

Snow White's Bone Graft



The Crabgrass - Vol. 1:
Translation

Horace - 1.5 Ode (Pyrrha):

A Retranslation

Original translation:

Notes: This was the translation that I had done just by using a dictionary and following the grammatical rules. There's a lot of beauty in the way the words were formatted in Latin, something that I really wanted to capture in translating this poem.

*What slender boy in many a rose drenched with clear fragrances grinds upon you, down in a pleasing cave, Oh Pyrrha?
For whom do you untie your long hair, simple with respect to elegance
Alas, how many times will the boy cry over poor fate and fortune & in his insolence stand aghast at oceans made rough by black storms
That trustworthy boy who now enjoys you in all your magnitude and love is ignorant of your possibilities.
Wretched are those to whom you appear golden, without knowing your true self.
A sacred wall shows that I've suspended my wet clothes there is a votive prayer for Neptune.*

1st translation

Notes: With this version, I wanted to see if I couldn't shift the blame from the boy to focus more on Pyrrha as if the author was even more angry with her.

*Pyrrha what delicate boy, again doused with perfumes, presses upon you, down in some pleasing grotto?
For him, do you arrange your golden locks, everso naturally elegant?
Alas how often he will lament over your fickle faith and fickle fate, caught off guard and surprised as you turn rough in black storms.
The Naive boy may enjoy you now, your love & your availability, unaware of how your deceptive wind blows.
Miserable are those who worship you, unaware of your true self.
As for me, I have hung my clothes as an offering to the god of the sea for passage through the storm.*



2nd Translation

Notes: I was trying to make it more "everything", more emotional, exaggerating more, changing the you's of the poem to punch more. I aimed to mimic the meter of the original

*Pyrrha what delicate boy, doused with perfumes,
presses upon you, down in some pleasing grotto?*

*For him, do you bind
your golden locks,
always simple in elegance?*

*Alas how often
he will lament over your fickle faith and fickle fate,
caught off guard and surprised
as you turn rough in black storms.*

*The naive boy may enjoy you now,
your love & your availability,
unaware of how
your deceptive wind blows.*

*Miserable are those for whom you seem gold,
untried.*

*As for me, I have hung my clothes as an offering
to the god of the sea
for passage
through the storm.*



3rd Translation

Notes: With this version, I really wanted to play around with the formatting and indentation as well as the questioning of the poem to try and bring out some of the fun word order Horace was known for.

*Pyrrha,
what slender boy?
doused in perfumes, is pressing upon you,
down in some pleasing grotto?*

*Pyrrha,
for him?
do you bind your golden locks,
naturally gracefully?*

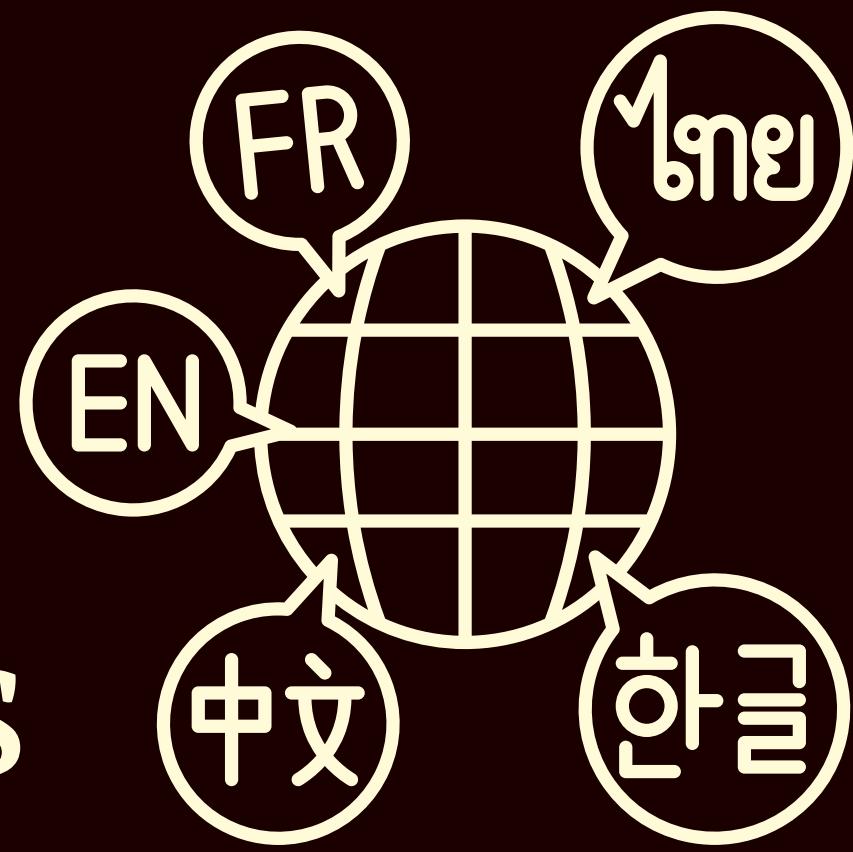
*Alas!
how often he will lament!
over your fickle faith and fickle fate,
forever caught off guard,
as you turn rough in black storms.*

