



Under the sign 'Mother Goose Tales', an old servant spins by the hearth, telling her fairy tales to the children of the family. The frontispiece to Charles Perrault's collection *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* of 1697, might have been inspired by his own family.

From the **BEAST to the BLONDE**
ON FAIRY TALES AND THEIR TELLERS



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CHAPTER 13

Absent Mothers: Cinderella



As her sisters drive off, outcast and orphaned Cinderella wishes on the sapling growing from her mother's grave and finds herself clothed by magic in a dress and jewels and slippers, so that she can go to the ball. (Joseph Southall, *Cinderella*, 1893-5.)

*What happened to the mother
who looked at the snow? I don't say
(you don't know this grammar yet)
how mothers and stepmothers change,*

*looking, and being looked at.
It takes a long time ...
Sinister twinkling animals,
Hollywood ikons, modern Greek style:*

*a basket of images, poison at work
in the woodland no Cretan child
ever sees. Closer to home
I've seen a loved girl turn feral.*

*These pages lurk in the mind,
speak of your sister,
her mother, and me. Perhaps,
already, of you.*

Ruth Padel

The good mother often dies at the beginning of the story. Tales telling of her miraculous return to life, like Shakespeare's romances *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, have not gained the currency or popularity of 'Cinderella' or 'Snow White' in which she is supplanted by a monster.

Figures of female evil stride through the best-loved, classic fairy tales: on this earth, wicked stepmothers, ugly sisters; from fairyland, bad fairies, witches, ogresses. In the most famous stories, monsters in female shape outnumber the giants and hobgoblins of 'Tom Thumb' or 'Puss-in-Boots' or 'Rumpelstiltskin',

and certainly eclipse them in vividness and their lingering grip on the imagination: children are more thrilled than disgusted by the wolf who gobbles up Red Riding Hood, whereas they are repelled by the witch who fattens up Hansel to eat him. He exercises the beast's seductiveness, she is consigned to the flames of her oven to a loud sigh of relief, or even a hurrah.

All over the world, stories which centre on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering. The earliest extant version of 'Cinderella' to feature a lost slipper was written down around AD 850–60 in China; the story was taken down from a family servant by an official, and the way it is told reveals that the audience already knows it: this is by no means the *Ur-text*.

The Chinese Cinderella, Yeh-hsien, is 'intelligent, and good at making pottery on the wheel'. When her own mother dies, and is soon followed by her father, her father's co-wife begins to maltreat her, and to prefer her own daughter. A magic golden fish appears in a pond and befriends Yeh-hsien. When the wicked stepmother discovers this source of comfort for her hated stepdaughter, she kills it, eats it and hides the bones 'under the dung hill'. When Yeh-hsien, all unknowing, calls to the fish the next day as is her custom, an enchanter descends from the sky and tells her where to find the bones: 'Take [them] and hide them in your room. Whatever you want, you have only to pray to them for it ...' Yeh-hsien does so, and finds that she no longer suffers from hunger or thirst or cold – the fishbones care for her. On the day of the local festival, her stepmother and stepsister order her to stay behind, but she waits till they have left, and then, in a cloak of kingfisher feathers and gold shoes, she joins them at the festival. Her sister recognizes her, and it is when Yeh-hsien realizes this and runs away that she loses one of her gold shoes. It is picked up and sold to a local warlord: 'it was an inch too small even for the one among them that had the smallest foot. He ordered all the women in his kingdom to try it on. But there was not one that it fitted. It was as light as down and made no noise even when treading on stone.'

Yeh-hsien comes forward and, taking her fishbones with her, becomes 'chief wife' in the king's household. Her stepmother and sister are stoned to death. One of the few divergences from the later – much later – European tradition occurs here: the local people are sorry for the mother and sister and dub their grave 'The Tomb of the Distressed Women'; it becomes a fertility shrine, much visited by men: 'any girl they prayed for there, they got'.

