JUDITH P. ROBERTSON
NECTARIA KARAGIOZIS

# My big fat Greek fairy tale: Children's uses and reception of fairy tale narratives in a Greek-as-a-second-language learning environment

*Young readers of Greek ancestry negotiate gender, ethnicity, and age through the reading of Greek fairy tales.*

In fantastical moments we both like to imagine that Nia Vardalos's catapult to the screen with *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick, 2002) was powered by our modest fairy tale research. The film is a "down-to-earth look at one woman's attempt at preserving her Greek Orthodox family's traditional values while carving out a future for herself and discovering her individuality" (Lycos Movie Reviews, 2002). The story is narrated by Toula Portokalos (Nia Vardalos), who says that she, like every Greek woman, "was put upon this earth for three purposes: to marry a Greek man, to have Greek children, and to feed everyone until the day she dies" (Ebert, 2002). In reality, we find ourselves thinking about the sources of Vardalos's inspiration. How do actors, directors, and readers use culturally available material (narratives, ethnic experience, fairy tales) to negotiate the problems and possibilities that contexts present in terms of selfhood? How do living forms of culture help individuals deal with attachment issues and take control of destinies? What can we say about reading as the children of Greek immigrants and about having lasting identifications with ancient heroes who seem ordinary yet unsettled, just like us? How do second-generation Greek children in Canada negotiate the rites of initiation into their teenage years, and how do they actively draw on the fabric of everyday life to forge workable solutions to their desires?

## The study

In this article, we present the findings of a study of second-generation Greek children's interpretations of fairy tales in a Greek-as-a-second-language (GSL) learning environment. In our inquiry we sought to understand children's potent deployment of popular culture in times of learning. The subjects were 22 preadolescents, and we observed their reactions to two classic Greek fairy tales (told to them in Greek). Our study provides evidence of the children's animated experiences of meaning making as they wrote, argued, made art, and confessed their personal ideas and feelings. Like the actors who play their roles with unpretentious charm in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the children in this big fat Greek fairy tale study caused us to consider in heartfelt ways the lively possibilities of popular culture and ethnic consciousness in contemporary Canadian life.

The study aimed to account for "the key elements in a lived cultural ensemble" (Johnson, 1983, p. 76) in which preadolescent children in a GSL after-school learning environment responded to Greek fairy tales read to them in their second language. Through these children's engagements with the fairy tales, we examine how the formal

**FIGURE 1**
**Research questions**

- What formal literary aspects of traditional Greek tales (i.e., images, symbols, narrative structures, characters) attract the attention of young readers?
- How do the fictional tales affect readers in producing ethno-specific identifications in a Greek-as-a-second-language (GSL) learning environment?
- What affective behaviors do English-speaking children of second-generation Greek ancestry demonstrate in response to classic Greek tales, and of what significance are those responses in relation to gender identifications?
- How do preteen children use such texts to question or maintain forms of social power?
- What is the educational potential of Greek fairy tales for learners in a GSL environment?

elements of texts meet the social positions of users to reproduce or permit a questioning of existing social relations in the making of child identities. (See Figure 1 for research questions.)

## Background and conceptual framework

Our interest was fueled by mutual fascination with fairy tale form, and especially by Nectaria Karagiozis's love of Greek stories. As a child growing up near Mount Olympus, Greece, Nectaria loved her grandfather's animated storytelling. During girlhood, she remembers borrowing magical elements from his stories to help keep in touch with her dreams, and they still make her hopeful and strong in times of vulnerability. From a young age she won standing ovations for adroit mimicry of her grandfather's yarns. Eventually, she crossed over from nostalgic memory into more scientific observation to try to understand the force of Greek classical culture on her youthful idealism.

Fairy tales possess prevalence and power in children's lives. Yet, studies that explore how youthful consciousness is given meaning through engagement with the fairy tale form are few and far between (see as exceptions Bearse, 1992; Bloodgood & Worthy, 1992; Davies, 1989, 1993; Flickinger, Garcia, & Long, 1992; Giroux, Simon, & contributors, 1989; Hunt, 1992; Zipes, 1983, 1986, 1999). Even more startling was our discovery that studies of the literary influence of the Greek fairy tale genre (with its early, exemplary modeling of structural forms and character conventions) are practically nonexistent within North American studies of (Greek) second-language childhood.

