



The Indispensable World of Fairy Tales

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Fairy tales have a remarkable power to stir up argument. Critics from the past often insisted that they encouraged superstition or else damagingly misled children by describing magical events as if these could actually happen - an accusation still made in some Montessori schools. This century Marxist critics have seen fairy tales as right-wing propaganda, forever preaching the message that heroes and heroines should try to join the ranks of the rich and powerful rather than attempt to overthrow them. More recently feminists have charged fairy tales with harbouring strong sexist views, holding up marriage as the only legitimate aim for all young females.

All these counter-arguments have something to be said for them. At a time when solitary old ladies were still open to suspicion of witchcraft in country areas, some fairy stories could be seen as enemies of reason, rather as parents today often dislike children's books or games that draw heavily upon ideas of the occult. Again, fairy story techniques can at times be used to fob children off, especially when they ask difficult questions. Babies brought by storks or hidden under gooseberry bushes; crocks of gold found underneath rainbows; children whose noble origins automatically distinguish them from their rougher, adoptive peasant parents - all such concepts are highly attractive to children and also totally misleading. If such ideas are presented without qualification, there can certainly be an element of deliberate adult bamboozlement designed to keep the young from knowledge that arguably they have as much right to as anyone else.

Present-day selections of fairy tales are indeed sometimes sexist, in that male characters tend to see most of the action while female characters often shine only in those household duties traditionally expected of a good wife. Society itself is also often depicted as static and hierarchical by virtue of 'how wisely God apportions riches and poverty', to quote one of the Grimm brothers' interpolations during their story 'Godfather Death'. If peasant Jack or Jill makes it to the top through a fortunate marriage, it doesn't matter if their rich spouse is fairly unpleasant, as is sometimes the case. In the world of fairy tales, personal survival is all, with any additional palaces, feasts or casket of jewels an agreeable bonus to the ultimate aim of living in comfort off the work of others for the rest of your life.

The usual defence of fairy tales refers to how much pleasure they give to children, whatever their particular faults. As for the possibility of any long-lasting damage arising from these faults, it is generally held now that the major influences shaping our lives have to be more complex and various than mere exposure to fairy tales or indeed to any other literature at an impressionable age. Certainly Charles Dickens and Charles Lamb regretted the use that various fantastical tales were put to in their young lives by nurse-maids trying to terrify them into keeping quiet at night. But elsewhere they write passionately about the sense of hope, beauty and excitement they found in the rest of the fairy tales they once came across.

A more insidious threat to fairy tales today arises when they are simply ignored altogether. Now that fewer fairy stories

are told to children by way of an oral culture, their survival depends upon a parent or teacher actually getting hold of a collection and reading it out to whoever is listening. But while many fairy tale collections remain in print, some adults no longer think they matter very much one way or the other. As it is, famous nineteenth-century fairy tale classics like Ruskin's **The King of the Golden River** or Dickens' **The Magic Fishbone** are virtually unread now. Who is to say that today's children, deep into sci-fi, computer games and 'My Little Pony' books, have any need of stories firmly rooted in a peasant culture now quite disappeared from the developed world? In this former harsh, sometimes brutal environment, rural poverty was the order of the day, with quarrels over inheritance sometimes a matter of life or death. Many might feel now that the modern, urban child will find all this too hard to understand.

But although the geography, economics and politics of the modern world are very different, the appeal of fairy tales remains very strong. Much of this appeal is ultimately mysterious, revolving around ancient imaginative symbols and situations that crop up over and over again in all folk literature. It would be impertinent and arrogant to attempt to unravel and explain away such symbols, just as it's foolish to suggest that we moderns always know better than anyone else what is good for our children's imagination. Even currently controversial fairy tale symbols, such as the common though not universal equation of lighter hair with virtue and darker hair with evil, can be found in all cultures, black or white-skinned. So there may again be something deeper going on here than mere reflections of fashions or racist attitudes.

A clearer case can be made for the continuing relevance of fairy tales to children's developing psychology. Originally these tales were for peasant audiences where everyone could enjoy compensatory daydreams in which the poor outwitted the rich and the powerless got the better of the powerful. Today, Western adult audiences no longer have such impoverished lives and are too educated to continue believing in fairy tale imagery. But young children are still given to magical thinking and are also still a fairly powerless group in society. Small wonder that they still enjoy identifying with heroes and heroines who overcome giants or out-manoeuvre ogres on their way to eventual power over those who once took advantage of their general impotence in society.