The great antiquity of this story gives the reader today a dizzy feeling; in its essential structure and its lively details 'Cinderella' has been told for over a

thousand years, passed on from voice to text and back again, over and over again until it reaches the decorous drawing rooms of the Parisian *précieuses* and finds its Western canonical form in Perrault's 'Cendrillon'. The Chinese version exhibits many features of its social context. The tiny, precious golden shoe, a treasure among country people who would have gone barefoot or worn bark or straw pattens, also reverberates with the fetishism of bound feet: the T'ang dynasty, established in the sixth century, introduced this custom to China and it marked out highborn, valuable, desirable women. The strains between women in this Chinese Cinderella's family are knotted into the structure of polygamy. In China (and elsewhere), this type of marriage has inspired a huge body of literature about female rivalry – *Raise the Red Lantern*, the recent film directed by Zhang Yimou, dramatized the continuing tragic tensions in a warlord's palace between his wives in the 1920s, as each schemes to win their master's favours and he plays one against the other for his own pleasure.

In other settings, the lost shoe likewise denotes the wearer's beauty, and brutal imagery of deformation, cultural and literal, returns: in the Grimm Brothers' tale, the sisters hack off their toes, hack off their heels to fit the slipper, and birds warn the prince:

Turn and peep, turn and peep,
There's blood within the shoe.
The shoe it is too small for her,
The true bride waits for you.

In Aelian's brief, late second-century AD tale of Rhodope, her sandal is carried off by an eagle when she is bathing, and dropped at the feet of the Pharaoh in Memphis. He instantly vows he must possess the woman this delightful object fits; he searches the whole of Egypt to make her his wife. The ancient site in Naples, dedicated to the Madonna di Piedigrotta since the fourteenth century but known in pagan times, also enshrines a cult of a virgin's foot; some Neapolitans claim possession of Mary's own slipper – and very small it is, too. The symbolic erotic significance of the shoe has been thoroughly explored by Bruno Bettelheim in his influential study of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*; the substitution of body parts effected by the imagery relates to the webbed or otherwise odd foot of the storyteller, discussed earlier. The fairy tale proposes a perfect foot from knowledge of the imperfections of feet and what they stand for; it offers a remedy in itself for the problem. As the stream restores Sheba, so the recognition brought

about by love in the flow of the narrative undoes the perception of ugliness. The story advocates small feet only at its most literal, patent level of meaning; like other variations in the cycle, it promises that what is hidden and not known can be beautiful, if beheld in the right spirit.

But Cinderella's goodness changes character; even her colouring reflects canons of virtue and standards of beauty according to circumstances: in China, pottery and intelligence, in contemporary England 'long golden hair, and eyelashes that turn [ed] up like the petals of a daisy'. Above all, however, the Chinese imagery reveals itself in the choice of animal familiar, for fish occupy an exalted place in their mythological bestiary, which is taken up in their cuisine and their gardens – ornamented with carp of great price, with goggle eyes and swirling fins.

The animal helper, who embodies the dead mother in providing for her orphaned child, constitutes a structural node in the Cinderella story, but the creature changes in later European versions until she takes the form of the fairy god-mother familiar today. In the Grimms' *Aschenputtel* of 1812, a hazel sapling grows up on the mother's grave, and her bones transform it into a powerful wishing tree, to work her daughter's revenge and triumph (p. 200). The tree shakes down the dresses of gold and the silken slippers this Cinderella wears to the ball, and shelters the doves, who act as her protectors: her father thinks she is hiding in the dovecote perched on its branches and he chops down the tree in his rage. It is the doves who sort the peas and the lentils her stepmother scatters, and who unmask



In perhaps the oldest illustration of Cinderella, she weeps by the hearth after her stepmother has tossed lentils and peas into the cinders and ordered her to sift them. (In *Das irrige Schaf*, Nuremberg, early sixteenth century.)

the false sisters with their song. At the end, they peck out the wicked sisters' eyes in punishment. No quarter is offered here, no posthumous shrine.