To frame the study conceptually, we drew on four interdisciplinary fields that examine how readers read and the implications of reading practices for personal development. First, cultural studies encourage interest in how (child) readers become both subjects of and subjected to realities that engage them in particular ways with textual forms (Barker & Beezer, 1992; Johnson, 1983). The cultural studies field analyzes texts for encoded hegemonic modes of address and looks for reading practices that negotiate, oppose, or comply with dominant codes (Hall, 1993). Second, psychoanalysis views preadolescence as a tumultuous time of passage from family life to social responsibility (Kaplan, 1984)—a time in which sex/gender and ethnic relations weigh on landscapes of meaning making (Johnson, 1983). Psychoanalysis embraces reading experience as a "transitional space" in the development of the cultural self (Bettelheim, 1976; Freud, 1908; Klein, Heimann, Isaacs, & Riviere, 1952; Rudnytsky, 1993; Winnicott, 1971, 1990). It examines how children work through developmental predicaments in reading and how fantasies of aggression or romance may play out in the movement from dependency to mature sociality (Robertson, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002; Robertson, Gritziotis, & Campbell, 2000). Third, feminism inspires curiosity about how times of reading play out a quest that is saturated with power. Feminism views popular texts as serious objects of study where readers struggle to obtain access to hope (Christian-Smith, 1993; Johnson, 1983). Fourth, literary studies examine how children's capacity for reasoned thinking requires them to make meaning through symbols,

**FIGURE 2**
**Written questionnaire**

1. Did you like this fairy tale?
2. Who is your favorite character in this story? Give an adjective for him or her.
3. Can you describe an act of your favorite character that strikes you most?
4. Is there someone you dislike in the tale? Explain what it is about his or her attitude, character, or ways of thinking that you cannot stand.
5. What were some of your feelings while listening to the fairy tale? What was happening in the story when you felt that way?
6. Do you find any elements that make you realize that this is a Greek fairy tale?
7. Would you like to change something in the fairy tale, and, if so, what is it?
8. Would you like to draw your favorite scene from the tale?

plots, and conventions (Nussbaum, 1995). Stories can act as vehicles to subversive thinking and moral complexity. We wanted to know how children work to understand relationships in stories (through the economy of symbols experienced in time) in order to better understand how they attribute meaning to their external realities (Bruner, 1966).

Within this conceptual model, we were aware that critical research condemns fairy tales as socially conserving agents of discourse, dogging the relations between power and gender (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1984; Zipes, 1986). We wanted to understand how (and indeed whether) fairy tales justify the hierarchical social order through their use of patriarchal plot resolutions or representations. Do traditional tales reinforce coercive fantasies that consolidate feminine subservience and male bullying? Do they impose on child readers specific stereotypes that present women, older people, and people with disabilities as weak, powerless, wicked, or mean, and men or boys as violent, cruel, and self-seeking? Do fairy tale depictions of getting lost and being found (with all of the brutality, hatred, revenge, fear, and solitude entailed) cause children to lose faith with life?

## Methodology

With a focus on readers' reactions, we set out to examine how children use Greek traditional stories to produce meaning and to resolve (mentally) problematic situations. By traditional stories we mean tales created by unknown Greeks and maintained through oral tradition from generation to generation. We used two kinds of data. First, questionnaires were administered in English to students after Nectaria's Greek narration of two particular tales on separate occasions. *Chrisofeggaraki* and *The Greek Children* (Aggelopoulou, 1991), which are discussed in this article, were only two of many Greek fairy tales to which readers were exposed during the seven-week study. The research questionnaires (see Figure 2) were administered during weeks 4 and 6, with written student, teacher, principal, and parent consent. Many children proudly accompanied their written responses with illustrations of the most meaningful segments of the stories.

The second data source comprised taped and transcribed group interviews. The interviews (see Figure 3) consisted of semistructured, predetermined questions that followed the reading of the two Greek tales and were carried out in focus groups organized in mixed-sex, same-age groupings. Questions were designed to discover participants' ideas, understanding, and feelings about the Greek fairy tale narratives.

