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INTRODUCTION

One would be hard-pressed to find a genre more in need of scholarly focus than the beleaguered fairy tale. Tales like “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast,” which have been told and retold for over a thousand years by adults for adults, have been sanitized, distorted, and dismissed as mere children’s bedtime stories. “In this century at least,” says English professor Roger Sale, “so many people know fairy tales only through badly truncated modern versions, that it is no longer really fairy tales they know.”¹

Fairy tales have a long and distinguished heritage. “Cinderella” has been found in over seven hundred variants all over the world, dating back to the ninth century in China. Popular versions of the fairy tale are thin remnants of an oral tradition. Oral variants of “Cinderella” tell of a bold and forthright heroine who, through perseverance, ingenuity, and grace under pressure, meets the conditions necessary to break the spell that has kept her true and noble nature hidden. It is a deep and haunting tale of the stripping away of illusion and recovery of the authentic self. Similarly, early versions of “Snow White” are not about a wicked queen’s jealousy of the young heroine; instead, they focus on the envy of Snow White’s mother as her daughter begins to blossom into early womanhood. Furthermore, Little Red Riding Hood in the older tales is not saved by a passing woodsman, or eaten by the wolf, but rather escapes certain death by adopting her perpetrator’s tactics of cunning and deception. Even Sleeping Beauty is awakened by a suckling child whom she has conceived while in her long sleep rather than by a charming prince. Most of these famous fairy tales differ from the popular conceptions of them and contain much more profound messages.

AN INFLUENTIAL ART FORM

Once an ancient oral art form in which storytellers held small groups spellbound recounting wondrous tales, fairy tales now represent a mass-media phenomenon of awe-inspiring proportions and dominion. Fairy-tale novels, movies, television series, commercials, cartoons, toys, and video games saturate the world of adult and child alike. *How Fairy Tales Shape Our Lives* is the subtitle of a work published by Sheldon Cashdan in 1999. And “shape our lives” they do. Psychologist Eric Berne says fairy tales not only influence people’s hopes and dreams but also can be actual programs for their behavior. “Cinderella, I liked best,” said a twenty-six-year-old divorced mother of two interviewed by folklorist Kay Stone. “She was gorgeous. I was homely, and I kept thinking it would happen to me too—I’d bloom one day. But it’s never happened. I’m still waiting!”² Danish author Isak Dinesen says she is able to live her life more bravely because she reads the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. Fairy tales can free and empower people or constrain and constrict them, sending them on long misplaced journeys in search of fulfillment. They are a major socialization tool and cultural determinant in contemporary Western civilization. Thus, to read and understand them requires an alert and discerning eye.

THE LEGACY OF FAIRY TALES

Fairy tales present the quintessential conflict between good and evil. Since the beginning of recorded time and probably beyond, they have been, in the words of scholar Jack Zipes, “a means to conquer the terrors of mankind through metaphor.”³ William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas Mann, Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allan Poe, Anne Sexton, and many other writers of distinction have drawn on the metaphorical muscle of the genre to comment on their society or to present their view of a better world. Fairy tales are allied with hope and a utopian spirit. They suggest that change is possible and miraculous transformation is entirely plausible. They implant noble notions of valor, compassion, and essential goodness. A legacy of the fairy tales of childhood is the idea that a small and seemingly inadequate hero can take on overwhelming adversity and emerge triumphant.

Folklorists, professors of language and literature, psychiatrists, historians, librarians, writers, storytellers, parents, and educators continue to debate the nature, meaning, function, and significance of the fairy tale as genre. According to British folklorists Iona and Peter Opie, fairy tales have caused more controversy than any other form of traditional literature since Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published their famous collection in the early nineteenth century. This book presents a small sample of this large and vibrant body of scholarship.

THEORIES OF ORIGIN

Most famous fairy tales come from the oral storytelling tradition. The question of the origins of fairy tales has intrigued scholars since the discipline of folklore was founded in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Early studies focused on trying to find a rational explanation for the fantastic content of fairy tales.

British antiquarian Edwin Sidney Hartland and folklorist Andrew Lang asserted that fairy tales represent the worldview of prehistoric man. This included a belief in the separation of body and spirit, meaning that spirits could exit one body and occupy another and that certain people had the power to effect such transformation. Fairy tales helped primitive man comprehend the vast and inexplicable forces of nature by imbuing the birds, beasts, sun, moon, earth, and sky with spirits that exhibited human passions and personalities. Other scholars, like folklorist Ruth Benedict, refute the need for a rational explanation of the genre's origin, claiming that fairy tales are the eternal expression of a wild and fanciful imagination freed by the wish-fulfillment characteristic of the tales themselves.