Fairy tales that stress other peasant preoccupations of the time, such as position in the family, evil step-parents or the possibility of vast quantities of food as a result of magical intervention, also continue to mirror aspects of a child's fantasy preoccupations. The savage sibling rivalry sometimes found in fairy tales where the youngest often gets the roughest end of the stick is part of every child's morbid picture of his or her own treatment on those days when nothing seems to go right. Fantasies about revenge on evil parents or step-parents belong to the same black moods where children have fallen out with those in authority over them and long to get their own back, if only in the imagination and through identifying with a fairy tale hero or heroine bent on the same task. The table-cloths that spread themselves and the taps that run with wine once had instant appeal to all semi-starving peasant audiences. Today they continue to fascinate children at the age where good and abundant food is still thought of as the greatest single pleasure in life.

There is much else in fairy tales with special appeal for children. Such tales often deal with semi-taboo subjects like eroticism or sadism which can be naturally interesting to the young, however much adults may prefer to imagine otherwise. Fairy tales also talk frankly of death, another semi-taboo subject today, and raise sensitive family issues such as which child is loved most and which is neglected through parental hostility. Their overall view of the world is on the whole a bleak one, suggesting we should all beware of trusting too much in others and warning us that good fortune can sometimes be as arbitrarily lost as it can, on occasions, suddenly be acquired. This is not the view most Western parents would wish to impart to their families. Yet children themselves already know that a harsher world does exist through their own early encounters with family disruption, sibling rivalry or quarrelling in the peer group. Modern children's literature aimed at younger readers tends to ignore this darker side of things. But fairy tales have always known of its existence, and within their pages young readers may often feel more at home than in the latest glib and glossy picture book preaching the usual unsentimental pieties still thought of as most fitting for infants.

Not every fairy tale collection is necessarily suitable for all children. Any selection that included only passive heroines and active males would indeed be biased and possibly best ignored, given that within fairy tales as a whole female characters are often far livelier than their male counterparts, tending to possess more magical powers which they use to greater effect. Fairy tale selections that concentrate on stories featuring evil mothers or step-mothers in contrast to

benign if weak-willed fathers are also obviously unbalanced, since there are many other fairy stories that stress masculine danger to children and the values of female warmth and nurturance. Other fairy tale selections from the past can seem genuinely shocking now. I would not wish to inflict the story of 'Bluebeard' on any child today, with all its misogynist sadism. Nor do I relish the gloating details of torture that the Grimm brothers sometimes added to their tales. The magically imposed series of farts that give rise to such rollicking broad humour in older, oral versions of French fairy tales might also cause problems now, at least if read out in the classroom, as would stories that mock Jews, hunchbacks, simpletons or any of the other traditional butts for cruel peasant humour.

Most of these details will however be missing from modern selections. Just as fairy tales used to change orally from region to region or from century to century, printed versions too tend to modify certain incidents and details according to the tastes and needs of contemporary audiences. Some stories may occasionally drop out altogether, like the Grimms' tale of children who play at slaughter-houses then go on to kill and chop up an actual playmate. There is nothing wrong with this process of modification, so long as the essential fairy story message of light against dark, small against large and humanity up against extreme hardship is still allowed to come through. For children have a right to know about a time when young people were sometimes expendable when there was no longer enough to eat. They also have a right to know that the world can be full of dangers as well as delights. They have a right of access to the type of magical wish-fulfilment fantasy that can be so sustaining in low moments, with its enticing details of an opulence and sensuality beyond anything realisable on this earth. They also have a right to hear stories that follow young heroes and heroines from their childhood state right through to courtship and marriage.

In fact, fairy tales treat childhood as an end in itself; instead, youth is generally seen as a bridge to maturity. This is in contrast to children's literature written in the last hundred years, where childhood is often treated as an emotional and physical cul-de-sac leading nowhere except back into an atmosphere of permanently arrested development. Victorian illustrators, however, often recognised the idea of personal growth and development in fairy tales, emphasising in their pictures the sexuality of their heroes and heroines, so providing child readers with intimations of their own incipient sexuality in the responses such illustrations could sometimes produce. Later illustrators, such as Walt Disney, went the other way, and in so doing helped fuel present-day feminist objections to those fairy tale versions that always dwell on the cute and the demure in female characters. The best collections, however, should, both in their selection and in their illustrations, aim at introducing young readers to the wide range of emotions, personalities and adventures that have always characterised fairy tales which, at their best, probably remain quite as exciting and moving for young readers today as they always have in the past.

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