*The boy.
may enjoy you now,
your affection and sweet availability.
nevertheless unaware,
of how your deceptive wind blows.*

*I
have hung my clothes
for the sea god
as an offering for safe passage
through the storm.*

Hidden Words

Part 1: Language As a Lens



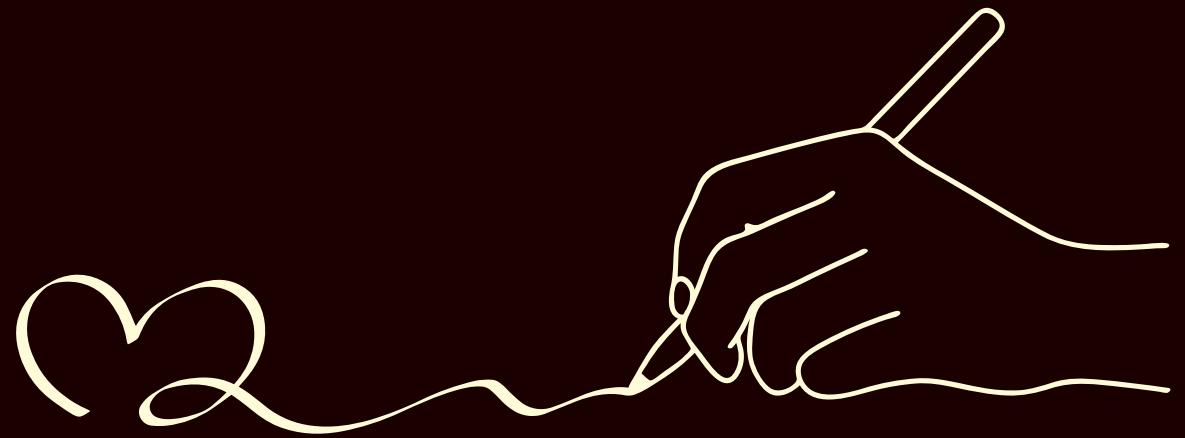
Have I been gripped by a sense of alienation from what I was reading: was this what I had written? How could I have been so flat and insipid?

Italo Calvino, Italian author and translator, had written this quote in an previously unpublished essay called “*Translation is the true way of reading a text*”. His essay delves into the art of translation and how rereading someone else’s translation of his novels changed his understanding of the purpose of his own work.

I haven’t had much experience formally translating other than Latin. But even then, I’ve learned to appreciate the beauty of the different languages and the abilities it has. I’ve also learned the difficulties of preserving a work’s identity across languages. For one thing, due to its reliance on conjugation, Latin can play with word order in a way English simply can’t. In many cases, that shapes the identity of a passage — how am I to translate it to English?

Language can be a lens, shaping a piece of literature. The right lens can sharpen my appreciation of the details. The wrong lens can be a funhouse mirror, distorting and unworking what I read. That is the power of the translator, and I think that’s really beautiful.

Part 2: Living Words



Hidden Girl, by Shyima Hall, recounts her story of child slavery. Born in Egypt, her parents sold her into child slavery in order to pay off her sister's debt, shipping her off America. There she spent 4 grueling years with captors before she was rescued thanks to an anonymous tip to the police, placing her in foster care.

Although the tale was heartbreaking, it lacked the feeling of purpose, of direction, and I found myself often wondering what she was attempting to say.

Recently, I watched an interview with Shyima from 2014, the same year the book was published. Her manner of speaking was so different from what I had read that it was almost alarming. In her hour-long talk, she communicated far more powerfully about the horrors of human trafficking than her book did.