A number of other theories of fairy-tale origins have been advanced. In 1859, following the discovery of Sanskrit as the parent of European languages, German scholar Theodor Benfrey claimed that all classical fairy tales were based on ancient Indian folklore texts. The *Panchatantra*, written in Sanskrit in the third century, incorporated several animal tales thought to be antecedents of modern European fairy tales like "Puss-in-Boots." This theory was discredited with the discovery of records of fairy tales preserved on papyrus dating back as far as 2000 B.C. in ancient Egypt and references to tales of fairies, monsters, and

marvels in *Wasps*, written by the Greek playwright Aristophanes in 422 B.C.

Since the mid-1800s, many other theories have been advanced. In 1870 George Cox of the School of Solar Mythology claimed that fairy tales were early man's poetic rendering of the conflict between the Sun and the darkness of night. Hungarian psychological folklorist Geza Róheim believed the source of many tales was dream material. Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp of the myth-ritual school of origins said fairy tales arose from primitive rites and myths, often secret tales containing tribal wisdom and sacred knowledge that were passed on by the elders during initiation rites. For example, British folklorist E.D. Phillips suggested a link between sacrificial rites practiced by tribes in Siberia and Robert Southey's tale known as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." In order to appease the angry ghosts of bears killed for ritual sacrifice, Siberian tribesmen built three wooden huts in the forest and placed the bear pelts in them. The myths supposedly became detached for the rite and floated into the oral tradition as tales of magic.

Folklorists have also been fascinated by the prevalence of very similar oral fairy tales throughout the world. In 1893 British folklorist Marian Cox published her analysis of 345 versions of "Cinderella" found in widely divergent parts of the globe that had no known early contact with each other. To explain the multiple existence of fairy tales, some scholars have claimed that the same dreams, concerns, and fantasies are common to all of humankind and thus similar expressions of stories spontaneously arise from the psychic unity of all people. Refuting the psychological approach, Diffusionists believe the multiple existence of folktales is based on historical fact, on the movements of sailors, merchants, gypsies, and early traders. In the late nineteenth century Finnish scholars Kaarle and Julius Krohn argued that the life history of each major fairy tale must be explored individually. They traced the history and movement of specific tales and suggested a place and date of origin for many of the most famous ones, insisting that the originators of the tales were lost to history. "The history of fairy-stories," says fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien in his classic essay "On Fairy-Stories," "is probably more complex than the history of the human race, and as complex as the history of human language. All three things: independent invention, inheritance and diffusion

have evidently played their part in producing the intricate web of story. It is now beyond all skill but that of the elves to unravel it."⁴

THE CIVILIZING FUNCTION OF EARLY LITERARY FAIRY TALES

By most accounts the first literary tale, a clear antecedent to modern fairy tales, is "Cupid and Psyche," written in Latin by Lucius Apuleius in the second century. It is considered the root tale of "Beauty and the Beast" and was part of a larger work called *Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*), which is the story of a young man who is turned into an ass by magic. Some scholars believe "Cupid and Psyche" was based on a cult initiation myth about the Egyptian goddess Isis and was a product of Apuleius's interest in the religious initiation rites associated with the goddess's worship. It has been suggested that Apuleius was initiated into that cult, which was one of the reasons why the parents of his betrothed accused him of casting a spell over their daughter to entice her to marry him. "Cupid and Psyche," a tale that subscribed to such mesmerization, is thought to have some autobiographical content as well as being based on oral folklore and earlier Latin texts.

Another work in Latin, produced in about 1300, was *Gesta Romanorum*, which consisted of anecdotes and tales (including tales of magic) and was used principally by the clergy to impart morals to their charges. It is said to have influenced the work of Shakespeare and English poet Edmund Spenser, who wrote "The Faerie Queen," a famous poem of the sixteenth century that drew on fairy-tale motifs and themes.

One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, first recorded in Arabic in about 1500, comprises oral tales from Arabia, Egypt, Persia, and India. It consists of the frame story of Scheherazade, the wife of a violent and merciless king, who stays her own execution night after night by amusing the king with fairy tales. Through cunning, compassion, and the messages in the fairy tales, she succeeds in civilizing the bestial drives of her husband while at the same time imparting lessons in Muslim customs and law to the audience. Antoine Galland's elegant reworking of the Arabic text into French in 1717 had a significant impact on the format, style, and motifs of the European fairy tale as genre. Writers of fairy tales still employ the device, attributed to the influence

of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, of setting their tales in faraway lands to discuss sensitive issues at home.

These early literary tales did not stand as individual stories but were included within frame stories with other types of tales. Unlike the oral tales on which they were based, the literary tales focused on teaching values and ethics to males in preparation for powerful roles in society. "Whereas many of the oral fairy tales were concerned with the humanization of natural forces," writes Professor Zipes, "the literary fairy tale, beginning with 'Cupid and Psyche,' shifted the emphasis more toward the civilization of the protagonist who must learn to respect special codes and laws to become accepted in society and/or united to reproduce and continue the progress of the world toward perfect happiness."⁵

The frame story persisted in fairy-tale literature for years, influencing even Renaissance scholars and storytellers. Italy was at the forefront of cultural developments during the Renaissance, a time when humanism looked to the rebirth of a lost human spirit and the classical wisdom that had been neglected during the Middle Ages. It is not surprising then that the first European storybook to include fairy tales for a mixed audience of upper-class men and women was Gianfrancesco Straparola's *The Pleasant Nights*, published in two volumes in 1550 and 1553. This consists of a frame story in which Straparola and a group of political dissidents forced to flee Milan pass their evenings in exile telling each other jests, tall tales, and fairy tales. In 1634 another Italian author, Giambattista Basile, wrote *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*The Tale of Tales*), also known as *Pentamerone*, which was the first European attempt to frame an entire collection of fairy tales based on oral folklore. The work includes early variants of "Cinderella," "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Beauty and the Beast."

