

BLANCA NIEVES A PHILIPPINE VERSION OF SNOW WHITE

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ABSTRACT

A Philippine version of the popular western tale, *Snow White* exists in the form of a *corrido* in Hiligaynon titled *Vida ni Principe Alfredo cag ni Blanca Nieves sa Guinharian sang Babiera* (1912) by an author known as “Nipon.” The direct source for “Blanca Nieves” is unknown, and while it resembles the Grimms’ version closely, many details have been added to the basic tale. This paper shows how these details allow for a reading of *Blanca Nieves* that highlights an aspect of the tale that centers, not on the mother-daughter relationship, but on the “beauty myth” as the primary motivation for the story.

Keywords: *corrido, Blanca Nieves, Snow White tale, the beauty myth*

THE STORY OF “SNOW WHITE” IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS fairy tales in the world and exists in numerous oral and literary variants that goes back to the Middle Ages in Europe. Variants of the story have been documented in the Romance and Slavic languages (Kropej 2008; Oriol 2008), and even in Africa (Schmidt 2008). The most famous literary version is, of course, that of the Brothers Grimm, in particular their final revision of the tale published in 1857. The Grimms’ version is also the most discussed and has been the basis of other famous modern versions, most notably the Disney animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). In the Philippines, a version of the tale exists in the form of a *corrido* in the Hiligaynon language with the title *Vida ni Principe Alfredo cag ni Blanca Nieves sa Guinharian sang Babiera* (Life of Prince Alfredo and of Blanca Nieves in the Kingdom of Babiera), published in 1912 by the Imprenta y Libreria Panayana, with the author identified pseudonymously as Nipon. The direct source for the Philippine “Blanca Nieves” is unknown, and while it resembles the Grimms’ version closely, many details have been added to the basic tale. In this paper, I hope to show how these details allow for a reading of *Blanca Nieves* that highlights an aspect of the tale that centers, not on the mother-daughter relationship, but on the “beauty myth” as the primary

motivation for the story.

Interpretations of the various Snow White versions usually emphasize the invariant features of the tale. “Whether we examine one version of “Snow White” or one hundred versions, we will always find the persecutor—be it a cruel stepmother, treacherous sister, or jealous mother—who resents and engages in hostilities against a young girl” (Barzilai 1990, 516). In other words, interpretations of the tale tend to emphasize these invariant features, suggesting that “the fairy tale draws on a communality of human experience that is not contingent upon the time and place of the telling” (Barzilai 1990, 526). This explains the enduring appeal of the tale across cultures. The version that has gotten the most scholarly attention is that of the Grimm brothers, known as “Sneewittchen” (Little Snow White), which went through a few revisions before being published in its final version in 1857. This is the version that has become something of a standard reference because it is so well-known through the different translations that have been made of it, as well as of the modern retellings and movies that have been based on it.

It is this version of the tale by the Grimm brothers that has attracted the scholarly criticism, focusing on different themes and issues suggested by the tale. N. J. Girardot (1977, 280) sees the tale as a girl’s transition into womanhood in which Snow White “makes the necessary move from the egocentric self-love of the child to the other-directed love that is required for maintaining society through its institutionalized form of marriage.” Bruno Bettelheim (1976, 194-215) interprets the tale as an instance of the Oedipus complex in women. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979, 36-42) the tale is a metaphor for the conflicting patriarchal images of women in literature: Snow White is the image of the angel-woman, while the stepmother represents the monster-woman, and the desire of women for male approval is represented by the magic mirror. Shuli Barzilai (1990, 523) interprets the tale as the story of what happens when mothers and daughters cannot work out the problems created by the special, intense bond between them.” Another intriguing reading is given by Michelle Ann Abate (2012) who reads the tale as a fantasy of filicide created by adults for an adult audience. These are the various readings of the “canonical” version of the tale by the Grimm brothers.

