Narrative Causalities

Kafalenos, Emma

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CHAPTER 2

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEA(S):

Two Versions, Different Causalities

Both Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm collected and published in slightly different versions the familiar tale about a princess who cannot sleep because of the pea(s) under her many mattresses. Telling more or less the same story but telling it differently, and with different effects, the two versions illustrate some of the ways that a representation—the way that events are recounted—can affect interpretations of causality. In response to either of the two tellings, readers will construct a similar fabula (the chronologically ordered sequence of events that perceivers make in response to a representation). But the two representations elicit different interpretations of which characters are responsible for the successful outcome and, more generally, of the apparent power structure in the narrative world in which the characters exist and act.

The fabulas that readers construct from the two tellings are almost identical. In both fabulas, a prince desires to marry a princess. Initial efforts to locate a princess are unsuccessful, but a princess finally arrives. The king greets her. The queen devises a test to prove that she is a princess. In the end, the prince has found his princess. As similar as the two fabulas are, however, readers’ interpretations of which characters’ agency brings about the happy ending and which characters wield the most power in the narrative world will vary according to whether they are reading the Grimms’ version or Andersen’s version. Analyzing and comparing readers’ interpretations of the function of events in the two stories illuminates the degree to which, and some of the means by which, a representation guides readers’ (listeners’, viewers’) interpretations of causality.
Let us look first at Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea” (translated by Erik Christian Haugaard):

Once upon a time there was a prince who wanted to marry a princess, but she would have to be a real one. He traveled around the whole world looking for her; but every time he met a princess there was always something amiss. There were plenty of princesses but not one of them was quite to his taste. Something was always the matter: they just weren’t real princesses. So he returned home very sad and sorry, for he had set his heart on marrying a real princess.

The story continues:

One evening a storm broke over the kingdom. The lightning flashed, the thunder roared, and the rain came down in bucketfuls. In the midst of this horrible storm, someone knocked on the city gate; and the king himself went down to open it.

On the other side of the gate stood a princess. But goodness, how wet she was! Water ran down her hair and her clothes in streams. It flowed in through the heels of her shoes and out through the toes. But she said that she was a real princess.

“We’ll find that out quickly enough,” thought the old queen, but she didn’t say a word out loud. She hurried to the guest room and took all the bedclothes off the bed; then on the bare bedstead she put a pea. On top of the pea she put twenty mattresses; and on top of the mattresses, twenty eiderdown quilts. That was the bed on which the princess had to sleep.

In the morning, when someone asked her how she had slept, she replied, “Oh, just wretchedly! I didn’t close my eyes once, the whole night through. God knows what was in that bed; but it was something hard, and I am black and blue all over.”

Now they knew that she was a real princess, since she had felt the pea that was lying on the bedstead through twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdown quilts. Only a real princess could be so sensitive!

The prince married her. The pea was exhibited in the royal museum; and you can go there and see it, if it hasn’t been stolen.

Now that was a real story! (20–21)
Andersen’s story begins by reporting the prince’s desire for a princess. If we interpret the prince’s desire as a function a, we are saying that we assume that his desire for a princess will motivate intentional action designed to satisfy his desire. The difference between the two types of motivating A functions is that an upper-case function A represents an event that changes the narrative world, while a lower-case function a represents a reevaluation—a change in perception—of an otherwise unchanged narrative world. If the prince had lost his wife, the narrative world would have changed, and we would interpret the event as function A. But in “The Princess and the Pea,” the prince’s world has not changed. He has not lost a wife; he has reached a stage in his life in which he realizes that he would like to have a wife. So we interpret his desire to marry as creating a lower-case function-a situation.

Andersen’s prince is a C-actant. Wanting a princess, he decides to find one, and begins his search. In the analysis below, I bracket function C because we infer that he has decided to act from the actions we are told that he takes:

\[ \text{a} \quad \text{prince wants to marry a real princess} \]

\[ [\text{C}] \quad \text{prince decides to find himself a real princess} \]

\[ C' \quad \text{prince travels, looking for a real princess} \]

Once the prince leaves to look for a princess, most readers assume that he will find one (function H), marry her (function I), and thereby achieve a new equilibrium (Eq)—an equilibrium that is similar but not identical to the one that was disrupted when he realized that he wanted to marry a princess. But Andersen’s prince cannot locate a princess.

