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What Is Real in Folk Tales?

Near a large forest lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and two children. The boy's name was Hansel and the girl's Gretel. The woodcutter had little to eat, and once when a great famine swept the country, he was no longer able to earn even their daily bread. One evening when he was lying in his bed and tossing about and worrying, he sighed and said to his wife, "What's to become of us? How can we feed our poor children when we've nothing left for ourselves?" "Do you know what, husband," answered the wife, "the first thing tomorrow morning we'll take the children out into the thickest part of the forest. There we'll kindle them a fire and give each a little piece of bread; then we'll go about our work and leave them there alone: they won't find the way back home, and we'll be rid of them." "No, wife," said the man, "that I won't do. How could I have the heart to leave my children alone in the forest; the wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces." "O you fool," she said, "then all four of us will starve to death; you might as well start planing the boards for our coffins," and gave him no peace until he agreed. "But all the same I'm sorry for the poor children," said the man.

The two children hadn't been able to get to sleep either, because they were hungry and heard what their stepmother said to their father. Gretel wept bitter tears and said to Hansel, "Now it's all up with us." "Be quiet, Gretel," said Hansel, "Don't worry, I'll get us out of this, of course."¹

The stories that the Grimm brothers started to collect around 1806 were the sort of thing that peasants told at the *veillée* when they assembled in the evening around a fire. Bruno Bettelheim, who has studied such stories from a psychoanalytic point of view in a very interesting book called *The Uses of Enchantment*,² regards the story of Hansel and Gretel as a regressive fantasy.

In terms of the child's dominant anxiety, Hansel and Gretel believe that their parents are talking about a plot to desert them . . . By projecting their inner anxiety onto those they fear might cut them off, Hansel and Gretel are convinced that their parents plan to starve them to death!³

They lack "the courage to embark on the voyage of finding themselves," and so the story is about "the debilitating consequences of failing to deal with life's problems by means of regression and denial which reduce our ability to solve problems."⁴

The naive historian who reads Hansel and Gretel might not have thought of this explanation, especially when applied to little children who show quite a lot of initiative in order to cling to a minimum of security or to recapture it when it has been lost. And one reason why the historian might not think of it would be that any story of cast-out children would strike him as highly realistic and calling for very little interpretation indeed.⁵ The cunning analyst wants to go beyond the obvious, so one section of Bettelheim's book is called "The Fantasy of the Wicked Stepmother."⁶ But that interpretation simply ignores the grim everyday experience on which the recurrent motif is based. Given the mortality rates, especially of women in childbirth, wicked stepmothers were not a subject of fantasy any more than cast-out children.

Whether we take Hansel and Gretel or Cinderella, their basic themes were utterly familiar to those who listened to them—pretty much into the nineteenth century. Restif de la Bretonne's life of his father, who was born under Louis XIV, describes the middle-aged widower marrying a young servant who then proceeds to expel or exploit the daughters of his first marriage.⁷ The memoirs of Jean-Roch Coignet,⁸ born about 25 miles away from Restif's village of Nitry in the same area of Lower Burgundy under Louis XVI (in 1776 to be exact), describe a father who used three wives to sire 32 official offspring. Jean-Roch was one of the sons of the second wife. She died; his father married the eighteen-year old servant who beat and starved the orphans until the two oldest boys, aged eight and nine respectively, ran away and hired themselves out as shepherds. Meanwhile, the two youngest (a boy of six and a girl of seven) were Hansel-and-Gretel by their stepmother. One evening when the father was in the fields, she took them into the local forest, as deep into it as she could, and left them there in the dark, completely lost. After three days and three nights (during which they lived on berries and cried a lot), they were found by a miller who took them in. So they survived by sheer chance and then, again by chance, Jean-Roch (by then a hard-bitten veteran of twenty-eight, well-launched on a military

career under Napoleon) discovered them twenty years later in Paris. Within three months of the reunion, the girl died, and one of the brothers followed her shortly, with Coignet noting that the hardships they endured in youth sapped their health and strength.