SUBVERSIVE FRENCH BEGINNINGS

France's place as a central power in Europe with a rich and innovative cultural life and technological advances in printing were contributing factors to the development of the literary fairy tale in the late seventeenth century. The Italian fairy tales circulated throughout the courts of Europe and captured the attention of the aristocratic women of the French salon. Many of the tales were similar to fairy tales told by French nannies emerging from a common oral tradition. Yet

in the intellectual salons, fairy tales served both as a diversion from the grim realities of life and as a venue to covertly express discontent with the policies of Louis XIV. Expensive foreign wars meant high taxes, which curbed the extravagant lifestyle of the elite. A heavy death toll in combat, combined with serious crop failure, led to much social unrest. This historical context shaped the early character of the genre, as the tales could be readily interpreted as political commentary on the state of the nation.

In the salons of Paris, where elite women and men met to discuss art, politics, literature, and love, the genre was first named *contes de fée*, or fairy tales. Zipes suggests that the imprint of the fairies on the naming of the genre was significant in determining its evolution. For the first time the power of metamorphosis was placed in the hands of women, "the redoubtable fairies." Against the backdrop of two centuries of burning witches at the stake for nonconformism, women were not free to speak openly of alternative beliefs to those of the established church and monarchy. These could be safely expressed in a symbolical code in fairy tales. In fact many beliefs that went against the grain of traditional religion, social conventions, or the monarch's law could be disguised in fantasy in the world of fairies. "There was something subversive about the institutionalization of the fairy tale in France during the 1690's," says Zipes, "for it enabled writers to create a dialogue about norms, manners and power that evaded court censorship and freed the fantasy of the writers and readers while at the same time paying tribute to the French code of civilité and the majesty of the aristocracy."⁶

Provocative, often bizarre, and extraordinary salon fairy tales flourished between 1690 and the early part of the next century. "The Utopian impulse was not much different than the Utopian impulse that led peasants to tell their folktales," says Zipes, "but the wish fulfillment in the oral tales of the peasants arose out of completely different circumstances of oppression and hope. The salon tales were marked by the struggles within the upper classes for recognition, sensible policies and power."⁷ Once considered vulgar and not worth the attention of the elite, folklore was elevated in tone and style by writers like Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, who wrote *The Island of Happiness* and subsequently published four volumes of fairy

tales between 1696 and 1698. D'Aulnoy was the foremost fairy-tale teller in her day and was considered the innovator of the fairy tale as literary genre. The influence of "Cupid and Psyche," early Italian literary tales, and French folklore was evident in her work along with her use of the genre to express political concerns. In the main tale of her first collection, the hero Adolph fails to achieve total happiness as he sacrifices love for glory in war, which was a covert condemnation of the king's aggressive wars abroad and the incredible sacrifices demanded of his subjects.

CHARLES PERRAULT'S MORAL PURPOSE

A frequent visitor to the French salon and confidante of D'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault published his *Mother Goose Tales* in 1697. Many versions of the most famous fairy tales read by children today, such as "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Little Red Riding Hood," are based on Perrault's stylish renditions. His central purpose in writing the tales, however, was less related to producing a children's text and more to do with winning support in a famous intellectual debate of the time.

The son of a member of the French Parlement, Perrault acquired a position under an influential politician and pursued a successful administrative career promoting the arts and sciences. But his real love was his writing and poetry. Perrault struggled most of his career trying to establish credentials amongst the literary elite. In 1697, in an attempt to appease his critics, he published a long poem called "The Age of Louis the Great." While the aim of the poem was to flatter the king and Perrault's contemporaries by suggesting the superiority of modern society over ancient times, it inadvertently sparked a famous intellectual debate known as the "Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns."

Charles Perrault stood firmly on the side of the "moderns" who believed France's progress depended on developing a culture of enlightenment based on the beliefs of the common people and the wisdom conveyed through their folklore. Perrault took these folktales and added a specific moral dimension. In the preface to the third edition, he writes, "I believe that my fables are more worthy of being recounted than most of the ancients' tales . . . which were created only to please, without regard for sound morals, which they greatly neglected."⁸ And so the real audience of

his *Mother Goose Tales* was the literary establishment, which could appreciate the subtle way he transformed well-known fairy tales into moral treatises. Perrault's opponents felt his position denounced the classical literary tradition of the great authors of antiquity, such as Homer and Virgil, and amounted to pagan worship. According to Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi, Perrault's biographer, the debate had far-reaching implications, providing the impetus for the revolutions of the eighteenth century and justifying the abolition of outmoded social systems. Ultimately, Louis XIV declared in favor of the wisdom of the ancients, and Perrault's personal and artistic credibility suffered by being linked to this conflict forevermore.