In 'Rashin Coatie', the appealing and lively Scottish version, published by Andrew Lang at the turn of the century, the dead mother returns in the form of a red calf, who offers the starving child food out of her ear; the stepsister spies on her, and the calf is killed; but it continues to protect her, giving her fine clothes and satin slippers, so she can go to church like the others and meet her young prince there. Variants on the tale from all over the world give the mother's ghost some kind of consoling and magical role in her daughter's ultimate escape from pain, and it was this aspect which drew Angela Carter. In her version, called 'Ashputtle', she creates a vision of dark, archaic grief in an uncanny short tale; the mother's ghost returns in the form of one animal after another to give back life to her child.

The little cat came by. The ghost of the mother went into the cat.

'Your hair wants doing,' said the cat. 'Lie down.'

The little cat unpicked her raggy lugs with its clever paws until the burned child's hair hung down nicely, but it had been so snagged and tangled that the claws were all pulled out before it was finished.

'Comb your own hair, next time,' said the cat. 'You've taken my strength away. I can't do it again.'

The same happens with a cow who gives this Cinders milk and a bird who gives her clothes; each time, the mother takes possession of the animal and is worn out by the task, until at last Ashputtle escapes – with a lover whom her evil stepmother had wanted.

'Now I can go to sleep,' said the ghost of the mother. 'Now everything is all right.'

II

In most of the more familiar retellings today of this classic and much-loved story of female wish-fulfilment, the heroine's mother no longer plays a part. In Basile's exuberantly fanciful *'La Gatta Cenerentola'* (The Cinderella Cat), the heroine Zezolla first conspires with her governess to kill her wicked stepmother: she drops the lid of a trunk on her head while she is rummaging in it to find some rags for Zezolla to wear. All goes according to plan, and the governess duly marries Zezolla's father:

But after a very short time she completely forgot the kindness [Zezolla] had done her ... and she began to push forward six daughters of her own who had been kept secret till then ... And Zezolla from one day to the next was reduced to such a state that she went from the bedroom to the kitchen, from the canopy to the hearth, from splendid silks and gold to dish-clouts, from the sceptre to the spit ...

But the dirty and neglected hearth cat, living in the cinders, will find her feet: a fairy materializes in a date tree Zezolla's father has brought back for his daughter from his travels, and she casts the spells which transform her into the richly arrayed beauty who, appearing three times at the local festival, bedazzles all, including the prince.

Basile, by omitting any mention of graves or bones, severs the narrative link between the orphan's mother and the fairy enchantress – this disjunction returns in Perrault, and in all the best-known versions circulating today. Very occasionally, the original baptismal vow a godmother makes, that she will act *in loco parentis*, provides a motive: 'Up rose a Fairy! all at once, with wings and a wand, and it was her own god-mother who promised her dying mother to love her as her own child.' But on the whole, the absent mother no longer returns. 'Once upon a time there was a girl called Cinderella. She was very unhappy as she had no one who loved her' – this is the classic opening of the modern fairy tale, repeated again and again in the available editions. None of the Disney films suggest that the heroines' mothers return to help them – not even the crowd-pleasing calculations of the recent *Beauty and the Beast* could produce a natural mother for Beauty, but only a cosy teapot-cum-housekeeper in lieu.

Yet Cinderella is a child in mourning for her mother, as her name tells us; her penitential garb is ash, dirty and low as a donkeyskin or a coat of grasses, but more particularly the sign of loss, the symbol of mortality, which the priest uses to mark the foreheads of the faithful on Ash Wednesday, saying, 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.' Basile only half explains her name – Gatta Cenerentola – when he says that she ends up sleeping in the ashes of the hearth like a cat; Perrault, likewise, when he writes that the kinder of the two stepsisters softens her nickname from Cucendron (Cinder-bottom; Cinder-fanny) to Cendrillon. But Perrault's withdrawn obscenity does preserve the hint at ritual pollution in ancient mourning customs, without apparently understanding it. The lays and romances of medieval literature are thronged with bereaved heroes and heroines who will not wash, or cut their hair or their beard, but hug the dirt to keep close to their lost

loved one, to be outcast as they are in death, to keep their own personal Lent, wearing sackcloth and ashes. The knowing Basile writes that mourning lasts as short a moment as pain in the funny bone, but Cinderella, in her rags, in her sackcloth and ashes, is a daughter who continues to grieve.