The study participants were 22 boys and girls drawn from the middle grades (4, 5, and 6) of a Canadian state-sponsored Heritage language after-school program, in which Nectaria is a full-time teacher. One or both of each participant's parents were of Greek national origin. The appropriateness of a preteen sample was confirmed by research illustrating that children's interest in fairy tales exists during specific periods of childhood. Favat (1997) found that children's passion for fairy tales encompasses early childhood to about age 10. Zipes (1983) argued that children's conceptual

**FIGURE 3**
**Open-ended interview questions**

1. How do you feel about this fairy tale?
2. What do you find most interesting about this fairy tale?
3. What is your favorite part of the story?
4. Who is your favorite character? Why do you like that character?
5. Can you describe one act of the character that strikes you most?
6. What do you like or dislike in the protagonist's attitude, character, and ways of thinking and acting?
7. What would you do if you were the protagonist of this fairy tale?
8. How do you feel about the other characters of the story?
9. What were some of your feelings while listening to that fairy tale? When did you feel this way?
10. Do you find any magic in the fairy tale? What does magic mean to you?
11. Have you heard or read any other Greek fairy tales before? Who narrated them to you? When? How did you feel about the stories? Why?
12. Do you find any elements that make you realize that this is a Greek fairy tale?
13. Do you find any differences between the Greek and other fairy tales that you have heard or read before? What do you find special or interesting about Greek or other fairy tales?

understanding develops from ages 6 to 10 and that storytelling has significant impact during these years. Kaplan (1984) argued that preteens need to be with members of their own generation to rewrite and reevaluate the past through work that allows them to revise it into a workable present. The inclusion of 11- and 12-year-olds was further justified in that children of this age are more competent users of Greek as a second language, thus expanding research potential for understanding how they make meaning. Because both parents and students were enthusiastic about the research, all students who wished to participate were welcomed into the study. The research site was a school classroom. The duration was seven consecutive Saturday mornings.

The children's responses were reviewed and coded into tentative conceptual categories. Our presentation of their engagements has a narrative form, constructed through examples derived from their words. Before progressing to a discussion of the research findings, we present an overview of the two tales selected for study.

## The narrative sample

The first fairy tale was *Chrisofeggaraki*, which was classified by Aggelopoulou (1991) as a "haunted, persecuted princess" (p. 260) story. In a manner resembling Cinderella, the ancient tale finds beautiful Chrisofeggaraki at the mercy of three jealous sisters who repeatedly try to kill her. In the first trial, the heroine hides out in a dragons' hut where, unbeknownst to her scaly hosts, at night she scrubs, tidies the house, and makes meals. Upon her discovery, she is rewarded by the dragons' devoted promise that she will marry into wealth. In a second trial, the evil sisters catch and kill her by placing a poison ring in her mouth. The gold coffin in which she lies falls into the hands of a handsome prince who, shaking it, dislodges the tainted ring, causing the heroine to live again. She marries the prince and bears a child. In a third trial, the insatiable sisters once more track down their sister, paralyze her by throwing a needle into her mouth, and transform her into an apple tree. Chrisofeggaraki's child, reaching for an apple, causes the tree to incline with tender grace, but the evil sisters cannot bend the tree for all their malicious force. Obsessed with hate, they chop down the tree. One day, an old woman, using a piece of wood from the tree to dice meat, hears a voice. The wood splits open, and a beautiful girl appears dressed in a golden gown. The prince comes back to reclaim Chrisofeggaraki, and they live happily ever after.

The second tale was *The Greek Children*. This traditional, historical tale set in the 18th century is

about George and his sister Maria, two beautiful children who grow up to be virtuous, patriotic, and beloved. One day the Turkish emperor, the evil Master Agas, tries to foil the siblings' happiness by setting George on the difficult task of finding and capturing a mermaid in a cage. Once the mission is accomplished, George learns from the enchanted creature of trouble at home. He rushes back to his village to find the country folk gathered at a wedding, where evil Master Agas has commanded Maria to dance with him. Maria's defiant refusal sparks a devastating war between the Greeks and the Turks, in which a haunting melody is heard above the din of battle. It is a girl's voice singing, "It's better to live one hour of freedom and independence, than 40 years of slavery and imprisonment." The tale reveals nothing more of the fates of the protagonists.