Another Grimm story, "Brother and Sister," sounds exactly like the experience of the Coignet children:

A brother took his sister by the hand and said: "Since our mother died, we haven't had a single happy hour. Our stepmother beats us every day, and when we go to her, she kicks us out. Hard left-over crusts of bread are our food, and the dog under the table is better off, for once in a while she throws it some choice morsel. The Lord have mercy, if our mother knew that! Come, let's go out into the world together . . ."

For Bettelheim, who does not cite the whole passage and leaves out all the concrete reasons the children have for wanting to leave home, being pushed out stands for self-realization and having to become oneself. Just as in Hansel and Gretel, he chides the children trying to hold on to their parents even though the time has come when they should meet the world on its own terms. They need to transcend that primitive orality which we also encounter in Hansel and Gretel's infatuation with the gingerbread house.⁹

An apt comment on these perceptions may be found in one of the Grimms' nicest stories, "The White Snake," which is about generosity and its rewards. The hero rides through a forest,

and there he saw a father-raven and a mother-raven standing by their nest and throwing their young out. "Out with you, you good-for-nothings!" they cried: "we can't keep up with your appetites any longer; you're big enough to provide for yourselves." The poor little birds were lying on the ground, fluttering and bearing their wings and crying, "we helpless children! We are supposed to provide for ourselves, and can't yet fly! What is left for us but to die of starvation?"¹⁰

When, as in the seventeenth century, famine conditions imposed a diet consisting wholly of bad black bread, acorns, and roots; when despair could drive children to feed on themselves; and when, well into the nineteenth century, bad harvests could impel communities from poverty to destruction, "infantile dependency" was short-lived and "separation anxiety" well-founded.¹¹ And this is my argument: that *märchen*, the popular stories that we describe as fairy tales, can tell us a great deal about real conditions in the world of those who told and those who heard the tales.

It has been claimed¹² that fairy tales do not speak the language of everyday reality. The familiar formula "once upon a time" warns us that we're not going to hear about real persons and places. The Grimms even have a few choice beginnings, such as, "in days of yore when God Himself still walked the earth, the land was much more fruitful than it is now." And the opening of the first story they print, "The Frog King," is also illustrative: "In days of old when wishing still did some good, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful; but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, which has, to be sure, seen so many things, was astonished every time it shone in her face."¹³ However, a very rough count of the Grimms' 200 folk tales shows only 70 of them beginning with these time-less signals. If we also leave aside thirty more fables or riddles or nonsense stories, fully half of the total have more or less realistic openings, like that of Hansel and Gretel, which may suggest that they are about real people.

A careful reading of the collection reveals a number of recurrent themes: hunger, poverty, death, danger, fear, chance. There are many orphans; there are wicked stepmothers, stepsisters, and mothers-in-law; there are poor children who have to go out into the world; there are forests inhabited by woodcutters and charcoal-burners but also by wild animals and outlaws and frightening spirits—forests that provide a refuge, but whose darkness breathes danger, where it was easy to lose one's way or to run into trouble. For Bettelheim, the forest symbolizes "the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious."¹⁴ Perhaps, but it is also very close to the reality of people who, well into the nineteenth century, feared it as the repair of bandits and wild beasts, and as a place where it was easy to lose oneself.

As in real life, forests are places through which one wends one's way uneasily, especially if one is alone, a woman or child, not knowing what to expect from the dark solitude. The sounds of forest or wasteland are not part of the villager's familiar symphony; their dwellers do not participate in the net of relations that makes one feel secure.

Much has been made of the success of ballads and stories about outlaws and their adventures. However, these were meant to produce not the thrills of emulation but the delights of fear. Ghosts, too, remained an ever-popular subject for *veillées*, but no one claims their public aspired to be like them. The stories that Restif remembered being told by the servants and the shepherds of la Bretonne were about "witches, ghosts, pacts with the devil, excommunicated men turned into beasts, who eat the people . . . shepherd-sorcerers . . ." He stayed up late, after his father had taken off for bed, "to hear stories of thieves and specters, and they made such a strong impression on me that afterwards I did not dare go to my bed alone."¹⁵

