds continues that a realisation about "the sexist ideologies inherent in the tales" came to the fore (2020, p. 3). Hence, the second wave of feminist performances, such as Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, and Emma Donoghue's subversive rewritings, subconsciously left a loose thread for an umbrella term called *anti-tales* with feminist back-ups. McAra and Calvin's words clearly define the genre without further ado: "[An anti-tale] takes aspects of the fairy-tale genre, and its equivalent genres, and re-imagines, subverts,

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[1] Consecutively referring to Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956).

inverts, deconstructs or satirizes elements of them to represent an alternate narrative interpretation, outcome or morality" (2011, p. 4). In this theoretical framework, an anti-tale is reminiscent of a shadow of the original image of classical fairy tales; however, rather than following in the footsteps of such, it diverts the path without question.

Still, as much as new wine is poured into old bottles, using Angela Carter's metaphor,[2] those who have been exploded by the pressure are few, making qualified anti-tales still in the minority. In the twenty-first century, for instance, the renewed interest was the corollary of a two-day symposium held at the University of Glasgow in 2010, from which Catriona McAra and David Calvin published an edited collection of essays, *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment* (2011). Although the rekindling attempt proves to be crucial, "much is yet to be done to establish it as an essential genre in its own right" (Reynold, 2020, p. 1). Reynold's concern appears to be about scholarship since, in contemporary fiction, the retellings of classical fairy tales are in flux. Either relating to commercial or entertainment purposes, the retellings on an intermedial basis today are such voluminous subjects that they could hardly be pinned down to a certain perspective, but much is to be fair if they are categorised as anti-tales.

> Clearly today, fairy tale retellings, particularly dark ones, have a broad commercial appeal. One need only look at the films produced by Disney, or at the range of pop culture novels an Amazon search yields, to appreciate the scope and appeal of this kind of story. Many of these works are perceived to be radical in their narrative digressions from what are considered to be the traditional fairy tales established by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm […] to challenge the patriarchal and ideological mores of the established male-authored and often misogynist stories. (2020, p. 1)

The key to comprehending and making corrections is found in this quotation. Today, the anti-tale genre operates as a feminist deconstruction attempt by providing contemplation on a utopian world freed from the oppressive grip of patriarchy. Besides, the nonsynchronous interests between scholarships and literary reworks entitle this generic literature as minor literature in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the incentives of which are always "political" (1994, p. 17). The political programme of minor literature has a "revolutionary force" (1993, p. 19), which happens to be the case in anti-tales that seek a breach in a prevailing system and values for minorities.

Differences in narratives of fairy tales in reproductions, even by the thinnest of margins, constitute a comprehensive corpus. In popular culture, the Cinderella story seems to be a quintessential means of subversion. Jessica Day George's *Princess of Glass* (2010), Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), and Kalynn Bayron's *Cinderella is Dead* (2020) are a few examples. The Netflix production *The Grimm Variations* aligns itself with these retellings by opting for the female simulacrum to undermine the patriarchal ancestors of the Brothers Grimm version of *Cinderella* (1812). At this point, the question is: how does the Netflix production harness the old to forge something new? This question is at the heart of the section that follows.

Classical Rendition of *Cinderella*: The Brothers Grimm Version

I am of the opinion that a critical analysis of the contemporary rendition without the original text would be as nonsensical as dancing without music. Anti-tales, in fact, orient towards the original ancestors to pinpoint utopic differences. Not much to say, however, I suggest looking into the Brothers Grimm version to appreciate the underlying subversions of the target series.

The roots of the Cinderella story depend on societal anxiety about female transgression. According to Jorgensen (2018) and Smith (2015), the general motif of *happily ever after* in fairy tales is meant to indoctrinate female subjects into abstaining from attending social and political spaces. Female targets are

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[2] "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (ctd. in Gamble, 2022, p. 4).

provided with two options that put them between the devil and the deep blue sea: they could "be princesses or witches, but not much else" (Williams, 2010, p. 263). Either clinging on to submission and subservience or defiling the normative codes are two different steps to take to be considered a princess or witch in a fairy tale picture. The Cinderella story, too, follows a similar line of patriarchal grasp with a trope of transformation, through which the story unobjectively compares two different statuses of before / after for readership.