It would be very simple-minded to pin the picture of female hatred and cruelty in the Cinderella cycle and fairy tales like 'Rapunzel', 'Snow White' and 'The Sleeping Beauty' on male authors and interpreters alone. They have contributed to it and confirmed it, from Charles Perrault's wittily awful sisters (not ugly but beautiful) and terrifying cannibal ogresses (in his 'Sleeping Beauty', see below) to the Grimm Brothers and their brilliantly successful spiritual heir Walt Disney, who made the cartoon films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950), which have done more than any other creation to naturalize female – maternal – malignancy in the imaginations of children worldwide.

Both films concentrate with exuberant glee on the towering, taloned, raven-haired wicked stepmother; all Disney's powers of invention failed to save the princes from featureless banality and his heroines from saccharin sentimentality. Authentic power lies with the bad women, and the plump cosy fairy godmother in *Cinderella* seems no match for them. Disney's vision has affected everybody's idea of fairy tales themselves: until writers and anthologists began looking again, passive hapless heroines and vigorous wicked older women seemed generic. Disney selected certain stories and stressed certain sides to them; the wise children, the cunning little vixens, the teeming population of the stories were drastically purged. The disequilibrium between good and evil in these films has influenced contemporary perception of fairy tale, as a form where sinister and gruesome forces are magnified and prevail throughout – until the very last moment, where, *ex machina*, right and goodness overcome them.

Visual artists have continued to bring relish to the task of portraying the wicked witches and evil stepmothers of the tales: Maurice Sendak and David Hockney have created memorably warty, hook-nosed, crouchback horrors in their illustrations to Grimm. Furthermore, father figures tend to be excused responsibility, as we shall see in more detail later (Chapter Twenty-one). The tales consistently fail to ask, why did Cinderella's father marry again so quickly, so unwisely? Or, why does he allow Cinderella's mistreatment at all?

Terror of the witch, so deliberately exorcized by Perrault's urbane wit, returns in malignant force through the imagination of pantomime, film, and children's books, not in the magic person of the fairy godmother, but in the vicious power of the evil stepmother.

The fairy godmother as witch: in steeple hat and pointy shoes, she tumbles down the chimney. (Arthur Rackham, Cinderella, London, 1919.)



Nevertheless, the misogyny of fairy tales engages women as participants, not just targets; the antagonisms and sufferings the stories recount connect to the world of female authority as well as experience. Also, as they so frequently claim to speak in a woman's voice (the storyteller, Mother Goose), it is worth pausing to examine the weight and implications of that claim before pointing the finger exclusively at Grimm or Disney or Cruikshank. Bengt Holbek observes that 'men and women often tell the same tales in characteristically different ways', and the scholar of German fairy tales Ruth Botigheimer has recently studied the differences in narrators' approaches. Anthropologists, too, have proceeded along lines of inquiry into the differences. Reimar Schefold, working among the Mentawaians of Indonesia, was told a story by his assistant, Tengtati: later, he was approached by a woman, 'a respected matron called Teuraggamimanai', who related the same tale in her version – it was her favourite, heard from her mother, and she wanted to give the Dutchman the chance to hear it in her, preferred, form. Schefold, who had not been told stories by women until that point, compared the two accounts and found there were significant differences of emphasis in a turbulent story of two rebellious sisters and their suitors. The woman narrator stressed co-operation in work and alliance brought by marriage, the man lineage and the acquisition of dowry; the woman's version enhanced the sisters' activity, courage, spirit, determination, their control of their dowries and labour. In Spain, in the 1980s, the American James Taggart studied storytelling in

Estremadura, and uncovered parallels and divergences between men's and women's ways with their versions of 'Cinderella', 'Snow White', 'Cupid and Psyche', and 'Beauty and the Beast'. The differences are often obvious, and their development stands to reason, but attention needs to be drawn to them with regard to our own fairy tales, which have been all too easily perceived as immemorially traditional, unchanging, and pure. The archetypal image of the timeless old crone of course serves this camouflaging atavism.