FAIRY TALES ARE CONVENTIONALIZED AS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Contrary to popular belief, the literary fairy tale for children was not established by Charles Perrault, although his *Mother Goose Tales* achieved fame and recognition far in excess of the works of the women of the French salon. It was not until the publication of Governess Le Prince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," fifty years later, when more widespread acceptance of the fairy tale as a literary genre had taken place, that it was to be considered appropriate literature for children.

In 1740 Madame de Villeneuve, another product of the French salon, published an elaborate version of "Beauty and the Beast" based on Apuleius's "Cupid and Psyche." Seventeen years later Governess de Beaumont reworked and simplified Villeneuve's "Beauty and the Beast" with the express purpose of conveying standard notions of proper behavior to her charges. This led to a more widespread acceptance of the literary form as appropriate for adults and children of all social classes. Coupled with the large-scale distribution of *bibliothèque bleue*, or cheap chapbooks, in France in the eighteenth century, the literary fairy tale, once the sole purview of the elite intellectual, went back to the masses to interact with the oral tradition and became an established literary form for children.

In 1789 Charles Mayer published forty-one volumes of fairy tales, which included most of the French fairy tales from the preceding century. With this publication the genre became firmly established in the Western intellectual tradition. This

meant that all future writers of fairy tales borrowed from an established literary convention.

GERMAN ROMANTICISM AND THE FAIRY TALE

Developments in Germany provided the next impetus in the institutionalization of the fairy tale as a genre in the Western world. Under the influence of the French tales, German Romantics like Novalis, Ludwig Tieck, and E.T.A. Hoffman took the European fairy tale to new horizons. In their hands, the genre underwent a major shift in function to become a vehicle for the critique of the ideology of the aristocracy and social institutions. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's "The Fairy Tale" (1795) denounced the harsh aspects of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a further shift in the genre occurred to include social commentary. "The evil forces assume a social hue," says Zipes, "for the witches and villains are no longer allegorical representations of evil in the Christian tradition but are symbolically associated with the philistine bourgeois society or the decadent aristocracy."⁹

THE BROTHERS GRIMM:

FROM FOLKLORE TO EDUCATION MANUALS

Between 1792 and 1815 the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars devastated Europe. Territorial boundaries were continually redrawn as Napoléon usurped life, limb, and property in the name of the glory of France. Two German scholars, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, were deeply affected by these political events. "Despite their privileged childhood," writes professor of comparative literature Ruth Bottigheimer, "the Grimms were exposed directly to the major political traumas of the day. The French Revolution of 1789, which was followed by grisly reports of the executions of French nobles, affected Wilhelm's young imagination. His earliest extant water-color drawing depicts a bloody scene from Louis XIV's execution, as his head is held aloft before the gathered mob."¹⁰

Deeply concerned with the issue of German unification and imbued with the spirit of the Romantic movement that glorified the past, the Grimms pursued their nationalistic fervor by producing numerous scholarly books on German history, literature, religion, law, and folklore. This included

the publication of *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (*Childhood and Household Tales*) in two volumes in 1812 and 1815, the source of many of the best-known fairy tales. Thereafter, they combined the two volumes and published another six editions. This collection of tales, including appended scholarly notes, was intended to promote German ancestral pride, not merely to be a children's book. The folkloric work of the Grimm brothers changed the attitude of scholars toward the oral tales of the people and stimulated the collecting of fairy and folktales throughout Europe. Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), Joseph Jacobs' *English Fairy Tales* (1890), W.B. Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland* (1892), and Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe's *Norwegian Folktales*, also known as *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* (1859), were among the most famous compilations of the period.

The surprising popular response to the tales, attributed to the nationalist sentiments of a growing middle-class audience, spurred Wilhelm to edit the third volume with children in mind. He described this and subsequent editions as a proper educational manual. The Grimms' tales created an ideal type for the literary fairy tale, which not only elevated the tone and style of the original folkloric texts but also made substantive thematic changes in a manner that suited the tastes of middle-class parents in Europe.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AND THE ART FAIRY TALE

Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales Told for Children*, published in 1835, and subsequent books of fairy tales, which included "The Little Mermaid," "The Ugly Duckling," "The Snow Queen," and "Princess and the Pea," had a profound impact on the development of the fairy tale as genre. Andersen wrote fairy tales rather than collecting or recording oral folklore. He knew and loved the Grimms' stories as a boy, but unlike the German scholars, he held no romantic notions about the glorious past of the common folk. "He knew the truth about the good old days first hand,"¹¹ writes biographer Frederik Bøök. His motivation came not from any nationalistic fervor but rather from an intense personal ambition to escape his lowly origins, achieve fame and recognition, and find artistic expression for his eccentric and somewhat tortured personality.