Hence, the Cinderella story was designed to codify gender dyads and inclinations in life with a specific target of female indulgence with a heroine "disabled […] by circumstance" (Bonner, 2020, p. 89). After the demise of her mother, Cinderella is left in the care of her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. With her father's ignorance, and, more importantly, his absence from the narrative, there happens to be a familial power structure in which Cinderella is relegated to menial chores and forced to undergo the scorn of her new family, so much so that, due to her humble and diligent nature, she could not ask for something beyond her word while her father asks his two stepdaughters and Cinderella what he should bring back for them on his trip to the city. In contrast to material items, she asks for a twig to plant on her mother's grave that would later grow through her tears (1812, p. 2). From an archetypal perspective, Mirskaya and Pigulevskiy interpret Cinderella's unusual choice as not only her deindividuation but also her search for life energy in life (Eros) in the absence of maternal support and the failure of the substitute (2021, p. 2). The father's absence, moreover, reinforces the narrative of archetypal reading and connotes the absence of Logos and order in her life. Therefore, Cinderella's attempt to find a sanctuary on her mother's grave reveals an insight suggesting that the corpse lying in the grave is not her mother alone but her life energy as well.

One of the hindsight at hand to strengthen this claim would be the feminising energy regained after the king's announcement of a three-day festival for a marital opportunity for young women to marry the prince. Despite Cinderella's enthusiasm to attend the festival, she is initially hindered by the stepmother; then a magical touch appears out of her plight of suffering and tears by a dove that brings a dress made of "silver and gold" (1812, p. 3). Cinderella who once was buried in dirt and filth now undergoes a feminising reinvention through dress (De Rosario, 2018), which is on par with her reclamation of Eros.

The questions to answer would be: Why is Cinderella so eager to attend the festival? Would it be because the narrative entails a cliché way of love-at-first sight or some other undertones through marriage? My claim is that the Cinderella story takes a route that is most likely misogynistic and hegemonic. Panttaja notes:

> The motif of an enchanted or somehow disguised bride or bride-groom usually appears in tales that depict some kind of unusual marriage […] of a poor or ordinary mortal to a member of the deity or the nobility […] The idea, of course, is that one member, by being disguised or by disguising another, can enter into a marriage that he or she would not normally enter into, usually one that crosses class lines. Thus, the enchantment of a prospective bride or bridegroom has more to do with power and manipulation than it does with romance or affection. (1993, pp. 91–92)

The element of disguise is painstakingly present in the Brothers Grimm version because, as Cinderella attends the ball, "her stepmother and sisters did not know her, and thought she must be a foreign Princess" (1812, p. 3), which maintains some elements of manipulation and power structures as well.

From a sociopolitical perspective, Cinderella's real motivation remains ambiguous but is most likely to delineate her understanding of political dichotomies coded in society: female / male; household space / public sphere; lower class / higher class; proletariat / gentry. If marriage is her ticket to maximise the opportunities bestowed on her, her willingness to adhere to "definitive normative expectations at home and in the public sphere" (Zipes, 1983, p. 9) is her passport. She now seeks "the power and prestige that will accrue to her upon her marriage" (Panttaja, 1993, p. 92). Panttaja's suggestion proves to be right, but it should also be noted that the sense of love in the text is out of sight and a myth, as is her freedom because through marriage two souls become one flesh, yet in history, that flesh has always been the male himself.

The family that she escapes from and the family she will create now are two sides of the same coin. It is another form of prison Cinderella finds herself in.