## Study results

Transcriptions of student responses comprised about 300 typed pages. These findings, radically condensed, appear in the following sections. Student pseudonyms are omitted, and exact words are introduced as exemplars of meanings expressed most frequently by respondents. We present our interpretations of reader responses to both tales at once. In light of our interest in (a) how preteens use transitional cultural objects in the creation of social identities and (b) preadolescence as a time of growth and inner struggle, we group the responses below around patterns of affect, namely children's expressed feelings of nostalgia, anxiety, and vacillation or refusal in reading. These emotions demonstrate readers' avid use of fairy tale symbols and structures both to help them loosen the moorings of childhood and to cast defiantly forward on the unknown sea of adolescence. We also report that gender is a dominant position through which readers struggle to assign meaning to the tales.

At the end of the article, we return to a discussion of the limits and possibilities within which the children's readings operate, and we offer some pedagogical implications of the study.

### *Nostalgia*

Respondents demonstrated a keen ability to engage enthusiastically with classic Greek fairy tale forms. They performed astute situational, intertextual, and interactive skills as passionate learners of ancestral language through fairy tale reading. Enthusiasm was high throughout the project. The first lens through which the youths viewed the tales was narrative structure. Here, they registered a deeper affection for structural elements of the magical tale *Chrisofeggaraki* than for the more didactic *The Greek Children*. In discussing the tales, their responses sometimes reminded us of homesickness. It is as though, imaginatively, they read against the grain of both tales by constantly "returning home" to some fairy tale ideal to state what elements were missing.

For example, the second tale was an instructive fantasy of Greek history written to impart information and morality. It struck some respondents as tiresome. They described the story as "boring," "a plain thing," and said that "it had less magic." Boys and girls of all grades clamored for the presence of the old, familiar components of fairy tale fantasy. They asked for "more about princesses ending up married," "kind of romantic" figures and schemes, and "more violence." The younger male readers gravitated toward the mermaid in *The Greek Children*, who signaled to them a magical beacon to assist the hero. They isolated this structural dimension of magic as the most compelling aspect of the tale. In general, the absence of nobles, witches, magical transformations, marriage, and even "happy-ever-after" endings evoked reader discontent. The students complained that "It's very good, but hard to understand and hard to say to others" and "complicated to get all in your head." The readers' longing for familiar animistic structures and fantastical creatures blocked their ability to find pleasure in the historical tale. But the absence of such predictable narrative elements also pragmatically affected their rational comprehension of the fairy tale—a complaint registered by nearly all participants.

Readers used nostalgia for Greek signifiers as a second lens to view the fairy tales and construct meaning. Responses showed that the readers sharply processed the semiotic conventions and components of the tales in relation to the situated logic of their intergenerational cultural experiences, home life, and personal knowledge. Respondents from all three grades were quick to zero in on specifically Greek elements of *The Greek Children*.

They pleasurably associated the tale with Greek myth and fantasy by accurately recognizing the presence of typical conventions. These included structural elements such as repetition and parallel plot segments; rhetorical markings such as red caps on the Greek folk; the planting of the Greek flag by Maria; pictorial and iconographic clues such as picture borders made of colorful embroidered stitching, reminding them of Greek handwork seen at home; allusions to the Greek and Turkish wars learned about in Heritage school; Greek character names; and the presence of mythical and legendary elements, such as the sun and the moon, as personifications and agents of fate.

It was not surprising that recognition of these conventions was more clearly demonstrated by the oldest preteen respondents. Such culture-specific awareness often became the comic focal point of humorous pedagogical exchanges within the group. When a fourth-grade boy objected to "boring" repetitions, a sixth-grade girl reminded him that such familiar markers were what made the stories fairy tales, and Greek ones at that. Engel (1995) posited that through such engagements with culture texts, participants use reader-text relations as an informative space through which to "enter more easily and successfully into their culture" (p. 47). It is arguable that the encoded Greek modes of address in the tales were used by readers as useful objects through which to cultivate their places in the world as second-generation Greek Canadian citizens. Being Greek clearly helped to inform their readings.