The son of a poor cobbler and illiterate washerwoman, Andersen grew up steeped in the oral tradition. As a child he

invented lively tales and gave theatrical performances in his native town of Odense, Denmark. These early talents evolved into highly personal fairy tales reflecting both his hard life experience and keen powers of observation. One of Andersen's great innovations was his extraordinary imagination. His creative imaginary powers "shook the conventions of everyday existence as a lion shakes the bars of his cage,"¹² writes B  k. This changed the attitude of writers toward fantasy and fairy tales. "With the arrival of Andersen's tales in the English language," explain Iona and Peter Opie, "came an unfreezing of men's minds, an appreciation of fantasy literature and its limitless possibilities."¹³ Andersen continued what Perrault had begun, writing tales that spoke with different messages to children and adults. The fairy-tale genre began to exert its influence on the imagination of writers like Charles Dickens ("The Magic Fishbone" and *A Christmas Carol*), Oscar Wilde (*The Happy Prince and Other Stories*), Washington Irving (*Rip Van Winkle*), and Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Tanglewood Tales for Boys and Girls*).

THE RETURN OF THE FAIRIES TO VICTORIAN ENGLAND

As far back as English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's famous work *Leviathan*, written in 1651, the realm of fairy tales had been identified with the kingdom of darkness on English shores. Under the spell of Puritanism for the better part of two centuries, the literary establishment in England objected to fairy tales on the grounds of truth and reasonableness. In 1802 there was no greater spokesperson for the anti-fairy tale brigade than Sarah Trimmer, founder of a magazine called the *Guardian of Education*. Fearful that England and the established Christian Church were "in grave danger from the Jacobinical (or socialist) tendencies of France," she was suspect of anything of French origin, including Perrault's fairy tales. She supported the view of one anonymous magazine contributor, who wrote, "Cinderella paints some of the worst passions that can enter into the human breast, and of which little children should, if possible, be totally ignorant; such as envy, jealousy, a dislike of mothers-in-law and half-sisters, vanity, a love of dress etc etc."¹⁴

Major historical developments in England are said to account for the return of the credibility of fairy tales. The age of Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries heralded not only the belief in the value of the

imagination and fantasy but also a more open spirit of enquiry. "The questioning spirit of the romanticists," says Zipes, "enabled them to play a key role in fostering the rise of the literary fairy tale in Great Britain, for the symbolism of the tales gave them great freedom to experiment and express their doubts about the restricted view of the utilitarians and traditional religion."¹⁵ Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, and Samuel Coleridge pursued these questions through the fairy tales while W.B. Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley created a receptive environment for all forms of Romantic literature.

FAIRY TALES EXPRESS ALIENATION IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

Vast social upheaval accompanied the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century in Europe. The plight of the highly visible urban poor captured the attention of writers of fairy tales like John Ruskin (*King of the Golden River*, 1841), William Makepeace Thackeray (*The Rose and the Ring*, 1855) and Charles Kingsley (*The Water Babies*, 1863). These authors wrote for middle-class parents and children and looked to raise social consciousness about inequalities in English society. Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, and George MacDonald, the three most important writers in the genre from 1840 to 1880, wanted to develop an innovative fairy-tale form that would express the growing sense of alienation of the individual in the industrial age. They advocated change in the bureaucratic, rational, and materialist culture that had lost touch with humanity, compassion, and free-spiritedness. In Dickens', "The Magic Fishbone," he parodies a king who can only make sense of the world through reason and becomes totally confounded when his daughter, through the use of a magic fishbone, turns his world upside down and inside out. Although Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* serves to critique the absurd rules and regulations of his society, his use of an extraordinary plot without obvious moral purpose was a radical departure from the previous function of the genre. MacDonald's "The Light Princess," which parodies "Sleeping Beauty," tells of a princess who is cursed with a lack of gravity following an insult to a fairy godmother. When she sees a noble prince about to die because of her frivolity, she is transformed through compassion into a mature human being and gains the gravity necessary for good human relations.

Between 1860 and the turn of the century, fairy-tale writers moved in one of two directions. The first, represented by authors like Italian Carlo Collodi, who wrote *Pinocchio* in 1883, aimed to instill solid values like diligence and perseverance in the very young and uphold established norms. Writers who chose the other path, like Oscar Wilde, Kenneth Graham, Rudyard Kipling, and Robert Louis Stevenson, sought to reform the conventional fairy tale to expose readers to new views on authority, socialization, religion, and gender roles. They were joined by a number of female fairy-tale writers, including Christina Rossetti, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and Frances Hodgson Burnett, who expressed radical, angry, even violent views under the guise of the innocent fairy tale. Zipes concludes, "These writers instilled a Utopian spirit into the fairy tale discourse that endowed the genre with a vigorous and unique quality of social criticism, which was to be developed even further by later writers of faerie works such as A.A. Milne, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and T.H. White."¹⁶