In the comparison I drew in chapter 1 between the picaresque novel and the *Bildungsroman*, I distinguished between C-actants who, when they make the decision to act (function C), already have the power (skills, strength, knowledge, money, maturity, etc.) to accomplish their endeavor, and C-actants who undertake action (function C) without yet being sufficiently competent to accomplish it. In the former case much of the representation is generally devoted to the events of function H: direct action to alter the function-A situation. In the latter, some—and sometimes most—of the representation is devoted to events designed to empower the C-actant: the acquisition in a fairy tale of a magical talisman, the events of a *Bildungsroman* that lead to increased maturity.

Events that are designed to empower the C-actant to accomplish
function H are interpreted by the functions of the donor section (functions D, E, and F). Function F marks the C-actant’s acquisition of the power to accomplish function H. Function $F_{neg}$ marks the C-actant’s inability to acquire power needed to accomplish function H. Andersen’s prince returns home, having discovered that he lacks the ability ($F_{neg}$) to find a real princess. The process of resolution toward a new equilibrium comes to a stop before the motivating function-a situation has been resolved. Moreover, at the end of the first paragraph, Andersen’s story reiterates (even more emphatically than it is initially stated) that the prince is “very sad and sorry, for he had set his heart on marrying a real princess”—reminding readers that the initiating function-a situation remains unresolved.

As Andersen’s story continues, three characters’ actions empower the prince to accomplish his primary endeavor (function H): to find a real princess. A princess arrives, the king opens the gate to admit her, and the queen provides the pea and the pea test to discern a real princess. As a result, the process of resolution can continue and a new equilibrium can be established.

As a result of the actions of his prospective bride and both parents, the prince succeeds in satisfying his desire to marry a real princess. The pea, as I interpret it, is a talisman that empowers the possessor to discern a real princess. Handed down from mother to son, and enshrined in the royal museum where the prince will
always have access to it, the pea enables the prince in the future, should the need arise, to discern a real princess without further assistance from the queen. By the end of the story, according to this interpretation, the prince has acquired what we might describe as a mature level of discernment (function F), as well as satisfying his desire for a real princess (functions H and I).

Andersen’s prince is ultimately successful, but his satisfaction is achieved only with the help of every other character mentioned in the story. Nor are the contributions of the other three characters presented as equal. When Andersen’s prince traveled to look for a bride, we remember, he found many princesses, but he could not find a real princess. Thus the arrival of a princess and the king’s admitting her into the city (functions F1 and F2) merely replicate the portion of the undertaking that the prince has been able to accomplish. To complete the undertaking, the princess must also be deemed real. This is what the queen accomplishes. The way Andersen’s story is told guides readers to focus their attention on the queen’s actions, more than the princess’s or the king’s.

The perspective from which Andersen’s story is told remains situated in the vicinity of the prince—leaving when he does, and after he returns staying firmly within the gates—thereby suppressing all information about how and why the princess arrived at the gate, and why in this instance the king opens the gate himself. But Andersen’s story reports motivations twice: the prince’s in the first sentence (his desire to marry a princess), and the queen’s in the fourth paragraph. As we have seen, the knowledge that the prince wants to marry a princess guides readers to interpret his journey to look for a princess as a C-actant’s motivated action. The effect of information about the queen’s thoughts, for many readers, is similar. Immediately after we learn that the very wet princess claims to be a real princess, we read: “We’ll find that out quickly enough,” thought the old queen.” Knowing the queen’s thoughts guides many readers to interpret her subsequent behavior as motivated action to test the validity of the princess’s claim.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a}_2 & \quad \text{princess’s claim may be invalid} \\
\text{C} & \quad \text{queen decides to discern whether princess is real} \\
\text{C'} & \quad \text{queen’s first act (she keeps quiet, careful not to reveal her plan)} \\
\text{G} & \quad \text{queen enters bedroom—where H is to occur} \\
\text{H} & \quad \text{queen uses pea to test princess} \\
\text{I} & \quad \text{queen successfully tests princess (princess is real)}
\end{align*}
\]
The queen’s sequence reaches a successful conclusion, but the story continues. Now that the princess has been determined to be a real princess, the prince takes her as his wife, and puts the pea in a museum, completing the initiating $a_1$ sequence. As I interpret the causal relations of the events as Andersen reports them, the queen’s $a_2$ sequence provides the final empowerment the prince needs to complete his $a_1$ sequence; the queen’s sequence in its entirety is embedded as function $F$ in the prince’s sequence.