Instances and statistics of female storytelling are not however nearly as illuminating as internal evidence in the tales themselves. This yields a doubled aspect of femaleness: on the one hand the record of female experience in certain tales, and on the other the ascription of a female point of view, through the protagonist or the narrating voice. The male scribe of the literary monument of folklore, like Straparola or Lang or even Calvino, may be transmitting women's stories, as they claim. Or, like the male tragedian in the Greek amphitheatre who wears the mask of a woman to utter the speeches of Medea or Electra, these authors and scholars may be impersonating a woman. If they are inventing, rather than acknowledging a known female source, how does this ascription contribute to the impact of the tales? Even if an actual voice of a female narrator is not emerging muffled or distorted by the male mask she wears, what meanings does the fantasy of her original voice allow to flower within the stories?

The answer is composed of many strands: most obviously, storytellers the world over claim to know their material from an eye witness; the voice of the old nurse lends reliability to the tale, stamps it as authentic, rather than the concoction of the storyteller himself. More deeply, attributing to women testimony about women's wrongs and wrongdoing gives them added value: men might be expected to find women flighty, rapacious, self-seeking, cruel and lustful, but if women say such things about themselves, then the matter is settled. What some women say against others can be usefully turned against all of them.

The ravelled sleeve of these braided strands of male and female experience and wishes and fears can never be wholly combed out. If fairy tales are mere old wives' tales because they are told by women, is then what they say necessarily false, a mere trifle, including what they say about women? Or does the lowness of the genre, assumed on account of the lowness of its authors, permit a greater degree of truth-telling, as the jester's cap protects the fool from the consequences of his frank speech? Above all, if and when women are narrating, why are the female characters so cruel and the mother so often dead at the start of the story? Why have women continued to speak at all within this body of story which defames

them so profoundly? Could they be speaking to a purpose? The poet Olga Broumas, in a poem which speaks in Cinderella's voice, grieves for the part she has played in this process:

... I am a woman in a state of siege,
alone

as one piece of laundry, strung on a windy clothesline a
mile long. A woman co-opted by promises: the lure
of a job, the ruse of a choice, a woman forced
to bear witness, falsely
against my kind ...

Fairy tales like 'Cinderella' bear witness against women. But there are possible reasons for the evidence they bring, be it true or false (and it is both), which mitigate the wrongs they describe, not entirely, but in part.

The absence of the mother from the tale is often declared at the start, without explanation, as if none were required; Beauty appears before us, in the opening paragraph of the earliest written version of 'Beauty and the Beast' with that title, in 1740 (see p. 290), as a daughter to her father, a sister to her six elders, a biblical seventh child, the cadette, the favourite: nothing is spoken about her father's wife. Later, it will turn out that Beauty is a foundling, and was left by the fairies, after her fairy mother was disgraced by union with a mortal – not the father Beauty knows, but another, higher in rank, more powerful.

This is the kind of romancing that earned fairy tale the scorn of the literati, both in the past and today. Fairy tales play to the child's hankering after nobler, richer, altogether better origins, the fantasy of being a prince or a princess in disguise, the Freudian 'family romance'. But this type of fantasy can also comfort bereaved children, who, however irrationally, feel themselves abandoned by their dead mothers, and even guilty for their disappearance. One English Cinderella story, called 'Tattercoats', perceptively focusses on this type of grief: the king figure mistreats his granddaughter 'because at her birth, his favourite daughter died'. In this case, her ragged, starving, neglected state reflects his excess of mourning and her anguished guilt, and neither of them can be healed of the wound – the story has an unhappy ending.