AMERICAN FAIRY TALES AND IDEALISM

In an effort to explain the paucity of early American authors who wrote fairy tales, American writer and critic Selma G. Lanes asserts that the traditional fairy tale was "out of tune with the freshly minted optimism generated by the New World" in nineteenth-century America. "Fairy Tales were consolations for lives in need of magical solutions, but here man was master of his own fate."¹⁷

Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*, written in 1819, is considered the first serious attempt to adapt the European fairy tale to American soil. It took more than half a century for other American contenders to weigh in. Frank R. Stockton, hailed as the pioneer of American fairy tales, published *The Bee Man of Orn and Other Fanciful Tales* in 1887. Representative of a new breed of fairy-tale writers, Stockton and his contemporaries were drawn to the genre to express their views on the greed and materialism of the Gilded Age in America. Stockton's fairy tales convey his concerns about abuses of authority and offer a social vision that stresses inner contentment. In 1900 L. Frank Baum, who set out to write a distinctly American fairy tale, published *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In a sequel, Princess Langwidere asks Dorothy, "Are you of royal blood?" Emphasizing America's

detachment from European aristocracy and anything that smacked of the Old World, Dorothy pluckily replies, "Better than that, ma'am, I come from Kansas."¹⁸ Baum consciously departed from the Grimm/Andersen fairy-tale model in response to what British writer and critic Neil Phillip describes as a growing sense that European fairy tales were "failing American children in some deep-seated way."¹⁹

The American fairy tale differed from its European counterpart in several important respects. A certain idealism penetrated the genre and showed itself in different values, in a new conception of the use of magic, and in the nature of the relationship between good and evil. The heroes and heroines in American fairy tales sought courage, heart, and adventure rather than riches, power, and status. Magic was secondary to the overriding reality of American life experience. In Stockton's "The Bee Man of Orn," for example, after many adventures, the hero returns to his normal everyday life and sees it with fresh appreciation. Similarly, much of the power of the traditional European fairy tales came from the evenly matched forces of good and evil. But in the American versions, the wolf does not get Red Riding Hood, and Dorothy in Baum's Oz tales is not harmed because the power of good is always portrayed as greater than the power of evil. In the words of Lanes, early American writers of fairy tales had a "reluctance to give wickedness its due."²⁰ This rosy picture of American life and human nature became unglued in the twentieth century, when writers of fairy tales witnessed the world wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and disturbing developments in America's social fabric.

THE POLITICIZATION OF THE GENRE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By the twentieth century the literary fairy tale was fully institutionalized and commanded a major role in forming and maintaining the cultural heritage of Western society. This meant that publishing houses regularly produced books of fairy tales to meet an established demand by consumers. Fairy-tale themes and stories proliferated in a range of art forms, including music, opera, plays, poetry, the visual arts, and, more recently, film and television. Folklorist Wolfgang Mieder attests to the recent upsurge in innovative fairy-tale forms to include cartoons, comic strips, newspaper headlines, and advertisements. Creators of these art forms draw

on the near-universal language of fairy tales but shape them to impress specific social and political visions on their work.

Politicization was a marked feature of the genre during the first half of the twentieth century. The devastation caused by World War I prompted a number of writers to express political views through fairy-tale forms. For example, in 1919 Hermann Hesse gave his pacifist views in "Strange News from Another Planet." Thomas Mann produced his fairy-tale novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924), which was full of covert ideological messages, and, according to Jack Zipes, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1938) was written as a warning tale about the dangers of a second world war.

In the late 1930s the Nazis rise to power in Europe saw evidence of a more sinister use of the genre. The German Pedagogical Academy published Nazi interpretations of the Grimms' fairy tales, including a version of "Cinderella" in which the prince recognizes Cinderella's purity of blood while ensuring that her racially inferior stepmother and stepsisters receive their just desserts. The blatant use of the genre for indoctrination purposes continued into the Cold War era. In East Germany, Marxist versions of fairy tales such as "Cinderella" were altered to reflect the rejection by the prince of his former "parasitic existence" within the royal family and the palace and his subsequent preference for joining Cinderella as one of the common folk.

THE "DISNEYFICATION" OF AMERICA

While writers in Europe carried on their own experiments with fairy tales, a significant innovation took place in America that would have tremendous influence on the genre. In an effort to uplift sagging morale and encourage workers to pull together during the Great Depression, Walt Disney released the classic film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. This animated film, along with Disney's *Cinderella*, broke all box-office records. The film medium and the enormous appeal of his animated characters ensured that Disney's versions would be seen by millions of people worldwide. So influential were his fairy-tale features that they often supplanted the original tales on which they were based. A report from *Newsweek* in 1973 maintains that at the time of his death in 1966, Disney had entertained and educated three generations of Americans. Disney's fairy tales continue to play a role in uniting parents, children, and

people of different walks of life in the pleasures of enchantment and in providing a distraction from some of the harsher realities of the late twentieth century.