\[
\begin{align*}
a_1 & \quad \text{prince desires a princess} \\
C & \quad \text{prince decides to find one (prince is C-actant)} \\
C' & \quad \text{prince travels, looking for princesses} \\
F_{\text{neg}} & \quad \text{prince cannot discern a real princess} \\
F_1 & \quad \text{princess arrives} \\
F_2 & \quad \text{king admits princess} \\
F_3 & \quad \text{queen’s $a_2$ sequence proves princess is real:}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
a_2 & \quad \text{princess’s claim may be invalid} \\
C & \quad \text{queen decides to discern whether princess is real} \\
C' & \quad \text{queen’s first act (she keeps quiet, careful not to reveal her plan)} \\
G & \quad \text{queen enters bedroom—where $H$ is to occur} \\
H & \quad \text{queen uses pea to test princess} \\
I & \quad \text{queen successfully tests princess (princess is real)} \\
H & \quad \text{prince marries princess and enshrines pea in museum} \\
I & \quad \text{prince has a princess (and the means to find another)} \\
Eq & \quad \text{equilibrium is restored}
\end{align*}
\]

As we have seen, readers’ interpretations of causal relations are guided by the specific words of a text (the reiteration at the end of the first paragraph, for instance, of the prince’s continuing desire), and the perspective through which readers are permitted to perceive the events (Andersen’s narrator knows and reveals the motivations of the prince and the queen, but either does not know or suppresses the other characters’ thoughts). Other textual strategies that accentuate or de-emphasize specific events and the effects of characters’ actions include the sequence in which events are reported in a given representation, and the respective duration of events in the telling. In Andersen’s story the importance of the prince’s role is emphasized by being reported at the very beginning. But after the first paragraph, the prince’s actions are mentioned in only one further sentence near
the end of the story: “The prince married her.” The queen’s test and its results, on the other hand, fill three full paragraphs.

As I interpret the causal relations in Andersen’s story, the prince is a C-actant who does do something toward accomplishing his goal (he searches, and he gives credence to the results of his mother’s test). But his role as a C-actant is de-emphasized by the assistance he receives from his parents and his future bride, and particularly by the emphasis that Andersen’s story gives to the queen’s role by revealing her motivation and by devoting three paragraphs of this very short story to describing her actions and their successful results. If Andersen’s prince is a C-actant, his position as such is not unique; he is one of two. In addition, the centrality of his role is less the result of anything he himself does than of the suppression in the representation of information about the king’s and the princess’s motivations, and of the subordination of the queen’s motivated action to enabling the prince to complete his undertaking.

Andersen’s prince is no traditional hero. He leaves home, but returns defeated and in despair. Only at home, under the aegis of his parents—where his father can open doors, and his mother can use her magic talisman to show him that the locally available woman is a real princess—can he mature and begin to establish his own household. From what we see of his kingdom, it is small and family centered: a domestic world in which a woman can play a significant, if ultimately subsidiary, role. But the narrative world in which this family experiences the younger generation’s transition to adulthood is still nominally a patriarchy. With his bride and his pea in his possession, Andersen’s prince is in on his way to becoming a king.

With only a couple of exceptions, the version that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published as “The Pea Test” (translated by Jack Zipes) reveals the same fabula as Andersen’s version, but the Grimms’ story is likely to elicit from readers a much different interpretation of which characters’ agency brings about the successful conclusion and of how the hierarchy of power in the narrative world is structured.

Once upon a time there was a king whose only son was very eager to get married, and he asked his father for a wife.

“Your wish shall be fulfilled, my son,” said the king, “but
it’s only fitting that you marry no one less than a princess, and there are none to be had in the vicinity. Therefore, I shall issue a proclamation and perhaps a princess will come from afar.”

