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Prunella: An Experimental Musical

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PRUNELLA: An Experimental Musical – Process and Design

Leif Haley

About the Fairy Tale

“Prunella” is an Italian version of the Rapunzel story, written in 1879 under the name “Prezzemolina”, included in an anthology of Italian stories. Andrew Lang created the first English version, “Prunella”, in his *Grey Fairy Book* (1900).

The original story is far more ancient. The Rapunzel-type story (ATU-310, or “Maiden-in-the-Tower”) exists in over a dozen forms, across millennia and several continents:

Story:	Country of Origin:	Year of Origin:
Danaë (Perseus Myth)	Greece	7-8th century BCE?
Zal and Rudabeh	Persia	1010
Petrosinella	Italy	1634
Persinette	France	1697
Puddocky	Germany	1812
Rapunzel	Germany	1812/1857
The Enchanted Princesses, and Sibling Disloyalty	Spain	1846?
Violet	Germany/England	1857
Fair Angiola	Italy	1870
Prunella	Italy	1879
Blond Beauty	France	1891
Parsilette	France	1891
Juan and Clotilda	Philippines	1921

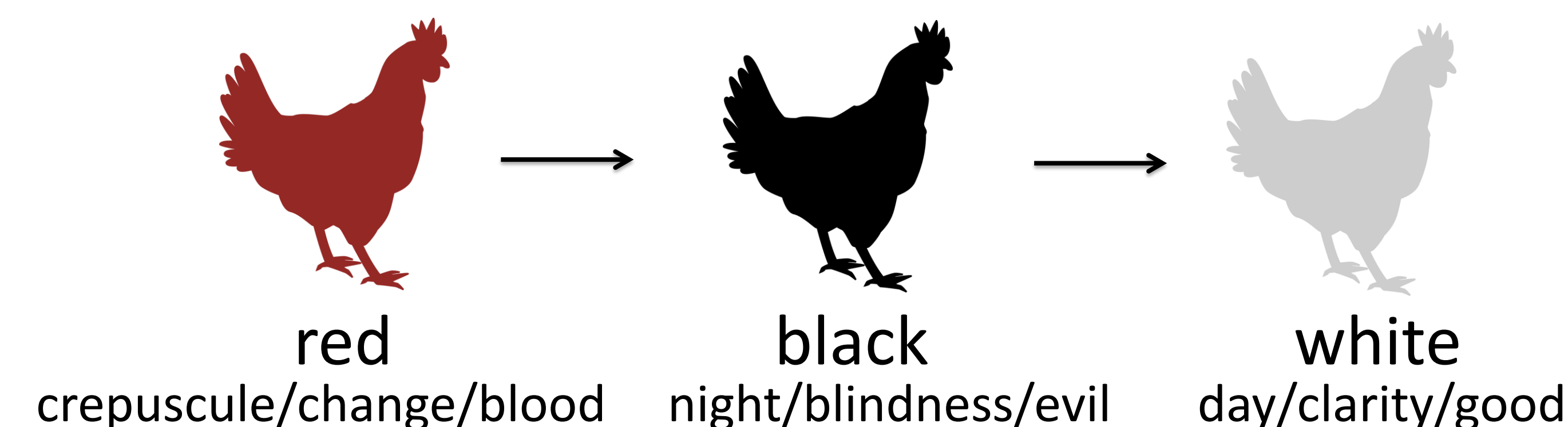
Analysis: Familiar but Unique

“Prunella” is fairly unique among ATU-310 stories:

- Consequential moral luck, not circumstantial moral luck
- Garden is not within walls
- Not one witch, but two
- Imprisonment does not involve a tower
- Witch’s son, instead of a heroic prince
- 3+1 impossible trials (5 in “Prezzemolina”)
- Iconic long hair...sort of (only in a side story—not Prunella’s)
- No magic healing

Philosophical and psychological content:

- Desire and punishment
- Voice and song; color and (metaphorical) blindness
- Knowledge vs. ignorance; ability/agency vs. ineptness
- Beauty as juxtaposition of good against evil
- Guilt, conscience, freedom, the oedipal mother, & so much more



Music and Composition

My main strategy for composition was to work back and forth between the piano, writing music, and the notebook, writing lyrics.

Completion of a Piano/Vocal score prior to orchestration proved logistically and conceptually helpful.

Example Score:

Composition is largely thematic, also textural: main Prunella theme

Developmental Decisions

Character role distribution:

- Prunella & Young Prunella
- Bensiabel
- Witch & Witch’s Sibling
- Narrator & Well-Servant & Hearth-Servant & Dog & Door

Ranges:

- Soprano
- Soprano
- Baritone

Instrumentation:

- Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello
- Piano
- Percussion:
 - bass drum & rute, bongos, crotales, tam-tam, small B-natural gong, suspended cymbal, triangle, vibraphone, woodblock
- Prerecorded electronics

Including dramaturgical integration of instrumentalists

Challenges:

- Actions vs. motivations of characters
 - A common theme in translation (e.g., Greek myth)
 - The Witch: terrifying/evil vs. sympathetic/good
- Dramatization of actions and trials, musical and vocal rendition of thoughts and emotions
 - E.g., pacing, register, text-painting, tone, practicality
- Addressing performative lacunae in original text
 - Spatial and temporal distribution of characters
 - Entrances and exits
- Adaptation of the original sources
 - Adding roundness to all characters; strengthening complexities already present or suggested
 - Reconciling the end of the story
 - Color theory of the three roosters (see left panel)
- Formatting scores and libretto; logistics

Sources

The Grey Fairy Book, edited by Andrew Lang, originally published 1900.

Project Gutenberg Online Version →

“Prezzemolina”, *Canti e Racconti del Popolo Italiano*, vol. 7
Domenico Comparetti and Alessandro d’Ancona, 1879.

← full list of works consulted, with synopsis & additional information



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