However, the vast commercialization of the genre with Disney theme parks, movies, videos, and toys has fueled a heated critical debate concerning Disney's treatment of the fairy tale as genre and his impact on the socialization process. In placing his main focus on technical innovations, critics claim that Disney has trivialized and sanitized the genuine tales beyond all recognition. For example, the authentic Cinderella tale is not one of rags to riches, a heroine dreaming of being rescued by a prince. In the tale derived from the oral tradition, Cinderella is a princess who has had a spell cast on her that hides her true identity and forces her to be a lowly housemaid. With the help of the spirit of her dead mother, she meets the conditions to have the wicked spell released when she is recognized and loved by a prince for her true beauty and inner nobility of spirit despite her filthy outward appearance. "With Mr. Disney's treatment," said American librarian Frances Clarke-Sayers in a famous letter to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1965, "the powerful ancient tales fraught with psychological conflict and spiritual truths become one great marshmallow-covered cream puff."²¹

Similarly, feminist critics argue that Disney's heroines provide poor female role models. Speaking of Snow White and Cinderella, Marina Warner says Disney portrays "niminy-piminy idiots as paragons and introduce children everywhere to expect malignancy from older women."²² Marcia Lieberman, in her acclaimed article " 'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale," says fairy tales are "training manuals in passive behavior"²³ for women. However, other feminist writers such as professor of American literature Alison Lurie point to the sterling qualities of heroines in earlier oral tales and suggest their emancipatory nature. More recent feminist scholars, including Madonna Kolbenschlag and Kay Stone, believe classical fairy tales can be both "parables of socialization"²⁴ for women and at the same time models for radical transformation of their lives.

Despite the views of feminists, academics, and educators, the popular appeal of the Disney fairy tales remained a major cultural influence and a reflection of values in the late twentieth century. For example, critics claim that they both

reflect and perpetuate sexual stereotypes that have promoted passivity in women and placed pressure on men to fulfill certain role expectations. "Disney's modifications originate from accurate readings of our culture," says American writer and librarian Betsy Hearne. "He got the address right. This is where we live. We who criticize Disney have seen the enemy, and he is us. . . . What he does to fairy tales and classics is, in a sense, our own shadow. We don't have to like it and we don't have to keep quiet about it, but we do have to understand our own society and the lore it generates."²⁵

In response to feminist concerns over Disney's sanitized variants and a predominance of fairy tales with passive heroines, writers cast a critical eye on the genre and explored new avenues of female empowerment in the classic tales. Rosemary Minard scanned folklore texts for pithy females and published *Womenfolk and Fairy Tales* in 1975. Pamela Travers, in *About the Sleeping Beauty*, collected multiple versions of the fairy tale from around the world and included her own updated version, suggesting that the awakening of Sleeping Beauty is symbolic of an awakening of the soul that has somehow fallen asleep after childhood and has become hemmed in and hidden by the external affairs of life. Authors such as Anne Sexton, Jane Yolen, Tanith Lee, Angela Carter, and Terri Windling have rewritten the old tales and created bold texts presenting a new breed of fairy-tale heroines as models for women. In Judith Viorst's Cinderella tale, for example, the heroine changes her mind when she sees the prince in the cold light of day and pretends the slipper does not fit.

FAIRY TALES ADDRESS MODERN SOCIAL CONCERNS

Like the feminist critics, other modern writers have continued to use fairy tales as vehicles of social commentary. Struck by the incongruence between the idealism of these classic tales and the harsh realities of the modern world, these writers chose to explore a more pessimistic anti-fairy-tale philosophy. Sarah Moon's *Little Red Riding Hood* uses Perrault's text with her own stark modern photography to present a disturbing commentary on modern social tragedies. A young girl sets out for her grandmother's house only to be raped and beaten in city streets on the way. And in the late 1980s, Ron Koslow's television series *Beauty and*

the Beast presented a typical New York yuppie lawyer involved with a successful real estate developer, who has her shallow life turned upside down after being raped in Central Park. Found close to death by a beastlike creature who inhabits an underground world, she is nursed back to health. In the process, she develops a social conscience, is "humanized" by the beast, and becomes a legal champion for the downtrodden.

Innovative uses of the genre have also included drawing on the powerful metaphors and symbolism to illuminate people's psychological conflicts. In his classic work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Freudian child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim suggests that many popular fairy tales symbolically depict emotional anxieties and can be used to help troubled children develop a sense of meaning in their lives. Following Bettelheim's work, psychology professor Sheldon Cashdan has drawn on the tale of "Cinderella" to illustrate the pitfalls of envy; "Jack and the Beanstalk," greed; "Hansel and Gretel," gluttony; and "Snow White," vanity, in his use of the genre to treat disturbed children.