Soon a written proclamation was circulated, and it did not take long before numerous princesses arrived at the court. Almost every day a new one appeared, but when the princesses were asked about their birth and lineage, it always turned out that they were not princesses at all, and they were sent away without having achieved their purpose.

“If everything continues like this,” the son said, “I’ll never get a wife in the end.”

“Calm yourself, my son,” said the queen. “Before you know it, she’ll be here. Happiness is often standing just outside the door. One only needs to open it.”

And it was really just as the queen had predicted.

Soon after, on a stormy evening when the wind and rain were beating on the windows, there was a loud knocking on the gate of the royal palace. The servants opened the gate, and a beautiful maiden entered. She demanded to be led directly before the king, who was surprised by such a late visit and asked her where she had come from, who she was, and what she desired.

“I’ve come from a distant country,” she answered, “and I’m the daughter of a mighty king. When your proclamation with the portrait of your son arrived in my father’s kingdom, I felt a strong love for your son and immediately set out on my way with the intention of becoming his bride.”

“I’m somewhat skeptical about what you’ve told me,” said the king. “Besides, you don’t look like a princess. Since when does a princess travel alone without an escort and in such poor clothes?”

“An escort would have only delayed me,” she replied. “The color of my clothes faded in the sun, and the rain washed it out completely. If you don’t believe I’m a princess, just send a messenger to my father.”

“That’s too far and too complicated,” said the king. “A delegation cannot ride as fast as you. The people must have the necessary time for such a journey. Years would pass before they returned. If you can’t prove in some other way that you’re a princess, then fortune will not shine upon you, and you’d do well to head for home, the sooner the better.”
“Let her stay,” the queen said. “I’ll put her to a test and know soon enough whether she’s a princess.”

The queen herself climbed up into the tower and had a bed made up for the maiden in a splendid room. When the mattress was carried into the room, she placed three peas on it, one on top, one in the middle, and one below. Then six other soft mattresses were stacked on top along with linen sheets and a cover made of eiderdown. When everything was ready, she led the maiden upstairs into the bedroom.

“After such a long trip, you must be tired, my child,” she said. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll continue talking.”

At the break of day the queen climbed up to the room in the tower. She thought the maiden would still be in a deep sleep, but the maiden was awake.

“How did you sleep, my little daughter?” she asked.

“Miserably,” replied the princess. “I couldn’t sleep a wink the whole night.”

“Why, my child? Wasn’t the bed good enough?”

“In all my days I’ve never lain in such a bed. It was hard from my head to my feet. It seemed as if I were lying on nothing but peas.”

“Now I know for sure,” said the queen, “that you’re a genuine princess. I shall send some royal garments up to you with pearls and jewels. Dress yourself as a bride, for we shall celebrate your wedding this very day.” (2: 377–78)

Like Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea,” the Grimms’ “The Pea Test” begins by revealing the prince’s desire for a princess (function a). But in the Grimms’ version, the prince does not leave home to look for one. This is the main difference in the fabulas of the two versions—that Andersen’s prince travels to find a princess (even though his traveling does not contribute to finding one), whereas the Grimms’ prince stays home. Differences between the two representations also, however, contribute right from the beginning to establishing the character of the prince differently. In Andersen’s story the prince is described as determined to marry only a real princess, whereas in the Grimms’ story the prince asks for a wife and it is the king who introduces the requirement that the prince’s bride must be a princess. In addition, in Andersen’s version the prince is called the “prince.” In the Grimms’ version, the young man in question is designated throughout in relation to one or the other of his parents; he is introduced as the “only son” of a king, called “my son” by the queen, and described as “your
son” by the princess when she is speaking to the king. In the Grimms’ story, the word “prince” does not occur.

Denoting the prince only as someone’s son, as the Grimms’ version does, can be interpreted by readers as indicating, on the part of the prince, the same lack of independence that is suggested by his asking for a wife and then doing nothing further to acquire one. Andersen’s prince, after all, however unprepared he is at the time and however unsuccessful his efforts are, leaves home to look for a princess. Interpreting his actions as functions, we saw Andersen’s prince as a C-actant who undertook (at least in the beginning) to find himself a wife. The Grimms’ prince is not a C-actant.