For example, in both the book and her speech, she discusses her rare calls with her family back in Egypt and the aftermath of these conversations with her captors, who she refers to as “The Mom” and “The Dad”. In the novel she writes, “*Once or twice, though, I got to briefly speak with my mother on the phone. The calls were set up by The Mom and were mostly to discuss the details of payment for me to my parents....Every time I said, ‘Mom, I want to come home,’ my mother replied, ‘You are almost done. It’s okay. You will be home soon.’ But even then I knew these for the placating words they were. Plus, every time my mother and I spoke, either The Mom or The Dad listened in...*

...Afterward, they'd yell at me. 'You are a stupid girl,' one or the other would shout. 'You should be grateful for the good life we give you.' It was like a broken record, or the movie Groundhog Day, where the same events take place over and over again".

When describing the same event in her speech she states, "In the 3 years I lived with them, I got to speak to my parents twice and the first time, I cried to my mom, I begged, "Hey I want to come back home, I can't do this anymore, they're verbally abusive,"... She turned around and said "Oh you're okay, you're almost done, you're fine, you have to do this for your family. Think of your family"... I got off the phone and The Dad came to me and said, "Don't you ever complain about us. How dare you? We give you the world. We treat you as one of the family...I couldn't imagine that that's how any family treats each other.",

In her talk, Shyima hammers the idea of the loss of her family, repeating over and over how not only her parents but her captors manipulate her with false ideas of what a family should be. It resonates completely differently, reminding the reader how Shyima's childhood was stripped from her and destroyed without a trace. It grounded me when I heard her say this; I had to sit and think about the privilege I have, the problems with our world, the forgotten innocent.

Groundhog Day's got nothing on that.



Part 3: Feedback and Life

Then, rereading my text in Italian and comparing it with the translation, I saw that the translation was perhaps very faithful, but in my text a word was used with a hint of ironic intention that the translation did not pick up; a subordinate clause in my text passed rapidly while in the translation it took on an unjustified importance and a disproportionate weight; the meaning of a verb in my text was softened by the syntactical construction of the sentence, while in the translation it sounded like a peremptory statement. In other words, the translation communicated something completely different from what I had written.

What Calvino highlights is the heart of the problem- that even as carefully as you copy, the overall meaning of a translation can drift away. Wysocky, as the main writer, may have translated Shyima's story faithfully but failed to capture her true voice or the soul of what was said. This was not just my issue; plenty of other reviews of the novel noted the same problem (Goodreads).

Translation should breathe life to the words of another, not mindlessly trace. It's something that makes translation so difficult, and I respect those who try.

And I fear that without some sort of quality check, the feedback loop Calvino had, we lose the breath of many of our stories. Translators owe it to the voices they carry to do more than just get the words right—they have to get the soul.

சித்திரமும் கைப்பழக்கம் செந்தமிழும் நாப்பழக்கம் வைத்ததொரு கல்வி மனப்பழக்கம்

Avvaiyar's 6th Venpa

(Chittiramum Kai Pazhakkam)

சித்திரமும் கைப்பழக்கம் செந்தமிழும் நாப்பழக்கம்
வைத்ததொரு கல்வி மனப்பழக்கம் - Avvaiyar

English Pronunciation:

Chittiramum kai pazhakkam
centami_lum nāppalakkam
vaittatoru kalvi maṇappalakkam

Translator's Note

I picked Avvaiyar to translate not only since she was such an accomplished Tamil poet, but also because she was someone I grew up hearing very often around the house. My relatives often would quote her sayings and moral lessons as a guidebook for good behavior and I loved learning more about my culture through her poetry. I wanted my translation to be short and succinct to try and capture the potency of her message. Something more specific I did was change the word “Tamil” to “language”. In the spirit of so much translation, I felt like a broader moral message fit more with the theme.

சித்திரமும் கைப்பழக்கம் செந்தமிழும் நாப்பழக்கம் வைத்ததொரு கல்வி மனப்பழக்கம்

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Google Search's translation:

The finest art is the practice of the hand;
The eloquence in Tamil literature is the
practice of the tongue;
The greatness of knowledge is the practice of
the mind;

My Grandfather's translation:

The art of drawing pictures is by practice of
the hand
Tamil poetry is by practice of the tongue
Deep learning is by practice of mind

My Translation:

Art is the hand's practice
Language is the tongue's practice
Learning is mind's practice



Snow White's Bone Graft

Part 1: Once Upon a Time

"Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?"

— *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937, directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Productions.



Schneewittchen

First, a short retelling of the original Snow White, by the Grimm Brothers.

Once, a queen longed for a child and bore Snow White, whose beauty outshone all. Her jealous stepmother, a queen, asked her magic mirror daily who was fairest. When it was named Snow White, envy drove her to order the girl's death.