Fairy tale protagonists provided a third lens to view the stories, and all respondents regarded them nostalgically. Despite their alleged desires for more princesses, violence, and happy-ever-after endings, a multitude of readers registered clear pleasure around traits associated with the chief characters, but a clear division of responses along gender lines emerged. In both *Chrisofeggaraki* and *The Greek Children*, female respondents in general registered admiration for idealized representations of the heroines' beauty, decorum ("polite," "nice"), and virtue ("brave and kind," "good"). Both boys and girls registered positive identifications with George, focusing on his courage, bravery, and tenacity ("brave and persistent"). The youngest male readers appeared to have no response whatsoever to the heroines' beauty (unless the female was a magical creature like a mermaid, whose power could assist them).

## Gender identifications

These patterns of response reveal gender-axis identifications as well as (for female respondents) gender-identification boundary jumping. In their use of stories in the struggle to become independent, what seems especially significant is the importance placed by readers of both sexes on character traits associated with morality as well as (for girls) physical beauty. The only remarkable deviations from this pattern came from the youngest male respondents (grade 4), who gravitated in rich fantasy to the antagonist, Master Agas. They said he was "excellent" and "greedy, selfish, and mean." One boy idealized Agas's "rich...[the one who] gets the bucks" disposition. The villain's ability to suppress others by force and bend them to his will was grievously condemned by the sixth-grade girls. They judged him as a bothersome character who "thinks only for himself" and is "busted, not letting anyone have a good time."

The study demonstrates how the rhetorical devices of the tale meet readers' sense-making positions in culture, age, and sex/gender to allow for moments of contest, negotiation, and compliance, and for open-ended debate among them. During heated class discussions, students wanted to work out their dilemmas without teacher interference. Sometimes the young boys would dominate the discussion by expressing desires for more ruthlessness, horror, and scary "Dracula" type violence in the tales. Several even asked Nectaria to revise the study to include more horror tales.

Female respondents of all ages found pleasure in Maria's heroic rejection of Agas during the wedding scene. Not only did the girls associate longingly with their own experiences of Greek wedding receptions, but they also drew on their personal knowledge in articulating their own views of role models and right and wrong. They expressed strong desires for self-efficacy and self-determination.

## Anxiety

The youngest readers were saddened by the ending of *The Greek Children* when George and Maria vanish preceding a dream vision in which their voices can be heard inciting bravery. They

responded, "The other ones [had] like happy endings; this one is not really a happy ending, because they will have to die," "Everyone was dying," and "I felt sad at the end." We were surprised by their responses. We had anticipated that students would identify pleasurably with representations of ancestral bravery and refusal to submit to ethnic oppression, especially when presented through juvenile heroes. Our expectation was confirmed only in the responses of the oldest readers (grade 6), who actually isolated the story ending for praise: "I felt proud when Maria started singing, 'It's better to live an hour of free life than 40 years of slavery and imprisonment.'"

One female respondent compared the ancient Agas to the modern rock star Marilyn Manson, "who has tattoos over his body, makes fun of people, and kills animals on stage." The girl's ability to draw on contemporary pop culture to identify a sexist antihero struck us as sophisticated in terms of its intertextual, interpretative strategies and intellectual richness in reading culture and possibility. Similar references to popular culture emerged in other student associations with such stories as "Snow White" and "Jack and the Beanstalk," and even the biblical "Joseph and His Coat of Many Colors." Such responses provide clear evidence of readers' analytical competence in reading plot structures intertextually. They also demonstrate preteen fascination with themes of strength and potency in the face of oppression.

Another noteworthy pattern was readers' troubled attentiveness to the theme of sibling rivalry in *Chrisofeggaraki*. Only fifth- and sixth-grade participants commented on the sisters' terrible cruelty to their younger sibling. These older readers related it to their experiences of fury or jealousy within the family. Students in grade 4 were content with labeling the sisters simply as "bad" ("active murderers," one boy called them); older readers more subtly associated the sisters' destructive impulses with their own sibling conflicts. A boy in grade 6 frankly admitted, "I am jealous of my sister. She gets all the attention." Another girl the same age said, "I want my brother and sister to beep off." This pattern shows readers using the reading experience to get in touch with feelings of displacement and anger within the family. One respondent in grade 6 wished "for all brothers and sisters not to get jealous." This pattern of bittersweet preoccupation demonstrates older preteen readers working against the grain of disillusionment with familial experience. They strive to interpret subjective possibility through lateral relationships that are represented within the third space of narrative fantasy.