The Grimms’ story illustrates a narrative path that includes function B. In many narratives, a character who is affected by, or knows about, a function-A (or function-a) event decides to try to ameliorate the situation and in doing so becomes a C-actant. Andersen’s story is an example. In other narratives, a character who is affected by a function-A (or function-a) event, or knows about a function-A (or function-a) event, requests another character to be the C-actant and to attempt to ameliorate the situation. That request that someone else be a C-actant expresses function B. The Grimms’ prince, instead of riding off to find a bride, asks his father to provide one. The function of the proclamation the king issues—its effect in forwarding the action—is to amplify the prince’s request, so that it can be heard at a greater distance. We interpret the proclamation as a second function B: a request that a princess come from afar to be the wife of the prince.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{a} & &\text{prince desires a wife} \\
&B_1 & &\text{prince asks king for a wife} \\
&B_2 & &\text{king issues proclamation requesting a princess}
\end{align*}
\]

There is as yet no C-actant. Narrative logic leads us to assume that a C-actant will emerge from among the distant peoples whom the king’s proclamation reaches.

As a result, when potential princesses begin to arrive, we assume that they do so in response to the king’s function-B proclamation. Logically, this means that each of the false princesses, having heard the king’s proclamation, has decided (function C) that she wants to marry the prince, and has set out to travel to the court (function C’). But the Grimms’ story guides us in recognizing that these princesses are not real princesses by suppressing
every indication of their function-C and function-C' intentional acts. In the analysis below, I bracket functions C and C' to indicate that the events they represent are not mentioned in the story. I interpret the arrival of the princesses at the court as function G, the test by which they attempt to prove their princesshood as function H, and their failure as function Ineg. Because numerous princesses arrive and fail, I put the whole sequence in parentheses and indicate by the superscript “n” an indeterminate number of recurrences.

\[
\begin{align*}
a & \quad \text{prince desires a wife} \\
B_1 & \quad \text{prince asks king for a wife} \\
B_2 & \quad \text{king issues proclamation requesting a princess} \\
([C, C'] G H \text{Ineg})^n & \quad \text{numerous princesses arrive and fail}
\end{align*}
\]

The Grimms’ representation shifts at this point to scenic treatment (unlike Andersen’s version in which the only words spoken aloud are those the princess speaks when she describes the terrible effects of the pea), and includes two scenes that Andersen’s version does not include: the prince’s petulant outburst to his mother and the king’s interview with the princess. Neither scene moves the situation toward resolution—the prince’s because he merely complains; the king’s because his test for princesses proves invalid—but both scenes provide the kind of information that scenic treatment generally provides. By being permitted to hear characters’ conversations among themselves, readers gain information about the characters’ personalities and values and how they interact with each other.

The prince’s outburst, in the fourth paragraph, reminds us that the initial function-a situation is still in effect: the prince continues to want a wife. But the scene also permits the introduction of the queen, giving us, as our first view of her, her interaction with her son, whom she placates by assuring him that his bride will soon arrive. The narrator’s confirmation that it was “just as [she] predicted” inspires readers’ belief in the queen’s wisdom and guides readers to expect immediate progress toward resolving the function-a situation. Given this information, when a beautiful maiden enters (function G), we have no doubt that she is the C-actant who will be successful. And in fact, during her interview with the king, the princess tells her story in words that reveal her C-actant role: after the proclamation and the accompanying portrait of the prince arrived (function B), she explains, “I felt a strong love for
your son [function C, the decision] and immediately set out on my way [function C'] with the intention of becoming his bride.”