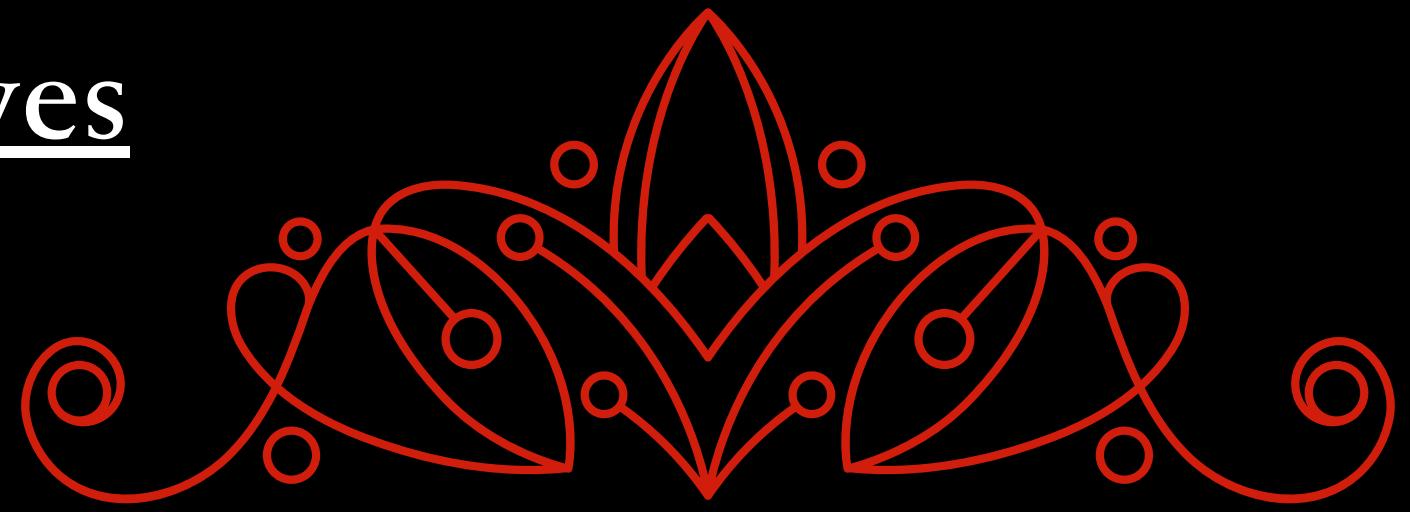
The huntsman, charmed by Snow White's beauty, spared her. She fled to a forest and found refuge with seven dwarfs. The queen, discovering Snow White lived, tried to kill her three times: with a tight corset, a poisoned comb, and a poisoned apple. The apple put Snow White into a death-like sleep.

The dwarfs placed her in a glass coffin. A prince, captivated by her beauty, pleaded for her. While moving the coffin, servants dislodged the apple. Snow White awoke, and she and the prince rejoiced.

At their wedding, the wicked queen arrived. Her punishment: dancing in red-hot iron slippers until she died. Snow White and the prince lived happily ever after.