Paradoxically, the best possible intentions can also contribute to the absence of mothers from the tales. In the case of 'Schneewittchen' (Snow White), for instance,

the Grimms altered the earlier versions they had taken down in which Snow White's own mother suffered murderous jealousy of her and persecuted her. The 1819 edition is the first to introduce a stepmother in her place; the manuscript and the editions of 1810 and 1812 place Snow White's natural mother at the pivot of the violent plot. But it was altered so that a mother should not be seen to torment a daughter. This is still the case in a version collected in the Armenian community in Detroit this century: having pursued her daughter with murderous rage, this mother finally dies of surprise when she hears from the moon that her daughter is still living and is more beautiful than her.

The Grimm Brothers worked on the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in draft after draft after the first edition of 1812, Wilhelm in particular infusing the new editions with his Christian fervour, emboldening the moral strokes of the plot, meting out penalties to the wicked and rewards to the just, to conform with prevailing Christian and social values. They also softened the harshness – especially in family dramas. They could not make it disappear altogether, but in 'Hansel and Gretel', for example, they added the father's miserable reluctance to an earlier version in which both parents had proposed the abandonment of their children, and turned the mother into a wicked stepmother. On the whole, they tended towards sparing the father's villainy, and substituting another wife for the natural mother, who had figured as the villain in the versions they had been told: they



Mothers, especially wicked stepmothers, abandon their children to the wolves.
(The Babes in the Wood, tableau, Madame Tussaud's, London, 1959.)

felt obliged to deal less harshly with mothers than the female storytellers whose material they were setting down.

The disappearance here of the original mothers forms a response to the harshness of the material: in their romantic idealism, the Grimms literally could not bear a maternal presence to be equivocal, or dangerous, and preferred to banish her altogether. For them, the bad mother had to disappear in order for the ideal to survive and allow Mother to flourish as symbol of the eternal feminine, the motherland, and the family itself as the highest social desideratum.

Bruno Bettelheim has analysed this manoeuvre, using a Freudian principle of splitting, in *The Uses of Enchantment*. According to his analysis, the wicked stepmother acts as the Janus face of the good mother, who can thus be saved and cherished in fantasy and memory, split from the bad mother:

While all young children sometimes need to split the image of their parent into its benevolent and threatening aspects to feel fully sheltered by the first, most cannot do it as cleverly and consciously as this girl [a case history] did. Most children cannot find their own solution to the impasse of Mother suddenly changing into 'a look-alike impostor'. Fairytales, which contain good fairies who suddenly appear and help the child find happiness despite this 'impostor' or 'stepmother', permit the child not to be destroyed by this 'impostor' ... These fantasies are helpful; they permit the child to feel really angry at the Martian pretender or the 'false parent' without guilt ... So the typical fairytale splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all-good, but it also permits anger at this bad 'stepmother' without endangering the goodwill of the true mother who is viewed as a different person... The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one's angry thoughts and wishes about her – a guilt which would seriously interfere with the good relation to Mother.

This theory is neat, satisfying and, as a convincing emotional stratagem, strikes home. It has consequently proved extremely persuasive: paediatricians have restored harsh fairy tales including the Grimms' to children's bookshelves, and endorsed the therapeutic powers of fictional cruelty and horror. The bad mother has become an inevitable, even required ingredient in fantasy, and hatred of her a legitimate, applauded stratagem of psychic survival. Bettelheim's theory has

contributed to the continuing absence of good mothers from fairy tales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them. His argument, and its tremendous diffusion and widespread acceptance, have effaced from memory the historical reasons for women's cruelty within the home and have made such behaviour seem natural, even intrinsic to the mother-child relationship. It has even helped to ratify the expectation of strife as healthy and the resulting hatred as therapeutic.

This archetypal approach leeches history out of fairy tale. Fairy or wonder tales, however farfetched the incidents they include, or fantastic the enchantments they concoct, take on the colour of the actual circumstances in which they are or were told. While certain structural elements remain, variant versions of the same story often reveal the particular conditions of the society which told it and retold it in this form. The absent mother can be read literally as exactly that: a feature of the family before our modern era, when death in childbirth was the most common cause of female mortality, and surviving orphans would find themselves brought up by their mother's successor (p. 262).