### Anxiety and vacillation or refusal

Repetition and parallelism in the plot segments of both tales annoyed some respondents, especially boys in grade 4 who wanted more realism. One student stated, "Bored. Bored all the time." The literal notion that a poison ring could wreak such havoc on individuals was specifically rejected by boys of all levels. One boy wrote in exasperation about the character Chrisofeggaraki, "She is pretty interesting because she is weak. She just dies of a ring! Buh! Nobody would ever die. It would hurt you, yes, but not a ring! A ring!" A few boys suggested inserting editorial changes: a "knife or something," or "the ring could change into a bomb. That would make more sense."

Chrisofeggaraki's actions, which conform to those of a heroic quest, were quickly dismissed by some readers. Upon closer investigation, we became aware of dividing lines of gender between respondents' vacillation about Chrisofeggaraki as an ideal heroine. It was paradoxical that most readers claimed to identify positively with representations of her beauty, kindness, and virtue, while at the same time the boys often found subsequent cause (especially in public discussion) to diminish the heroine's worthiness. She was "stupid" to keep house for the dragons. She was "dumb" not to reveal herself, especially since the dragons were blind. Tests of her heroism failed to convince the boys. She "is not a hero. She is a girl. She can't be a hero," said one student.

To the contrary, female readers of all ages gravitated to Chrisofeggaraki's magical, maternal, and regenerative powers. They cited her ability to talk to the sun, to transform into a tree, and to then come back to life. "She kept on going back to life," wrote one girl admiringly. "She kept on dying," a boy reproved disparagingly. Female readers loved the heroine's repeated demonstrations of grace and bravery, such as bending to nurture her child with fruit. Perhaps such starkly oppositional and contestatory readings of the same text both confirmed and undermined the gender work the respondents felt

compelled to do as preteens. The tale seemed to confirm for girls the "naturalness" of power exercised as adventurousness, transformation, and care. For some boys, such female-positive readings became a public opportunity to assert the male prerogative to squelch female fantasies of access to action and power through verbal silencing. While the historical tale clearly gave rise to moments of female contestation around questions of ethical conduct, the more traditional *Chrisofeggaraki* (scorned by one boy as a "girly story") caused them to retreat. The tale seemed to inspire oppressive modes of regulation (nonspeaking public compliance for the females) more commonly associated with gender stereotypes, silencing, and prescription.

The most radically variant interpretation in the research (registered verbally and pictorially through the children's art) settled upon the character of Chrisofeggaraki. Readers were almost universally compelled by her magical transformation into an apple tree that bends its branches to a loved one, and the heroine's return to human form at the end of the story. The notion of transmogrification and regeneration fascinated them ("It's weird," and "Cool"). It seemed to confirm several girls' spiritual belief in regeneration ("Many people do that."). But another boy's rejoinder, "People can't do that," consigned the representation of regeneration to the realm of the mythical.

Whether or not they interpreted Chrisofeggaraki's metamorphoses as plausible, readers understood that this was one of the few times in the story in which the heroine occupied a position of enabling power. She could determine whether or not to allow people to touch her or to feed from her branches, and she could punish those who behaved toward her with cruelty. Again, however, clear gender and age schisms emerged among meanings attached to the representation of Chrisofeggaraki. The youngest male participants found the symbolization of the heroine lacking in logic. Once killed, they said, she should remain that way: "I say somebody dies [in a fairy tale]. I mean permanently," said one student. Another boy agreed: "Kill Chrisofeggaraki and that would make a good movie. Because there is finally someone dying."

We believe that, whether expressed as admiration for the protagonist's powerful animism (girl respondents) or, alternatively, as wishes for narrative resolution through closure by death (younger male respondents), the participants' fantasy engagements with the idea of magical transformations demonstrates something important in the landscape of preteen subjectivity. Such wishes constitute an important space for having second thoughts about struggles for autonomy, independence, and separation from the authority of parents in the struggle to grow up. The fantasies confirm for preadolescents, on a psychological level, the extreme value and vulnerability involved in conceiving the self as strong, capable, and in control.