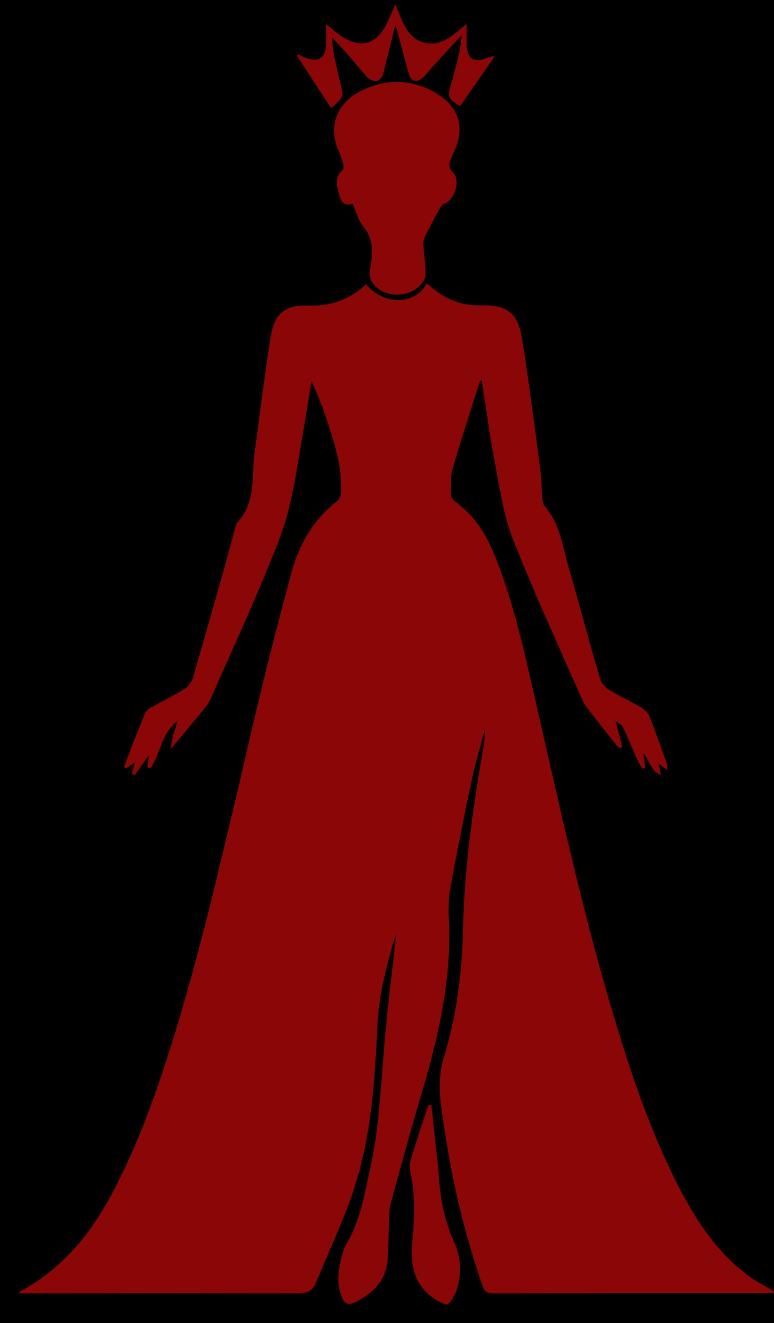
Snow White and the Seven Dwarves

Disney, as you might imagine, made many alterations to the tale.



Disney's Queen was a step-mother, not a mother. She wished for Snow White's heart (as proof of death), not for Snow White's organs (to eat them). She dies tortured as wedding entertainment, not by being struck by lightning. These changes can easily be chalked up to sanitizing the story for modern mores.

More interesting to me is what Disney does to the Prince, and Snow White herself. Grimms' Snow White herself is simply a child, barely doing anything to endear herself to the reader. She doesn't clean the dwarves' house, she just feeds herself and sleeps. Grimms' prince, then, takes in response a strange and pitiable role — so obsessed with a child's corpse, he carries it wherever he goes. In the end, an accident wakes Snow White, and not his true love. Grimm's story is fundamentally driven by fate, as Snow White flows from unimaginable cruelty to nobility on account of no one in particular. Disney chooses instead to tell a love story, where the prince is the driver of Snow White's fate.



Comparing the Two

To borrow an iconic image from the many Snow Whites, Grimms and Disney still largely tell mirror tales. In both, the Queen's motivation and mirror drive Snow White's peril. In both, her vanity leads to her destruction.

But the drivers of the tales are incredibly different. Grimms' Snow White lives off of coincidence — events in the story seem to just happen. She isn't saved by True Love's Kiss after all, but by jostling into a well placed bush. In some sense, she is mainly prophecies' plaything, and not the Prince's.

But, for practical purposes, Disney's Snow White is Snow White. It thoroughly supplanted the original story in the public conscience. Grimm's story has been left to the margins of history, referenced primarily to comment that the original Snow White was more "hardcore" than Disney's.

In this essay, I'm trying to understand what Disney owed to the Grimms', and what his Snow White owed to theirs.