Far from being timeless or ahistorical, “fairy tales fairy tales have their specific historical frame of reference” (Schenda 1986, 82). There are generic tale types (“Snow White” is identified as tale type 709 in the ATU index), however, different versions of the tale exist, each one with its own culturally and historically specific frame of reference. In other words specific versions introduce their own emphases to the basic tale. For instance, there is the Disney version that has become iconic. Based on the version by the Grimm brothers, it contains changes that are historically and culturally specific for its period. The Disney version, according to Tracey Mollet (2013, 123), “brings new merits to the idea of the American Dream”... where the emphasis of the tale “is on inner values and manners and on collective action for the sake of a better world for all” during the Depression Era of the 1930s in the United States of America. More recent versions have their own spin on the tale, ranging

from the realist to the post-modern. (Discussions of some individual version of the “Snow White” tale are given by Vanessa Joosen (2007, 228-239), Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola (1998, 1-16), Santiago Solis (2007, 114-131) and Birgit Tautz (2008, 165-184).) The Philippine version itself contains features and additions to the basic tale that locates it within the Philippine narrative tradition and culture of the early 20th century.

Blanca Nieves belongs to the narrative tradition of the Philippine corrido or metrical romances, which flourished from at least the 18th century until the first half of the 20th century (See Damiana Eugenio, 1987). Corridos are verse narratives that relate the romantic adventures of knights, princes and princesses, or the lives of saints. The characters are generally moral exemplars and the themes are morally didactic. *Blanca Nieves* contains the typical hallmarks of the genre. The titles of corridos about non-religious characters or subject matter are usually about male heroes, whose names are featured prominently in the title (e.g., *Don Jaime del Prado*, *Don Juan Tiñoso*, *Bernardo Carpio*). The full title of *Blanca Nieves* follows this convention and is rather misleading: *Vida ni Principe Alfredo cag ni Blanca Nieves sa guinharian sang Babiera*. The type used for “Principe Alfredo” is set in bold and printed much larger than the type used for “Blanca Nieves”, making it appear that it is the character of Prince Alfredo who is the hero of the story, when in fact he appears only near the end of the story. The action is set somewhere in Europe, which is typical of corridos, although there are a few localizations: for instance, the nearest Hiligaynon replacement for “nieve” (Spanish for “snow”) is *tun-og* (dew), probably because the audience or reader would not be able to visualize snow. *Blanca Nieves* conforms to some of the basic conventions of the corrido while remaining faithful to all of the events in the “Snow White” fairy tale.

There are, however, a number of additions and modifications to the basic tale that allows the corrido version to stand on its own as a distinct version of the tale that was addressed to the local audience or readership. For instance, Blanca Nieves’ father and mother have names (Amhed and Morguiana) and are not king and queen but ordinary townspeople; there are three hunters, instead of one; and there is the intriguing addition of a magical *negrito* or *ati* dance scene at the end which seems to have been borrowed from the *Ibong Adarna*. There are other small additions that at first glance seem to be simple embellishments to the basic tale. But compared to the version by the Grimm brothers (the simplicity of which allows for many different readings), the added details in *Blanca Nieves* add up to a distinct emphasis in the interpretation of the story.

Blanca Nieves emphasizes the idea that beauty is something that can be possessed by a woman and that men once possessed beauty confers a certain privilege to the woman who possesses beauty. This is illustrated in the repeated attempts by the stepmother at forcibly taking possession of Blanca Nieves’ beauty, or otherwise murdering her in order that she may be the only one who can claim to have the most beauty, for which she is punished with death at the end of the tale. Conversely, the more beautiful the woman, the better her chances of marrying up the social ladder,

as illustrated by the marriage of Blanca Nieves to Prince Alfredo. The dwarves take on the role of guardians or custodians who protect and preserve the beauty that Blanca Nieves possesses against the stepmother. The fact that her father keeps her in a room out everyone's sight, and that when she seemingly dies and is preserved in an elaborate glass coffin by the dwarves, to whom the prince offers money so he could buy her and put her on display in his father's palace, suggests that the character of *Blanca Nieves* is treated as a highly prized property. The corrido can be read as the story of Blanca Nieves as the property of her father in the beginning, guarded temporarily by the dwarves, and then transferred to the ownership of Prince Alfredo.