Like the prince’s outburst, the scene in which the king interviews the princess to test her (function H₁) does not move the situation toward resolution, but it offers readers an opportunity to hear about the difficulties of the princess’s long journey and her motivation for undertaking it, and also to learn something about the king. The princess fails the king’s test (function Iᵣₑₙ), not as a result of any lack on her part but rather because of the king’s limited powers of discernment. The princess fails the king’s test because the king is too distracted by her faded clothes to understand her amazing accomplishment or even to pay attention to her explanation for the way she is dressed. “The color of my clothes,” she says, “faded in the sun, and the rain washed it out completely.” The story reaches a successful completion because the queen’s test, which ensues, permits the princess to prove her princesshood by her inability to sleep on peas (function H₂). At this point the queen pronounces her a genuine princess (function I), and promises her clothes for the wedding.
But while the conclusion of the story leaves no doubt that the wedding will take place, the Grimms’ version stops before the wedding occurs. Instead of a wedding, the final scene is a private meeting between the princess and the queen, in which the queen promises the princess royal garments and jewels—those signs of princesshood that are the only ones that the king, we remember, is able to read. By stopping at this point, the representation that the Grimms write emphasizes the women’s roles. Whereas Andersen’s version ends with a wedding and an enshrined pea, and a prince who has needed help but by the end of the story has made great strides toward achieving maturity, the Grimms’ version concludes with what I read as the queen’s move to ensure the king’s approval of the princess she has selected, and perhaps a symbolic offer by the queen to share with the princess her power to manipulate the king and the prince, along with the clothes and jewels that are the visible signs of her power.

Further supporting the importance of the women’s roles in the Grimms’ version is the early disappearance from the text of the prince, who does not reappear after the fifth paragraph, and of the king, whom we do not see again after the eleventh of the twenty paragraphs. In addition, the scenic treatment in the Grimms’ version lets readers observe both the prince’s petulance and the king’s inability to discern a princess, and also the positive attributes the women display. The queen’s wisdom, in contrast to the king’s lack of discernment, permits her to construct a test for princesses that is accepted as valid. The princess displays the feminine softness that is traditionally a requisite of princesses, and also the traditionally masculine traits of decisiveness, courage, and endurance, which she demonstrates in her journey to the court.

The biggest difference between Andersen’s version and the Grimms’ version is that in the latter the princess’s motivation is revealed, and, as a result, readers interpret her behavior as that of a C-actant. The difference between the two versions is not in the princess’s actions, I emphasize, but in how the two stories are told and how, as a result of the different reporting strategies, readers interpret the functions of events. In both versions, when the
princess arrives she is unrecognized, and wet. From this information readers of both versions can construct a fabula in which a princess has traveled from some other place and through a storm. In Andersen’s version, the narrator summarizes the princess’s statements, reporting only that she claimed to be a real princess. Readers are given no information about why she was outside the gates of this particular city during this particular storm. In the Grimms’ version, the scenic treatment of the new arrival’s interview with the king permits readers to hear how the princess explains her presence to the king. Only in the Grimms’ version are readers, first, guided to expect the arrival of a princess by the king’s function-B proclamation that invites one to come from afar, and, second, allowed to hear the princess tell that, motivated by the prince’s portrait that accompanied the proclamation, she had fallen in love with the prince and traveled to the palace to be his bride. The two versions illustrate the effect that information about motivation can have on a reader’s (or a perceiver’s) interpretation of the function of an event. Readers of Andersen’s story do not know why the princess arrived at so fortuitous a moment, and may choose to explain it as a happy accident, as supernaturally inspired, or as motivated by the princess’s or someone else’s knowledge that the prince lacks a wife. The information about motivation that the Grimms’ readers are given guides readers to contemplate a highly motivated, courageous princess.

As differently as Andersen’s version and the Grimms’ version shape readers’ interpretations of the princess’s role, let us imagine yet another version: a third version that reveals exactly the same fabula as the Grimms’ version, but that emphasizes the princess’s C-actant role by providing information about her experiences as she traveled. To distinguish the C-actant in instances in which two characters leave home, Vladimir Propp advises, “the route followed by the story and on which the action is developed is actually the route of the seeker [the C-actant, in my terminology]” (“Morphology of the Folktale, 39). In the third version I am imagining, the events will be reported in the sequence in which the princess experiences them. Seeing the prince’s portrait she is entranced and immediately sets out. Day by day and difficulty after difficulty, the third version will follow the route of the princess during her journey, lingering over her repeated exposure
to the sun and the rain—information that the Grimms’ version includes but only as a summary, to explain the state of the princess’s faded clothes.