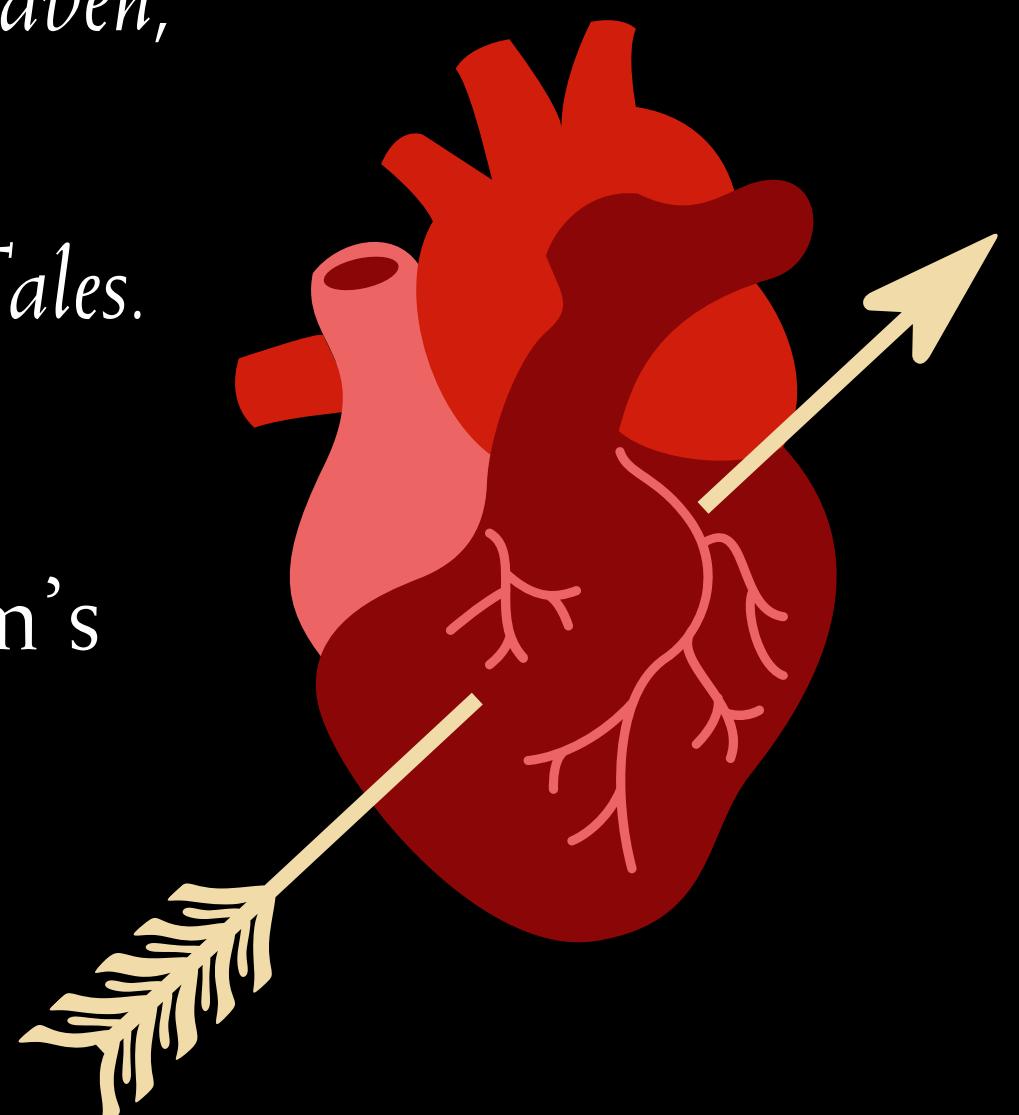
Part 2: The Spectrum of Adaptations

*And birds came too, and wept for Snow-white, first an owl, then a raven,
and last a dove.*

— Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

Let's step back and try to answer a (seemingly) easier question. What is the literal relationship between Grimm's Snow White and Disney's?

Grimm's fairy tales were early works in Standard German (which the Grimm Brothers helped codify) — Disney was, at the very least, translating across time.



Or was he? Disney had seen the 1916 live action Snow White. Already in that story, Snow White had been modified radically (in fact, more radically than in Disney's version of the story). So perhaps Disney was better described as adapting the story, rather than translating it.

Perhaps some terminology will make examining this question a bit easier. What exactly counts as an adaptation? Here, I'll try to introduce a spectrum of adaptation, ordered loosely from most to least attempted "faithful".

1. **Language Translation:** This carries the original story across language boundaries, aiming to preserve its meaning, tone, and nuances. The translator strives for an equivalent experience in the target language, with minimal changes.
2. **Medium Translation:** When a story shifts mediums—from page to screen, for example—this approach retains the core narrative, characters, and themes, adapting only as needed for the new format while staying true to the original's essence.
3. **Retelling:** A retelling re-imagines the original tale in a new context or perspective. The basic plot and characters remain recognizable, but details shift to resonate with contemporary audiences or the storyteller's vision.
4. **Fanfiction:** Fanfiction uses the original work as a springboard for new narratives, exploring different possibilities within the established world. It may diverge from the source material but often stays true to its spirit, allowing creative freedom.
5. **Loose Adaptation:** Here, the original work serves more as inspiration than a guide. Significant changes in plot, character, and theme are made, with the resulting work standing on its own, only faintly echoing the source.
6. **Conversation:** In Harold Bloom's sense, works in conversation engage with the original text by reinterpreting, critiquing, or subverting it. The focus is on dialogue rather than fidelity, offering new insights or perspectives on the original.