The situation dramatized in *Blanca Nieves* can be seen as a form of the "beauty myth" as discussed by Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* published in 1991. Beauty, according to Wolf (1991, 12) is seen as "a currency system like the gold standard" as well as an "expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves." The "beauty myth" is described by Wolf as follows:

"The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Woman must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary. Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless" (Wolf 1991, 12).

Wolf is describing the situation of American women in the 1980s. However, if the words "biological" and "evolutionary" is substituted with "divine providence" (Blanca Nieves' beauty is understood to be a gift from God), then the above quotation accurately describes the motivation for the conflict in the corrido.

The corrido genre is an idealizing narrative form. It expresses for a popular audience or readership the ideals of the larger community. Corrido employ a rather plain and straightforward style of storytelling that may seem to modern readers as simplistic and naive, but this unembellished style probably what appealed to its audience. Corridos were designed to be read out loud, so that even those members of the audience who were illiterate had access to the stories. Moreover, corridos were intended to be both entertaining and didactic. Resil Mojares (1983, 21) suggests that during the Spanish period corridos supplanted the pre-Spanish epics "as medium for popular entertainment and agent of moral and social control." Bienvenido Lumbea (1986, 54) makes a similar suggestion, stating that as colonial society became more complex and urbanized, people looked to the corridos for norms of social behavior and social sophistication. In short, corridos were intended not merely for entertainment but also for teaching the values, norms, and ideals of the community.

As a corrido, as well as a fairy tale, *Blanca Nieves* offers a view of some of the things that Filipinos valued highly during the early 20th century, particularly as

regards women. Blanca Nieves is the ideal fairy tale heroine mostly conforming to the description of the type by Jack Zipes:

“The female hero learns to be passive, obedient, self-sacrificing, hardworking, patient, and straight laced. Her goal is wealth, jewels, and a man to protect her property rights. Her jurisdiction is the home or castle. Her happiness depends on conformity to patriarchal rule. Sexual activity is generally postponed until after marriage. Often the tales imply a postponement of gratification until the necessary skills, power and wealth are acquired” (Zipes 2006, 70).

The character of Blanca Nieves is slightly different in that she is not required to work, has no skills, and that she does not own any material wealth. Her sole possession is her beauty, treasured and coveted by the male characters in the story. Ostensibly, the story of Blanca Nieves is a warning against committing the sin of envy, as stated in the moralizing passage that closes the story. But, the dynamic between Blanca Nieves and the stepmother also shows that women, in particular beautiful women, are portrayed in the story as valuable property.

Blanca Nieves' career can be divided into these three phases. Blanca Nieves initially is the property of her father, temporarily placed in the custody of the dwarves, until she finally becomes the property of Prince Alfredo. As she transitions from daughter to wife, she also acquires power through or because of her beauty, which she uses to command the execution of her stepmother.

In the Grimm version of the tale, the King is completely absent and the Queen dies after giving birth to Snow White. In the Philippine version, Morguiana dies when Blanca Nieves is seven years old. The father has prominent role in the corrido as the authority figure in the family. After the death of Morguiana, Amhed has his daughter locked up in a room out of sight (presumably until the day that she is of marriageable age), accompanied only by a maid who is the only one allowed to go in or out of the secret room. Amhed remarries soon after to a woman who is famous for her beauty, and because he is away on business most of the time, he orders his second wife (who remains unnamed throughout the story) to look after his daughter. When the stepmother asks Amhed why he keeps his daughter hidden in a room he replies that if she sees that Blanca Nieves' beauty surpasses her own she might become envious. While it is not overtly stated, keeping his daughter hidden from sight of everyone else suggests a sense of ownership by Amhed over his daughter. His authority is later undermined when, being extremely curious to see if indeed Blanca Nieves is more beautiful than she is, the stepmother compels Amhed to open the door of the secret room by withholding sexual intercourse from him. There is a short comic scene where the Amhed ends up wrestling with his wife who is determined to resist his sexual advances as long as he denies her wish to see Blanca Nieves. Here, Amhed asserts his ownership over his wife:

*Busa ining Amhed namangcot sa asaua
ayhan ang lauas mo may iban pang tag-iyá
may sobra pa sa acon nga guina tigan-an ca*

pinalabi mo ayhan sang imo pag higugma (Nipon 1912, 7).
 (Therefore Amhed asked his wife
 perhaps someone else still owns your body
 someone besides me that you are reserving yourself for
 whom you hold dearer with your love.)