Of ghosts the Grimms seem not to have heard, but their collection speaks to the frightfulness of robbers, and French folk tales also bear them out. Thieves, fear of thieves and of their revenge when foiled, inform more stories than do wolves and other wild animals. Connivance (or resignation) does not entail sympathy. Action, albeit defensive, risks retaliation.¹⁶ An oft-repeated theme tells of the out-manuevered thief, his hand cut off by a cunning lass, who returns to marry the girl, takes her away with him to savor his revenge, and finally fails, captured or killed by the heroine's relatives or neighbors, or by *gendarmes*. Robbers like Laramée are not popular, but nasty and alarming. When the *gendarmes* catch up with him, they burn him at the stake.¹⁷

The theme of the fiancé who is a bandit or murderer in secret also warns against allowing strangers to marry into the village community, as in "La Fiancée et les quarante bandits" where the heroine's suitor is *étranger au pays*. He claims a castle and vast riches somewhere else, but *il ne faut pas se fier au premier venu*, and "his riches, one did not see them." No one knew his family, nor did he offer to invite anyone to meet them or to see his property. So the girl goes off to see for herself, without the stranger's knowing, and ends by calling the *gendarmes*.¹⁸

A number of stories begin with the son or sons leaving home, very young, either to earn money or to escape the misery they knew. This is absolutely true to life well into the nineteenth century. The eight-year old Coignet guarding his sheep in the forest, the eleven-year old boy from the Pyrénées arrested in Paris in 1828 for selling engravings without a permit, and the twelve-year old boy a policeman noted among the rebels of 1832, all confirm stories like that of the three brothers who have nothing left to eat: "it can't go on like this," they said, "we'd better go out into the world and seek our fortune."¹⁹

In many a fairy tale (though far from all) such fortune eventually comes by marriage to an heiress. The ideal prize is a princess, of course. But the king, her father, sounds more like a landed gentleman or a wealthy farmer: he hires his servants in person, sees they are sent their meals out in the fields, watches them at work "through his castle windows," worries about their working too little or eating too much.²⁰ The wandering hero triumphs over suspicions (and bad faith) with magic help, of course preferably from his bride to be, but also because his need makes him rise to the challenges encountered. Note that, as a rule, he is not the heir to his own house but a younger son for whom marrying out offers the best chance to recover his original situation, or better it, with a status scarcely less favorable than his first-born sibling; not direct heir, but son-in-law.

Such situations could readily drive some aspirants to trickery, as we

have seen above. In different circumstances, however, well-born youths or maidens may have concealed their origins in order to survive. Their honorable birth, unsuitable for kitchen maid or farm servant, was revealed when success made it relevant or when some other need called for self-justification.²¹

One hazard (among others) for those who wandered off: in the wider world, the language differed from one area to another, sometimes from one valley to another. Their speech, therefore, was probably meaningless away from home, and people had trouble understanding them. Like migrant workers today they tried to get by with a few words or phrases, and they often got into trouble. One finds this motif of senseless words or phrases being repeated in inappropriate situations in two Grimm stories, appropriately entitled "The Three Journeymen" and "Going Traveling," but it comes up most explicitly in a Breton story where three country lads go to Paris "to learn how to speak," pick up three French phrases, and get sent to prison for a murder they did not commit.²²

It is then a hazardous world, and one in which chance plays a great part. In 1830, a fourteen-year old peasant lad from the Creuse called Martin Nadaud, who had been born exactly thirty years after Jean-Roch Coignet, is taken by his father for his first "campaign" in Paris as a mason.²³ In those days (and pretty much since Richelieu mobilized the peasants of Creuse and Limousin to build the great dike that would keep the English fleet out of La Rochelle), the men folk of certain villages spent nine to twelve months every year as builders in Paris, Lyon, or Bordeaux and earned the cash to make ends meet on the stony soil of central France.

Before he leaves, Martin says goodbye to his four closest friends who are also setting off to do the same work in Lyon. Of the five lads, three would die within a couple of years and Nadaud himself nearly died the very next year of a three-story fall from which he recovered, almost surely because his father refused to let him go into the hospital. Thus danger and death are very real, but so is the great rule of luck: being saved by someone, or making a chance encounter, or distinguishing oneself in a moment of crisis (in battle or at work) and starting to go up in the world. The *Red and the Black* is a monument to this sort of resistible ascension, and Julien Sorel was not wrong about the possibilities he could exploit. He was only wrong about not exploiting them to the full. Martin Nadaud was going to pull himself up by his bootstraps (let it be said that his first boots, at fourteen, turned his feet into a wound), and in 1849 his fellow-masons would elect him deputy of the Creuse.