So perhaps Snow White is both a retelling and a medium adaptation of Grimm's original tale. Its shifts are sensible - over the course of a much longer feature length film, Disney perhaps felt the need to write characters to drive the movie's plot, rather than relying on the fairy tale atmosphere the Grimm's needed to sustain over only a few pages of text.

An early film was largely simple and crowd pleasing (animation particularly so), and grew more risk taking over time. In fact, Disney's employees already felt that he was taking a risk in making an animated feature film, since animation was largely (at the time) predicated on visual gags.

Of course the cruelty and randomness of the original story wouldn't have tested well with early audiences. Practically speaking, there was know way that Disney could have aired Grimm's Snow White. But perhaps that means that he should've written his own story, and not repurposed theirs.

Doing so, as necessary as it was to the story being told, effectively silenced Grimm's version of the tale. Could Disney have avoided this?



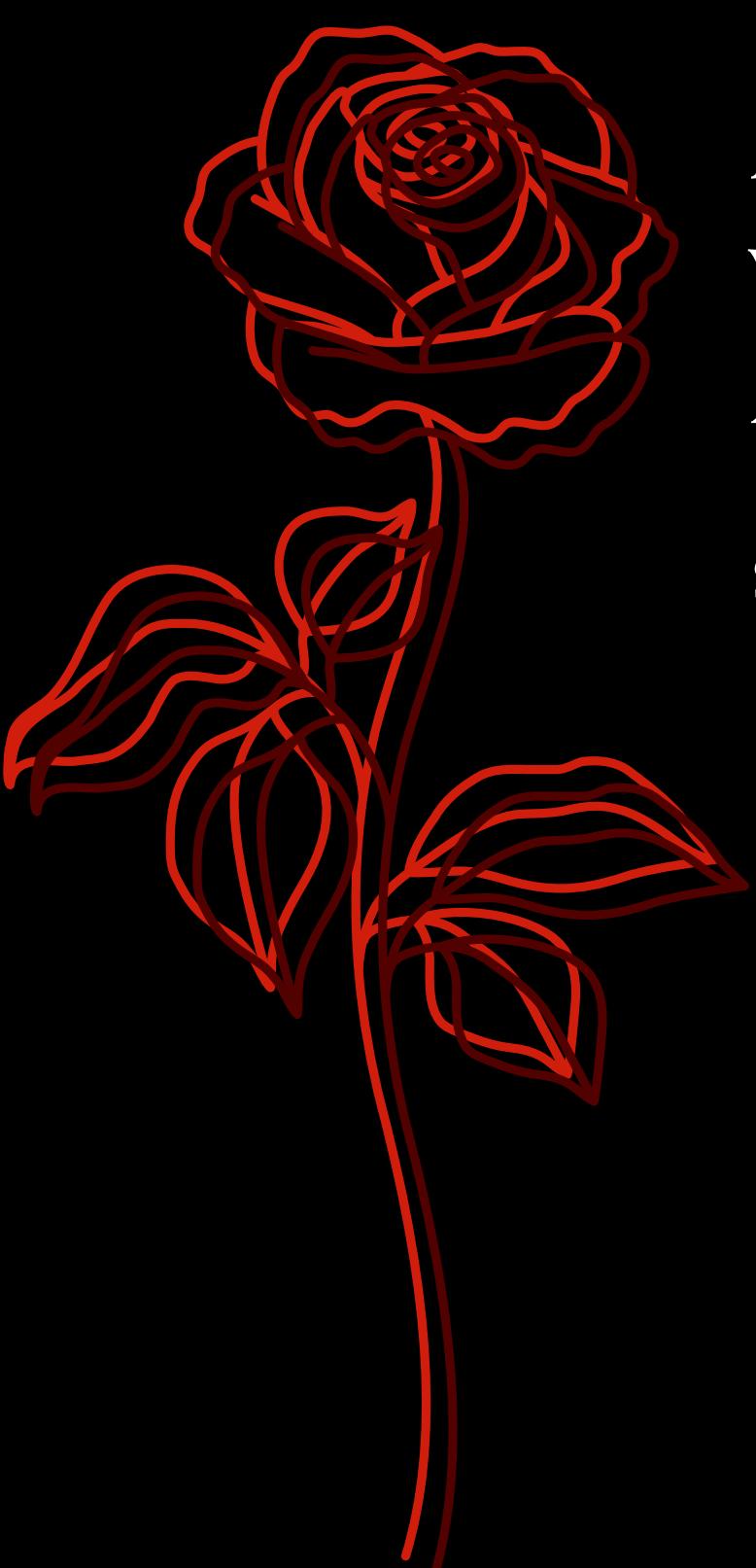
Part 3: A Rose by Any Other Name

"If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more." — Jane Austen, *Emma*, 1815.