The chronicles of the Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian dynasties, before the establishment of primogeniture, are bespattered with the blood of possible heirs, done away with by consorts ambitious for their own progeny – the true wicked stepmothers of history, who become embedded in stories as eternal truths. Moreover, children whose fathers had died often stayed in the paternal house, to be raised by their grandparents or uncles and their wives. Their mothers were made to return to their natal homes, and to forge another, advantageous alliance for their own parents' future. Widows remarried less frequently than widowers. For example, in Tuscany in the fifteenth century almost all men widowed under the age of sixty took another wife and started another family. In France, 80 per cent of widowers remarried within the year in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When a second wife entered the house, she often found herself and her children in competition – often for scarce resources – with the surviving offspring of the earlier marriage, who may well have appeared to threaten her own children's place in their father's affection too.

This antipathy seethes in the plots of many 'Cinderellas', sometimes offering an overt critique of social custom. Rossini's Cinderella opera, *La Cenerentola*, shows worldly-wise indignation at his heroine's plight – in her case, at the hands of her stepfather, Don Magnifico, who plots to make himself rich by marrying off his two other daughters, ignoring Cinderella. Tremendous buffoon he might be, but he treacherously pronounces Cinderella dead when he thinks it will help

advance his own interests. And when she protests, he threatens her with violence. Dowries are the issue here, as they were in Italy in Rossini's time; sisters compete for the larger share and Don Magnifico does not want to cut his wherewithal three ways. As it was gradually amassed, such *corredo* (treasure) was stored in *cassoni*, which were often decorated with pictures of just such stories as 'Cinderella'.

The enmity of stepmothers towards children of earlier unions marks chronicles and stories from all over the world, from the ancient world to the present day; they exhibit the different strains and knots in different types of kinship systems and households, arising from patrilineage, dotal obligations, female exogamy, polygamy. One tale from Dahomey, written down in 1958, tells how a dead mother manages, from beyond the grave, to kill a wicked stepmother. The conclusion contains a threat and a boast, and conveys the full pathetic vulnerability of a motherless child far beyond polygamous households themselves:

If a man has two wives and one dies leaving a child, you give that child to the second wife, and the second wife must look after the dead woman's child better than after her own children. And this is why one never mistreats orphans. For once you mistreat them, you die. You die the same day. You are not even sick. I know that myself, I am an orphan.

This story invokes the ghost of the dead mother as a tutelary spirit in the manner of the neglected versions of 'Cinderella'. But it also provides a precious and poignant clue to the function of stories for the narrator, not only for the audience, which can help to decipher the meanings of the most common fairy tales in which women are vilified. For the orphan from Dahomey is using the tale for his or her own protection; s/he is threatening with it any mother who maltreats a stepchild.

The underlying cautionary message of fairy tales like 'Cinderella' – 'You see what happens if you ...' – is almost always taken from the protagonist's point of view, because the prevalent view has seen fairy tales as unauthored and unanchored in specific circumstances. But another harvest of meanings can be gathered if the stories are analysed from the teller's vantage.

Psychoanalytical and historical interpreters of fairy tale usually enter stories like 'Cinderella', 'Snow White', or 'Beauty and the Beast' from the point of view of the protagonist, the orphaned daughter who has lost her real mother and is tormented by her stepmother, or her sisters, sometimes her stepsisters; the interpreters assume that the reader or listener naturally identifies with the heroine. Indeed, this is commonly the case. But that perception sometimes also assumes

that because the narrator makes common cause with the protagonist, the narrator identifies with her too.

Fairy tales are not told in the first person of the protagonist, and though Cinderella or Snow White engages our first attention as well as the narrator's, the voice of the storyteller may be issuing elsewhere. Imagine the characteristic scene, the child listening to an older person telling this story, and the absent mother materializes in the person of the narrator herself. John Berger, the art critic and novelist, has observed :

If you remember listening to stories as a child, you will remember the pleasure of hearing a story repeated many times, and you will remember that while you were listening you became three people. There is an incredible fusion: you became the story-teller, the protagonist and you remember yourself listening to the story...