Whether Cinderella finds true happiness or not after the so-called happy ending, it is certainly true that the unconscious desire to be taken care of, which is the foremost basis of Dowling's Cinderella complex, has been allegedly present in her marriage. But what is of importance is the fact that the tale operates in a minor key to induce this notion, a notion that "to marry up is the highest good" (1993, p. 97).

The Grimm Variations: 2024 Rendition of an Anti-Tale

The Grimm Variations overtly turns what is familiar into something unfamiliar. Using Susan Sontag's words, this counter relationship between the familiar-unfamiliar reconstructions recalls Barthes' usual tendency to deconfiguration that always accompanies the reinterpretation of the old, canon, and mainstream (x). It is not reinterpretation alone that breeds an anti-tale. In any case, an anti-tale enunciates a passageway to escape from linguistic and contextual prison-like memory. Allowances should be made, though, that *The Grimm Variations* manages it on a visual basis, treating "the study of the literary as a heterogenous material that conveys a more or less radical semiotic rupture within itself" (Batens & Martínez, 2015, p. 294). Even by this statement, the visual content captures the essence of an anti-tale by bending temporality, spatiality, and bodies within the narrative of subversion.

The episode salutes the traditional way of narration with "once upon a time, there was a young girl," but the twist is revealed in the following words, "who loved playing with dolls. But Kiyoko's new stepfamily soon realises that they may be her new playthings." As Reynolds points out, the "once upon a time motif" is ahistorical *par excellence*, and it basically refers to the timeless relevance of fairy tale norms to readers and audiences (2020, p. 116). Because the political value of temporal and spatial measures included in the folkloric narratives is the means for universal reception, what we imagine by the first syllables of the phrase is occasionally a rural place, mostly situated in the West, a bereaved girl with no agency over neither the incidents nor the fate that she is bound up with spatiality and temporality. In this sense, it is at least necessary for "anti-tales to challenge the problematic assumption of once upon a time-ness in the traditional series" (2020, p. 116).

The Grimm Variations in fact rings the bell of subverting traditional fairy tale tropes by transplanting the narrative in a Japanese context with a unique cultural and dramatic feel. Within this reshaped symbolic universe, the protagonist's name changes from Cinderella to Kiyoko, thus signifying a break from the negative connotations attached to the word "cinders" to instead evoke purity.[3] Indeed, a chart could be effective to illustrate the transformations within the episode:

Table 1. Characters and their reimaginations in the episode.

The Brothers Grimm (1812)	*The Grimm Variations* (2024)
Cinderella	Kiyoko
The Father	Viscount Otawara
The Stepmother	Tsuruko Otawara
The Stepdaughters	Makiko Otawara and Sawako Otawara
The Prince	Masataka Ichijo

Nonetheless, although Kiyoko is the Cinderella incarnate, her name is quite misleading. Kiyoko, despite her youthful appearance, embodies both the roles of antagonist and protagonist at the same time. The series, akin to the classical one, starts with Viscount Otawara's remarriage with a geisha, Tsuruko, who, unlike her

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[3] Kiyoko. (2024). Retrieved May 5, 2024 from Kiyoko : Meaning and Origin of First Name | Search Family History on Ancestry®.

predecessor's cruelty, exhibits great concern for her stepdaughter. This shift in the characteristics of the maternal figure in the classical story complements the change in the Cinderella figure's status in the household. In the anime, the stepfamily is victimised while Kiyoko asserts her freedom and manipulates them. The poster for the episode clearly gives itself away.

Figure 1. The poster of episode 1, "Cinderella".