Consider the classic Jane Austen novel, *Emma*, alongside the quintessential 90's chick-flick loose adaptation, *Clueless*. Despite their differences in setting—one in the genteel society of 19th century England, the other in the glitzy, fast-paced world of Beverly Hills—*Clueless* mirrors *Emma* in many significant ways. Both stories center on a young woman with a passion for matchmaking, who becomes entangled in a web of romantic misunderstandings, with one of her prospects secretly harboring a crush on her.

The connection between the two narratives runs deeper than mere plot parallels. While Cher Horowitz, the protagonist of *Clueless*, embodies the “dumb blonde” stereotype, Austen’s Emma Woodhouse is far from it. Yet, both characters share a certain ineptitude in reading social cues and an overconfidence that leads them astray. Both characters are fundamentally trying to orchestrate events they don’t understand, to teach the world what can’t be taught. Cher’s anxieties about dating and popularity echo Emma’s worries about marriage and social standing. Despite the differences in their outward circumstances, the core of their stories—what Mazmanian calls the thematic skeleton—remains the same.

Interestingly, a more faithful adaptation of Emma exists in the form of the 1996 film by Miramax. This version closely follows the novel’s plot and retains its historical setting. However, it misses some of the energy and charm that *Clueless* captures so well. While Emma in the Miramax film is elegant and poised, she lacks the impulsive, light-hearted spirit that Austen originally endowed her with, the spunk that drove the story. In contrast, *Clueless* manages to infuse its story with the same sense of fun and youthful folly that characterizes Austen’s original work, despite its modern trappings.



Melissa Mazmanian, in her essay “Reviving Emma in a *Clueless* World: The Current Attraction to a Classic Structure,” notes that “*Clueless* upholds the didactic impulse inlaid in *Emma*” and suggests that this deep similarity is the key to its success.

This idea of a “Thematic Skeleton” really resonated with me. *Clueless* had stripped *Emma* down to its bones and built a new layer on top of it, changing the setting to something more modern while still holding on to the core driver of *Emma*: the meddlesome teen.

But even as *Clueless* maintained some faithfulness to *Emma*, it gave the world two works to latch onto—it didn’t mutate the original work beyond recognition.

Part 4: A Story Reborn



Not long afterward she opened her eyes, lifted the lid from her coffin, sat up, and was alive again.

— Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

It's time for me to make a confession: I like Disney's *Snow White*. In fact, I might even argue that Disney's version was written exactly in the spirit that the Grimm brothers wrote their tales.

The Grimms were, in a sense, the original translators of their tales as well, aiming to strip the tales of foreign influences and make them distinctly German. Their language were modified to appear more Germanic, with fairies becoming wise women and princes transforming into king's sons.

But more importantly, it was the Grimms who changed Snow White's mother to her stepmother, worried that the original stories were too cruel. The Grimms themselves were the original "animators" of folk tales, transforming them into something more palatable for their time. They took significant liberties with the stories, making stylistic changes, adding dialogue, and removing elements that didn't fit the rustic tone they sought to cultivate. They even incorporated psychological and religious motifs that were absent from the original folk tales.

Over time, they expanded the stories, polished the language, and tailored them to a bourgeois audience, often adding Christian elements and eliminating sexual content. In doing this, the brothers are widely acknowledged as saving the original tales, and breathing new life into them.

To this conversation, Disney added his own modifications. Though I acknowledge that I'm speculating, it seems that Disney, like the Grimms before him, drew from the broader canon in making his Snow White. His ending for Snow White, with Snow White awoken by True Love's Kiss, has more in common with Sleeping Beauty, —another Grimm tale he would later adapt in full—than with the original Schneewittchen. In doing so, Disney replaced the thematic skeleton of the Grimms' tale with the lungs and liver of other stories, creating something new, yet familiar.

Through these changes, Snow White was reanimated, breathing new life into an old tale. Today, Snow White is far more popular than the other Grimm tales not adapted by Disney, a testament to Disney's cultural power.

Part 5: Her Lungs and Liver

Emma's heart still beats beneath *Clueless*' modern skin.

But Snow White is a different beast. The lungs and liver of Disney's Snow White draw breath from a story with a different heartbeat. It is the transplantation of organs, not a mere resurrection, that allows it to live on. It's a monster. It's the purest essence of translation.



Thank you so much for reading!

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