Fusion perhaps does not quite convey the simultaneous occupation of different positions in relation to the tale, which a listener (or reader) can experience – including that of the storyteller. The audience is invited to take her part – or his – as well as identify with the mishaps and reversals in the protagonist's life.

This angle of perception can yield a different set of meanings; if the storyteller speaks as a real 'mother' herself – even if her mouthpiece, on the page, is a man, like Perrault or the Grimms – what sort of a mother is she? If we read the famous stories of child abandonment and suffering and subsequent salvation from the point of view of the putative teller, not the solicited audience of the child, we can cast a new light on the material and its bitter, internecine struggles between women.

If the storyteller is an old woman, the old wife of the old wives' tale, a nurse or a governess, she may be offering herself as a surrogate to the vanished mother in the story. Within the stories themselves, the narrator frequently accedes symbolically to the story in the person of the fairy godmother. Mother Goose enters the story to work wonders on behalf of her brood. Good fairies are frequently disguised as hideous and ragged crones in order to test the heroine's kindness, as in Perrault's 'Les Fées' (The Fairies), Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's 'The Enchantments of Eloquence', some versions of 'Cinderella' (Pl. 1), and the Grimms' 'Frau Holle' (Mother Holle). In a single blast, the evil-tongued sister of L'Héritier's story calls the fairy in disguise 'une vieille folle' (an old fool), 'vermine de villageois' (village vermin), and connects her with procuresses and animals, particularly bitches – all



The fairy godmother, disguised as a blind beggar, prepares to change the rat, the mice and the pumpkin. (Chapbook, Cinderella, London, c. 1820.)

descriptions that were applied to the storyteller herself by fairy tale's detractors. Even when the fairy godmother is described in less disparaging terms, the perception of sympathy between storyteller and fairy need not be set aside; the claim reflects the wish-fulfilment of the storyteller herself as understood by her audience and disseminated through the printed versions of the tales: in 'Donkeyskin', the fairy helps the heroine to overcome the dangers her foolish/wicked mother has landed her in by her deathbed demand.

Illustrators unconsciously grasped the affinity between the teller who knows from the beginning the heroine's hidden virtue and the fairy godmother who brings about her happy recognition, and they disclosed it in their illustrations, even when little in the text openly proclaimed the identity, picturing the fairy godmother as bent, raddled, bespectacled and lame, the mirror image of the witchy storyteller who figured on the cover or the frontispiece (above). In George Cruikshank's original drawings for 'Cinderella', the fairy godmother is herself

transformed and revealed to be a beautiful enchantress: the heroine's recognition reflected in her own.

If the narrator/good fairy is bidding to replace the mother whose death she announces in the story, if she is offering herself as the benevolent wonder-worker in the lives of the story's protagonists, she may be reproducing within the tale another historical circumstance in the lives of women beside the high rate of death in childbirth or the enforced abandonment of children on widowhood: she may be recording, in concealed form, the antagonism between mothers and the women their sons marry, between daughters-in-law and their husbands' mothers. The unhappy families of fairy tale typically suffer before a marriage takes place which rescues the heroine; but her situation was itself brought about by unions of one kind or another, so that when critics reproach fairy tale for the glib promise of its traditional ending – 'And they all lived happily ever after' – they overlook the knowledge of misery within marriage that the preceding story reveals in its every line. The conclusion of fairy tales works a charm against despair, the last spell the narrating fairy godmother casts for change in her subjects and her hearers' destinies.

The stories concentrate on unions made by law, on the reshaping of families from the biological order to the social: on mothers and sisters bestowed by legal arrangement, as well as the husbands. The plots characteristically strive to align such social fias with the inclinations of the heart. In many variations on 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Donkeyskin', the enemies of love are patriarchs; but in many fairy tales the tyrants are women and they struggle against their often younger rivals to retain the security that their husbands or their fathers afford them.