## Implications for pedagogy

We were interested in providing descriptions of passionate involvement by preteen readers with cultural objects clearly set out in a circumscribed time and space. Our findings challenge theories of reading and representation that assume passive, behaviorally manipulated readers who automatically decode what appears to be the encoded dominant messages of popular texts. The fight to attach meaning to traditional tales by the second-generation Greek Canadian readers in our study shows both compliance to and refusal of dominant stereotypes, as art achieves force in the landscape of mental experience through identification, reflection, and dialogue. This study provides a window on how objects of culture are appropriated and transformed according to the needs and cultural logic of individuals inhabiting an interpretive community—in this case mixed gender, preadolescent, middle school age children of Greek Canadian second-generation ancestry.

In presenting our study we have tried to show how cultural forms contribute to dynamic subcultural style and contest—for example, how girls and boys use representations from popular culture to reproduce and resist forms of power. Fantasy tales help preteen readers to make real the imagined means for success; to conceive imaginary solutions to predicaments such as envy, hate, or intimidation; and to experience the force of inner life by representing aspects of thought and powerful feeling.

The students use Greek fairy tales to make meanings of and for themselves. Their passionate engagements with the oral tales of their ancestors help them to articulate selfhood in three ways. First, they read as ethnic subjects who are still in

the process of constructing what it means to be a Greek Canadian. The students perform this cultural work in reading through their astute connections to ancestry, language, ethnic heritage, conflict, communal life, and history. In so doing, they express particular sets of cultural competencies (linguistic, semiotic, historical, kinship) that help to organize meaningful engagements with the Greek tales. Our study cannot answer definitively the question of how such reading competence might mark these respondents as unique or "different" from non-Greek readers of the same tales. We speculate, however, that our readers bring specific sets of cultural insights to their readings, arising from ancestral knowledge and lived experience. They read pragmatically and emotionally by using what is already familiar to them to digest something new, but something they know in advance to be Greek tales passed down through generations.

Second, they read as preadolescent social subjects. Through fantasy work and group dynamics, they imagine possibilities for self-autonomy, empowerment, and comfort in times of radical physical and emotional developmental change and experimentation. The students' nostalgia, seduction, and defiant refusals denote a conflicted landscape of daunting physical and emotional change, leading up to the revolution of adolescence. The centrality of feelings of destructiveness, primitive greed, and repair demonstrates the intensity of emotional life during a time of transition and uncertainty.

Third, the readers construct meaningful engagements with the tales as gendered subjects in formation. Through dynamic interaction with plot structures, representations of power, age, and lived ethnic experience, participants repeatedly seize the opportunities of language arts education to explore multiple identities, gender roles, and the situated challenges of development to contribute to a vision of the future. Such gender work is not without struggle. At times there are failures of imagination. Spitz (1999) reminded us that the most stressful junctures of a child's life include crises; painful situations; or embarrassing, shame-laden, tragic issues. Books bring these situations into the open, making them public, and therefore giving readers permission to talk about them. Our study suggests that interaction with fairy tale narratives constitutes one important site for preadolescent representation and negotiation of sex/gender issues and possibility. Such work may open up unprecedented occasions for disturbing hegemony in learning—for making pedagogical disruptions and interventions.

In expressing their antipathy toward a representation of gendered brute force at a wedding in *Chrisofeggaraki*, for example, the girls may have been registering their hopes for reciprocity in experiences of intimacy and love. Within the study group, the older girls certainly asserted their culturally sanctioned ascendency as legitimate teachers and keepers of the moral code. Again and again they reminded the younger boys that the study could not be turned into a forum for discussing horror stories, because the study would not then achieve its objectives of being a forum for the examination of Greek fairy tales.

The older readers in the study, who were preparing to enter their teenage years and high school, found pleasure in identifying with the value and moral ideal of standing up to cultural crises and opposing ethnic colonization. This pattern of response provides evidence of ideals that may continue to guide the readers through a decade of developmental turbulence. We wondered (but were unable to confirm) if the feelings of sadness in response to historical representations of oppression in the youngest respondents reflected deeply felt personal fears. Perhaps unwittingly the historical tale tapped into their fantasy life about real struggles involved in standing up to playground bullies, whose machismo could target them (especially as ethnic subjects) as pained victims and scapegoats.