The stepmother uses the power that her beauty has over her husband uses to her advantage and gets her wish. In this phase, Blanca Nieves is unaware of the power of her own beauty and simply obeys the wishes of her father. When the stepmother expels her from the house and into the hands of three hunters who are paid by the stepmother to kill her, she likewise suffers without complaint.

The next phase of Blanca Nieves' story takes place in the house of the dwarves. Here, she is in a similar situation as in the secret room in her father's house in that the dwarves tell her to keep herself hidden from everyone, especially from the stepmother, and not to make any sound when someone other than them approaches the house. In the Grimm version, the dwarves allow Snow White to live in their house as long as she does the housework and keeps everything tidy while they are out at work. This has been interpreted to mean that Snow White is beginning to acquire the skills required for her to become a good wife. However, in the Philippine version the dwarves explicitly tell Blanca Nieves that she does not need to do anything inside their house and that they will keep everything in order for her comfort and provide everything that she needs. All that she needs to do is to stay inside and remain quiet. But since the dwarves go out to work every day, Blanca Nieves is allowed a certain amount of freedom to do as she wishes, signifying a growing maturity. If there is a skill that she learns here, it is that of showing hospitality to guests. Indeed, this is a skill that she uses later at the celebration of her wedding to Prince Alfredo when she invites both her father and stepmother to be guests of the palace. The end of this phase is represented by Blanca Nieves's temporary death where she is placed in an elaborate glass coffin where the dwarves can look at her beauty for as long as she does not rot away. Symbolically, she is ready to be inspected by potential suitors.

As the wife of the prince, Blanca Nieves has now reached the fulfilment of her upbringing. She has completed her training under the tutelage of men (in this case the dwarves), and she has acquired wealth and power by being married to the prince, who is now the one responsible for protecting her property rights, as Zipes put it. The dwarves who were once her tutors are now her servants. Finally, because of her marriage to the prince, her father Amhed has now gained a higher social status. The story strongly hints that Blanca Nieves is destined to be the wife of no less than the prince. When she revives from the effects of the poisoned apple and the prince proposes marriage to her, she tells him:

*Ya que ang handum mo sa maayong palad,
 tama ang signos co sa imo planetas:
 yari natigana ang acon nga lauas,*

halad co sa imo pati ang acon calag (Nipon 1912, 28).
 (As your wish is in good fortune,
 my signs are right for your planets:
 here is my body reserved
 I offer to you even my soul.)

Beauty is the central concern in the story. It is what confers value on Blanca Nieves and the stepmother as desirable wives. Since Blanca Nieves' beauty surpasses that of the stepmother's she is the one who is the suitable wife for the prince. Blanca Nieves is the literal embodiment of beauty, and possession of that beauty is what motivates the action in the story. Amhed's hiding Blanca Nieves in a secret room, which seems inexplicable in the beginning, makes sense when we consider that he is reserving his daughter to be married to someone who can offer the suitable status and wealth that such surpassing beauty merits. This seems to be corroborated in that part of the corrido where the prince, seeing Blanca Nieves in the coffin, offers to buy her from the dwarves so that he can have her embalmed and set up her coffin in his palace to be viewed by everyone. In this instance, Blanca Nieves literally becomes a work of art to be displayed.

In Wolf's idea of the "beauty myth" women must want to embody beauty. This is what drives the stepmother to attempt to murder Blanca Nieves. The act of eating what she thought was the liver and heart of Blanca Nieves signifies the stepmother's desire to physically incorporate her stepdaughter's beauty into herself. This also represents a sense of the unnatural competition that compels the stepmother's actions against her stepdaughter. Beauty is the leverage that allows the stepmother to compel Amhed to grant her wish to see Blanca Nieves. It is also what allows Blanca Nieves herself to move up the social ladder by marrying a prince.

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