The choice of dichotomies in the poster embodied by the heroine not only underlines Cinderella's transformation as in the classical story but also insinuates the dark twist in anti-tales. Additionally, the series utilises the poetics of Japanese simplicity and tranquillity, and in so doing, it underscores Maguire's observation about the characteristics of an anti-tale setting:

> As for the setting, take a look at the interchangeable flats, the painted scrims, the wing-and-drop sets hoisted in darkness above. Most likely the settings are modest and indefinite—the garden, the kitchen; the castle, the hovel; the sea, the cave; the market, the meadow; the well, the woods; the prison tower, the island sanctuary […] The velvet curtains part, side to side, like a parent playing peekaboo. (2010, p. 20)

Maguire (2010) approaches the matter of female autonomy in anti-tales with palimpsestic intentions through the setting, maintaining that anti-tales should take up simplistic settings to rewrite incidents. The simplest settings convey the clearest messages, in which the power of spatial and temporal measures is reduced to the zero-point of orientation due to mystery, ambiguity, and darkness. The uncertainty immanently provides palimpsestic freedom and enables fluidity for the heroine, which is quite applicable to the episode that features a gloomy atmosphere and occasional behind-the-scenes phenomena.

As much as the episode focalises dark places in the traditional Japanese house in the convention of an anti-tale, Kiyoko's dark intentions are superimposed on those gloomy settings, granting her agency over her unsuspecting stepfamily. As is given by the description of the episode, Kiyoko draws an interest in playing with dolls. Her twisted taste, however, invests in an unusual sense of game and appoints family members to be her dolls instead. She specifically utters, "Each of you has a special place in my heart, my dear, precious dolls" (2024, 33:42). One of the peculiar characteristics of Kiyoko's is that she always consults her doll about the fun they will have with playing with the pseudo-dolls. Therefore, in the narrative, living entities except for Kiyoko herself are objectified, whereas the inanimate entity gains a status higher than the former. The pathetic fallacy here introduces the power structure behind Kiyoko's inorganic attitudes towards manipulating traditional concepts. Within this frame, it could be said that Kiyoko's peculiar charisma in objectifying living entities suggests her response to once being used as a puppet within the traditional narrative of the Cinderella story. After all, in anti-tales, "characters are no longer simply puppets pulled along by conventional plot movements and expectations […] but rather they are actors" (Reynolds, 2020, p. 24).

In the labyrinthine corridors, Kiyoko's presence looms large with her presence unnoticed as she listens in on her stepsisters' conversations. With precision, Kiyoko gathers information and crafts complex

schemes in an effort to control and manipulate those around her. The manner of being undetected, however, is of importance because she never succumbs to Mulvey's (1975) being-looked-at-ness in the narrative; rather, she is the one performing active scopophilia behind the curtains and undermining her predecessor's passivity.

Her first machination takes form when she learns of Makiko's special fascination with her deceased mother's amethyst hairpin. Upon this vulnerability, Kiyoko launches a wicked deception. She presents the hairpin to Makiko and later steals it. While the rumours of the theft circulate, an innocent servant is spotted wearing the hairpin, with the explanation that she has found it in the garden, which is true because later it is revealed that Kiyoko placed it where the servant found it. In the absence of tangible evidence, Makiko accuses the servant of the theft and punishes her. Makiko's actions tarnish the stepfamily's presence in the household and etch an atrocious etiquette onto Makiko's character.

> Makiko: They all hate us, don't they?
> Yoshi: Yes, they do.
> Makiko: The servants only see us as stepchildren of humble means. It's no wonder they want to steal a hairpin or two. But what a foolish thing to do. Of all the hairpins, she stole the one Kiyoko…
> Yoshi: What is it?
> Makiko: Doesn't it seem odd to you?
> Yoshi: What?
> Makiko: It's clearly an expensive hairpin. Anyone can see that. So why would she show it off like that? That's like telling everyone she stole it.
> Yoshi: Is someone trying to make us look bad? (2024, 11:53)

Trapped in Kiyoko's manipulative web, the stepsisters find themselves ensnared by psychological horror and uncertainty without an escape. It is at this point that Kiyoko operates at full agency, taking two steps forward, scheming and tarnishing the fragile stepfamily's reputation.