AGGRESSIVE AND DISTURBING POSTMODERNIST FAIRY TALES

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the genre showed more aggressive tendencies. Through the use of highly disturbing fairy-tale images and dark departures from happy endings, artists like Emma Donoghue, Wendy Walker, and Robert Coover created highly experimental fairy-tale forms. These have been designed to shock people out of complacency and have left audiences unsettled and dissatisfied. Coover's "Hansel and Gretel" is a good example. The modernized Hansel and Gretel arrive at the witch's house, which is dark and frightening and greatly contrasts with the bright gingerbread house of the old tale. The tale concludes, "But the door: here they pause and catch their breath. It is heart-shaped and blood-stone-red, its burnished surface gleaming in the sunlight. Oh, what a thing is that door! Shining like a ruby, like hard cherry candy, and pulsing softly, radiantly. Yes, marvelous! insuperable! but beyond: what is that sound of black rags flapping?"²⁶ The traditional triumphant ending to the tale is bypassed, leaving the reader anxious but with no clear resolution. The primary function of the fairy tale—to provide hope and closure—has been undermined. According

to Jack Zipes, the object of these postmodernist fairy-tale writers is to jolt the reader into new awareness, to question old assumptions with an alert and critical eye, and "to hold a cracked mirror to the old fairy tales and reality at the same time."²⁷

Zipes suggests that the directions the genre will take in the future include the continued reproduction of classical tales for children, at the forefront of which is still the Disney animated verisons; feminist fairy tales designed to express concerns about women's roles in the twenty-first century; postmodern experimental forms with unusual twists like Coover's rendition of "Hansel and Gretel"; and parodies and revisions of the classical tales in a variety of forms, including commercials, films, and literature, both to amuse and to question convention. Sheldon Cashdan predicts that in the future the genre will be wedded to computer technology, which may lead to fairy tales in the world of virtual reality. Here, a young child might become Jack, scrambling down the beanstalk, or scale a castle wall to wake a sleeping princess. The classical tales would be given new dimensions as children experience fairy-tale characters and worlds from the inside out.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GENRE

One is struck by the antiquity of the fairy tale and by the variety of functions it has served during its long history. From civilizing, to subverting, to indoctrinating, to shocking audiences out of old beliefs, to molding new social patterns, fairy tales interact with societies and emerge in new forms. They reflect the values and concerns of the storyteller, the audience, and the times. Yet although their shapes and forms change, core elements endure. Cinderella is alive and well, whatever her modern-day apparel, an eternal fairy-tale heroine.

What can account for the longevity and tenacity of the genre? Why are the tales so compelling? Classical fairy tales mirror the process of growth, transformation, and maturity. American author Joseph Campbell says fairy tales present the archetype for the hero's journey. The initiate is cast out of the old and familiar, is alienated and lost, faces terrible danger, wins a great victory, and emerges from this mysterious journey with the power to bestow knowledge and wisdom on his fellow man. Campbell suggests that the longevity

of the genre is related to its eternal relevance to human history.

The compelling nature of fairy tales is partly related to their unique style and effect. Fairy tales contain magical occurrences that astonish and enchant. The world beyond "once upon a time" is a place free of ancient limitations like poverty, hunger, and death, and where deep soul longings, like flying as free as the birds or talking to the beasts, can find expression. In the fairy-tale form, writers like C.S. Lewis have seen the opportunity to "bypass the watchful dragons"²⁸ of the rational mind and present ideas to people that they would normally not admit. Tolkien says the effect of fairy tales is not amenable to rational analysis. Fairy tales open a door on "other time," which is free from strict adherence to rational laws and concepts.

Tolkien further maintains that the consolation of the happy ending, an essential characteristic of all true fairy tales, is the highest and most primary function of the genre. Classic fairy tales do not deny the existence of heartache and sorrow, but they do deny universal defeat. And, according to Tolkien, fairy tales produce a special kind of joy, "joy beyond the walls, poignant as grief,"²⁹ as keen as that produced by any literary art form. The joy elicited by fairy tales, however, can pass outside the web of story, or make-believe, and provide a glimpse of an underlying truth or reality. Fairy tales are so compelling because they arouse an intuitive knowing that there is a profound truth in the vicinity. It is a highly subjective call, and again, not open to rational analysis. Roger Sale gives an example of this as he describes his reaction to the final lines of the Grimms' tale "The Death of the Hen," which read, "So the cock was left all alone with the dead hen, and he digged a grave and laid her in it, and he raised a mound above her, and sat himself down and lamented so sore that at last he died. And they were all dead together." Sale's epiphany is unrestrained:

I feel here almost like shouting. There is nothing like this in the world, never before and never again. . . . We are back at the foot of the great narrative tree, where stories can, as if by a kind of natural magic, go anywhere, because life, crimped and fearful though it be, is wondrous and full and one must accept it all. One minds mortality less when remembering that we will all be dead together, along with the hen and the cock and the teller of that tale.³⁰

The wonder and recognition of the profound nature of something so deceptively innocent lures readers like Sale back to the genre, back to the magic and enchantment of the fairy-tale realm.

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30. Sale, *Fairy Tales and After*, pp. 46-47.

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