Some of the youngest male participants in the study showed a tendency for indifference and narcissism in their reading positions. Kaplan (1984) argued that such monstrous self-absorption signals the frank difficulty of movement into adolescence, with its assumption of responsibilities of communal morality and its associated struggles and vulnerabilities. The violent male fantasies represented by some respondents can perhaps also be illumined by Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory of child development, in which the advance to genital sexuality is said to be a time of sadism, when extreme fantasies of aggression are expressed symbolically (Hinshelwood, 1991). Preadolescent boys inhabit a cultural matrix of video games, organized sports, and movies in which males are typically encouraged to resolve crises through physical force.

Winnicott (1990) reminded teachers that fantasies of destruction are serious components of children's inner life. He argued that by "holding" these fantasies, teachers can help children make the transition from primitive dependency, with all its fear and greed, to social life, with its demands for reciprocity, concern, and care. The teacher's "containment" of violent projection assists the child in making an intolerable feeling representable. If we consider both the age-driven gender work that the boys in the study did, as well as the culturally dominant formations in which they were expected to participate (as boys and as *Greek* boys), their fantasy expressions of machismo take on a cultural logic, however discomfiting. On a brighter note, according to Melanie Klein, the more children are able to successfully liberate their anxieties through processes of expression in play and other symbolic activities, the more capable they become of mature, sympathetic "object-love" (Hinshelwood, 1991). The processes of open dialogue and debate encouraged throughout this study possess important pedagogical role-modeling implications for classroom teachers.

## Implications for teachers

The youngest readers' desire to resolve the tales' imaginary conflict through more violence raises the question of a possible lack of awareness of intertextual alternatives within this age group. The 9-year-old males seemed especially unable or unwilling to associate the narrative resolutions of these tales with fantasy's lavish use of signs and symbols to connote codes of empowerment and meaning. Our study telegraphs how important it is for teachers to teach children directly about alternative genres and literary conventions. Teachers who use traditional tales with preteens may enlarge their capacity for analysis by providing direct cross-cultural references that help them to comprehend the enabling uses of symbols to conceptualize heroic possibilities. Such symbols include the scar on J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter, and his invisibility cloak to combat vulnerability and evil. They also include J.R.R. Tolkien's use of a ring in the Lord of the Rings trilogy to symbolize the difficulties associated with the quest for limitless life and power. Such direct teaching may function as oppositional while, at the same time, it enlarges children's humane capacities for meaning making. The teacher inhabits a privileged position in battles of meaning around classroom texts. Allusions to Harry Potter's use of magical icons or Frodo Baggins's vicissitudes with the ring of power may expand gender-based readings that seem to dismiss those very elements of fantasy that, in reality, can open up deeply satisfying subjective opportunities. Some strategic teacher refereeing might be needed, for example, with the silence of girls who feel thin skinned beside boys' condemnation of obviously stereotypical—yet culturally sustaining and enlivening—"feminine" traits of caregiving, nurturance, hope, and beauty. An activity in which respondents are asked to envision story resolutions not founded on violence may permit some questioning of dominant patriarchal solutions.

Stories constitute the basis on which we structure and communicate our social experience. As Freud (1908) said, we even dream in story form. The participants of our study are active, audible receptors; passionate artists and wordsmiths—sometimes bored but most often excited by their own scathing or idealized pronouncements. They are the narrative arbiters of new dreams, sometimes narcissistic, often vulnerable, and always contested. Like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick, 2002), the second-generation Greek respondents of our big fat Greek fairy tale study radiate an affability that is awfully attractive. They succeed on their own modest terms without pretense or apology, and in the process they help us to understand some of the barriers and strategies for working through the dilemmas of preadolescent ethnic childhood.

***Robertson teaches in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. She can be contacted at 24 Elmdale Ave., Ottawa, ON K1M 1A2, Canada. E-mail jrobert@uottawa.ca. Karagiozis is a doctoral candidate at the same university. E-mail nectariak@sprint.ca.***

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