The *Memoirs* he has left us carry a leitmotif of praise for the modern age: praise for the railroads "which ushered in the golden age"²⁴ when migrant

masons no longer had to hike the 350 kilometers to Paris: praise for the superior diet which included meat (it is interesting to note that when the young Nadaud reached Paris it took him over a year before he could bring himself to touch meat which he had never eaten at home)²⁵; praise for the rising wages and better conditions of life—especially for the poor. In the mid-1890s Nadaud declares that "our century is one the most marvelous in our history, as far as the rise of popular wellbeing is concerned."²⁶ History bears him out, and so does the memory of those old enough to remember the old days without meat or wine or schools or old-age pensions, not to mention access to light and water, and to hospitals where one need not be dragged against one's will because that is where people went only to die.

The fairy tales bear him out too. When characters in folk tales get gifts or ask for them, when they are granted three wishes and so on, their ambitions are very simple: they dream of better clothes and better places to live, but above all they dream of food—pots that will cook endless porridge, tables or tablecloths that set themselves with meals, fairy bread that cannot be eaten out of existence, cubbyholes that secrete bread and milk. A proverb of the poor Cévennes makes clear that food is the most prized of presents, and likely to be consumed at once: "He who appreciates the gift closes his teeth on it."²⁷

When a white dove comes to the help of a girl lost in a forest, the bird gives her the key to a tree and promises that she "will find plenty of food." What she finds is "milk in a little bowl and beside it white bread to crumble into it, so that she was able to eat her fill."²⁸ The white bread would be a treat, but still that seems a very spare diet. The fact is that until the later nineteenth century the typical carnivores lived either in cities or in *châteaux* and palaces. That may be why we have a lot of legends about highborn ladies eating little children, just as Sleeping Beauty's mother-in-law wants to do in the Perrault version.²⁹

In fairy stories only the wicked eat meat, like Snow White's stepmother who eats the lungs and liver of a boar thinking that they are those of the girl, or the wicked witch who plans to eat Hansel. As for the children themselves, when the witch serves them what we are told is a good meal, they get "milk, pancakes and sugar, apples and nuts."³⁰ That would have been a real feast, especially in a context of famine. In the Auvergne version of Hansel and Gretel, Jeannot is imprisoned in the pigsty to be fattened up and fed on pig's mash. Jeannette carries him the mash and he tries not to eat it, but "the stuff was too appetizing for hungry children." So it is not very surprising that, in another story, a king's daughter using peas to mark her trail has her plan foiled because "in every street poor children were sitting and picking up peas."³¹

The other thing the poor dream about is treasure: gold, silver, anything they could lay their hands on, precisely because they could lay their hands on so little or none. The nature of the descriptions bears witness to this—one character does not even know the value of coins at all and accepts fathings for dollars (*thalers*), obviously because he had no previous occasion to handle either.³²

Most poor people (which means most people) were riddled with debts, often handed down from father to son. Shortage of cash (and consequently usury) played a crucial role in the rural risings of 1848–1851 and did not cease to haunt the peasants until the First World War and its cash flow emancipated them. In one French story, entitled *Jean Le Laid*, a father sells his soul to the devil, then his daughters to Ugly John, all to pay his debts.³³ But if the image of usury is realistic, the theme of hidden treasure is realistic too in times when the ground, or a wall, or a well, were the only safe places for savings or plate. In the absence of banks, hiding one's capital or savings was the natural thing to do. No wonder that for every hundred charges of theft between fellow-villagers in eighteenth-century Languedoc, thirty-seven referred to objects hidden in fields, or by the roadside. Crumbling walls, abandoned cottages or wells, hollow trees or a chance digging could reveal unexpected wealth: hence the persistent traditions that fascinated all peasants and the quest for secret treasures—often involving magic techniques or the services of professional sorcerers.³⁴ In 1838 the Finistère Assizes acquitted a farmhand accused of theft, accepting his plea that he had found a treasure, supported by the common knowledge that the man was *devin* and *sorcier*. At Brignon (Gard), about half a century later, two local men cutting down an almond tree discovered a sack of gold among its roots. By then, explanations inclined to positivism: "*Beléu*, qu'il en reste encore dans les murs"³⁵—so, no banks or vaults or safe deposit boxes, no credit, and little or no cash, or experience of it.