An account that, by leaving the court and following the princess’s route, emphasized the difficulties of her journey would draw readers’ attention to the events that express functions C and C’, permitting readers to perceive the softness the princess demonstrates in the pea incident as even more amazing in contrast to the discomfort we would be aware that she had recently borne. Such an account would strengthen readers’ recognition of the princess’s function-C intent, and the effectiveness of her intentional acts in satisfying the prince’s and the king’s need for a princess to come from afar. I introduce this imagined third version to show that, while the Grimms’ version provides information about the princess’s motivation and her journey, and Andersen’s does not, the Grimms’ version by no means emphasizes the princess’s C-actant role as much as it could. In the Grimms’ version the narrator’s perspective is spatially restricted to the cloistered locus of the court. The one glimpse we are permitted of the outside world comes from the princess herself, when she tells the king her story in her own words. The account that we are allowed to hear her tell, moreover, is both modestly undetailed (suppressing the painful experiences of the journey that in a sentimental account would draw an emotional response) and retrospective (removing suspense and the emotions readers would feel while waiting to learn whether she would arrive safely).

Instead of emphasizing the princess’s heroism and enhancing readers’ concern for her in these ways, the Grimms’ version moves on immediately from her interview with the king to the scene in which the queen prepares and carries out her test for princesses. In contrast to the two paragraphs in which the princess talks to the king about her journey, the Grimms’ version devotes the last nine of its twenty paragraphs to describing sequentially the stages of the test by which the queen determines that the princess is real. The princess’s only reported activity in this section is her statement that she was unable to sleep, whereas the queen is the active figure who watches over the preparations, the test, and its results. In addition, the Grimms’ version ends before the princess is given the promised finery. If we envision the concluding scene as if it were staged, the queen in her appropriate garb is the dominant figure; the princess has only her faded clothes.

The Grimms’ version distracts readers’ attention from the
princess’s C-actant role and enhances the queen’s role in two very effective ways. The first, as we have seen, is the long duration that is accorded to the queen’s test in the representation and the placement of the test as the final scene. The second is by suggesting—by enabling speculation—that the queen is a C-actant too. The queen’s speech to the prince in the fifth paragraph, in which she tells him that a princess will soon arrive, suggests a motivation that we have not considered. If we conceive her words as revealing an intent (function C) to ensure that the prince will have a bride, then we can interpret her test for princesses as function H: a ritual designed to anoint the next young woman who arrives, whoever she is, as princess and bride. According to this reading this queen—like Andersen’s queen—can be perceived as a C-actant (although this queen would be motivated by her son’s desire for a bride, while Andersen’s queen is motivated by her desire to prove whether the princess’s claim to be a real princess is true). For readers who interpret the Grimms’ queen as a C-actant, then resolution is effected by the motivated action of two C-actants: the queen and the princess. But the Grimms’ version is admittedly ambiguous in regard to the queen’s intent. While her words to her son offer reassurance that a princess will soon arrive, she does not say that she intends to ensure that the next princess who arrives will be deemed a real princess. The narrative allows thoughtful readers to interpret the queen’s actions in two ways.

But in either case—given either interpretation—the Grimms’ version de-emphasizes the princess’s role by suppressing the events of her journey and emphasizes the queen’s role by providing the details of the pea test, thus underscoring the complementary nature of the two women’s contributions to bringing about the successful outcome. In fact, the Grimms’ version shifts readers’ attention from a princess with extraordinary abilities to the value of collective action within a household by women who support each other’s goals. In Andersen’s version, the prince needs the assistance that each of the other three characters provides, but Andersen’s story represents a relatively traditional view of the location of power in the world. With the assistance he receives, Andersen’s prince seems prepared to become a responsible leader. In the Grimms’ more subversive telling of almost the same fabula, the women’s roles are larger than the men’s. The king and his son are no match for these two women. The view of the location of power that the Grimms’ version represents, as I read it, is that, at least within the household, there is no limit to what competent
and courageous women working together can bring about. Analyzing the interpretations of the function of events that readers reach in response to stories that report almost the same fabula provides a way to demonstrate some of the ways and the degree to which a representation can affect interpretations of causality.