It is my opinion that in the 2024 adaptation, the traditional invasion of Cinderella's stepfamily is replaced with Kiyoko's precise ambush. Within the darker realms of psychological manipulation, a pivotal event unfolds with the arrival of an invitation from our so-called prince, Masakata Ichijo, following the death of Viscount Otawara. Unlike the conventional desire for marriage, there are two separations from the classical narrative: (1) Kiyoko does not want to attend the ball despite her stepmother's insistence, and (2) the stepsisters exhibit an excessive desire for marriage not because they want to marry him but because they consider this a prospect of freedom from Kiyoko: "This is our chance to escape, to be free of Kiyoko" (2024, 26:37). Meanwhile, Kiyoko contemplates on the stepsisters' hope with a calculating gaze: "How will two ladies so unsuited to a viscount's household seize this eagerly awaited opportunity?" (2024, 28:19). She puts theory into deceptive practice. As we learn, Kiyoko later attends the ball and all of a sudden begs for mercy from her stepsisters, as if she had been ordered to stay at home and failed to obey. Her theatrical performance elicits sympathy and mercy from the attendees. Later on, the stepsisters are expelled from the ball with a tarnished reputation. It is not the ball alone that they are expelled from. They are now kicked out of Kiyoko's household, too. Looking at the bright side, though, they consider themselves free:

> Yoshi: Open up! Do you hear me?! I'll never forgive you for this!
> Makiko: We can stop acting now. We're finally free. (2024, 38:03)

Kiyoko's perspective is just as important. She elaborates on the incidents as follows:

> They managed to escape. I've been outwitted. Their disgraceful behaviour at the ball, the way they treated the servants… It was all just an act to marry me into the Ichijo family. A geisha's daughters indeed. They played the count's son like a fiddle. What a pity. They entertained us longer than anyone. (2024, 38:33)

Kiyoko frames herself as outwitted and the stepsisters' chain of actions as a means to marry Kiyoko into the Ichijo family. On the surface, she is seemingly entrapped in the marrying-*up* phenomenon; however, on a deeper level, just as the audience might catch a glimpse of, she is now in a different household with a new set of pseudo-dolls to play with. In the last scene where she utters the aforementioned words, Masakata Ichijo, her newlywed husband, wakes up and asks, "Can't sleep" (2024, 39:32). She responds: "I was just thinking […] About all the fun we'll have. This shall be ever so fun." (2024, 39:36). Kiyoko promisingly envisions that similar incidents are yet to come. It would not be far-fetched to argue that whereas Cinderella's marriage is the token of submission, Kiyoko's happily ever after motif is her metamorphosis into the form of *femme fatale*.

Conclusion

If we were living in the post-war era, then Wikipedia's old-fashioned description of the anti-tale genre as a *dark twin* of conventional fairy tales would have held some truth. It is true that the refashioned fairy tales in the 1950s inherited some darker aspects of warfare and came up with tragic twists. Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, the second wave of feminism balanced the nature of deviation in anti-tales with a critical mind for deconstructing the patriarchal world order. The criticism came with a realisation about the sexist ideologies in male-authored fairy tales mostly stamped with female submission and gender roles. This recognition led to a growing demand for narratives that contested gender roles and norms, creating the anti-tale genre as a way to subvert patriarchal systems and give voice to the feminine other.

The Grimm Variations (2024) is a unique addition to the anti-tale genre with its visual narrativization. Being an anime by source, it is created through the intertext of the Cinderella story to offer a pathway to liberation from linguistic and contextual constraints. The male-authored story, therefore, undergoes a sense of subversion from the basis, in which gender roles are not an exception. In the anime, the Cinderella incarnate, Kiyoko, is placed in contrast to the passive portrayal of Cinderella in the traditional Brothers Grimm version. Through Kiyoko's actions and motivations, we witness a departure from the conventional representations of female victimhood, seeking only marriage for their happily-ever-after motifs, since Kiyoko exhibits full agency over her ambience. She responds to the classical stepfamily's cruelty with ambush; she mentally reduces the family members to dolls to manipulate and play with; and most importantly, she does not succumb to the grips of classical wifehood, which is depicted as the highest good for women in traditional fairy tales.

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