There is a splendid scene in Nadaud's *Memoirs* in which, in 1842, after years of hard labor to escape dire poverty and debt (with the shame attendant on the latter), the migrant mason returns home from a long stay in Paris with a trunk from which he first extracts fine presents for the family: wife, sisters, parents. Then comes a sack of 1,000 francs in 5-franc pieces, and a second, and great is the joy. Then Nadaud tells his wife to look and see if there is anything else in the trunk, and she finds a third sack, and then a fourth, and everybody begins to cry and kiss. Then comes the orgy: "We started to empty the sacks and to place their contents in 100-franc piles. The table was covered with silver pieces, blinding white. It was past two in the morning when we stopped contemplating what we called a fascinating sight."³⁶ The language is stilted, but the experience must have been stu-

pendous, and it helps explain a lot of literary motifs that we no longer appreciate.

In folk tales the statement of misery, with which all were familiar, could lead to wonderful fantasies of resolution. There is one story in the Grimms' collection about "a little girl whose mother and father had died. She was so poor that she no longer had a room to live in nor bed to sleep in, and finally had nothing but the clothes on her back and in her hand a piece of bread that some kind soul had given her." Despite her straits, she gives the bread and the clothes off her back to people who are poorer than she is (or more enterprising), upon which the stars fall from the skies and turn into dollars which she gathers up. After which "she was rich as long as she lived."³⁷ Failing such rare selflessness, others sought the help of magic—not very different from what we find in tales. In 1776 Pierre Chambault of Noun, in Sologne, was placed in the pillory on market day and then banished for having bamboozled a miller with the promise of a hen who would lay silver coins at her owner's will. The miller had paid 480 *livres* to acquire the bird.³⁸

The fairy-tale world is a world in which no one can get rich except by miracle or crime. When a poor crofter in one Grimm story becomes prosperous and builds a house, his neighbors are convinced that he must have used foul means to do it, and he is summoned before the magistrate to explain his new wealth. As a matter of fact, the neighbors were right because the man was a trickster—but this, in the story, proved to be his salvation and the downfall of his neighbors beginning with the magistrate himself who ended up drowned because of their greed.³⁹ Evidently, in their world one could prosper only at someone else's expense (as the mercantilists correctly perceived): villages prayed that the hail should fall on the land of other villages, and people cast spells to translate milk from the udders of their neighbors' cows into that of cows in their own stable. It was a world where productivity is left to elves or dwarfs or other supernatural characters⁴⁰ who spin flax, or plait straw, or shovel mountains away, or sort peas like Cinderella's magic doves, while the hero sleeps or the heroine weeps.

The difference between the many poor and the exceptional few is reflected in looks and features: kings' daughters are visibly different—their hair is golden, their skin is white, they are beautiful, and only disguise (rags, caps to cover their shining tresses, ashes, blacking) can hide their natural nobility. Of course, the shoe-motif in *Cinderella* refers to small, dainty feet—an indication of ladylike refinement that would not be very practical for a peasant woman. Male features invite less comment, though several times kings or princesses object to the origins or the bearing of base-born suitors.⁴¹ All this is perfectly realistic. Class standing was

reflected in physique: there is evidence for it in the famous lines of Jean de la Bruyère about "certain wild animals, black and sunburnt and ghastly-looking," who have something like an articulate voice and when they straighten up show a human face.⁴² The evil and the poor are often described as "black," the noble and good as "white." In the tale of *Oc, la brave Mariette* is "pretty as a new penny" while *la méchante Catinou* "had skin as black as a cricket and bleary eyes."⁴³ Whatever the symbolism, the fact is that only upper-class people could keep their face and hands white—and the equation between social and spiritual quality is soon made and widely accepted.

Reading Arthur Young, a century after la Bruyère, things had not changed very much on the eve of the French Revolution. And the situation for most of the nineteenth century is well-reflected in another Grimm story called "Eve's Unequal Children," in which God visits the household of Adam and Eve who have many children but decide to show Him only the handsome ones on whom he distributes rich blessings: they are to become kings and princes, nobles and merchants, burghers and scholars. As for those children who were ugly and misshapen, their parents had hidden them under the hay, in the stove, in the cellar, and so on. But since God was so good, Eve thought she would take a chance and bring them out too, and indeed God behaves very decently and blesses, as the text says, "the whole coarse, dirty, scabby, sooty troop." But the fare He allots them is to be farmer and fisherman, tanner and weaver, carter and servant.⁴⁴ So the poor themselves had a pretty good idea about their comparative looks.

Dress, of course, provides another mark of status and another contribution to the way people look. Ladies and gentlemen who do not dress right are not recognized for what they are. Heroines are only seen as such when they put on the right rich dress. That has not changed much! But one interesting detail is that even at the highest social levels fashions do not seem to change—which is not to say that they did not change in the real life of court and castle and burgherdom but that the folk public had no perception of it or of fashion as such. The prince who enters the Sleeping Beauty's palace after 100 years of quarantine finds nothing remarkable about its occupants except that they are asleep.

Compare this with Perrault's version of the Sleeping Beauty in which the prince cannot help noting that she is dressed like his great-grandmother, even though he takes good care not to say anything about it. And a little later, when they go to eat, we are told that the musicians played "old pieces, but very good ones, even though they had not been played for almost 100 years." Bettelheim finds such "petty rationality" frivolous.⁴⁵ But awareness of the chronological time is peculiar to certain types of society,

and Perrault (who was a magistrate and a courtier) must have been well aware that his seventeenth-century readers would not fail to think of the changes time had wrought precisely because they lived in a society that took change for granted, whereas the contemporary peasant public did not.

By the time Washington Irving invented Rip Van Winkle, 120 years after Perrault, change-in-time is the whole point of the story with nature and humans thoroughly altered, the village changed, dress different, humans aging and dying.⁴⁶ All that after only twenty years' sleep! And the whole story is about history, about the evolution of men and societies in time. So we have quite a different notion of chronological time, which traditional peasant societies tend to ignore because it has very little to do with their conditions of life and work, as has the notion of change-in-time.

One thing that all social orders seem to have in common in tales as in real life is vermin: not just the fleas that plague even gentlefolk living in close proximity to horses and dogs (though only the peasants called getting up in the morning "*secouer les puces*"), but lice, especially in the hair, which may be the origin of another locution, "dirty like a comb" (*sale comme un peigne*),⁴⁷ and also the source of another motif to be found in folk tales, that of gold coins falling out when the heroine combs her hair.

One charming conceit that recurs in several stories is the relaxation that a little delousing can provide. When devils come home to grandma or kings rest with their enchanted brides, there is nothing they appreciate more than a little lousing before they go to sleep.⁴⁸ In one particular story, in which a king's son is given a series of impossible tasks, the youngest daughter of his tormentor (who is also a king) comes out into the fields to bring him something to eat (just as a farmer's wife would) and tries to cheer him up: "When he had eaten something, she said, 'First I'll louse you a bit, then you'll feel differently.' When she had loused him, he got tired and fell asleep." Whereupon, she performs a miracle and has a whole forest cut down. This is repeated three times until the prince has performed his tasks, after which they marry and she can louse him happily ever after.⁴⁹

But marks of affection and helpfulness can become weary tasks when fair maidens are captured by dragons which, as all know, tend to a multiplicity of pates. In one such case, a young huntsman rescues not one but three princesses:

He opened the door slowly and there sat one of the king's daughters with nine dragon heads in her lap and was lousing them. He took his hunting knife and hacked away. Then the nine heads came off. The king's daughter jumped up and fell on his neck, hugged and kissed him a lot . . . Then he went to the second daughter, who

had a seven-headed dragon to louse, and freed her too; likewise the youngest, who had a four-headed dragon to louse, he also attended to her. They all rejoiced greatly, and hugged and kissed him unceasingly.³⁰

But the story does not end on this merry note because the brave young man who rescues the maidens is then betrayed by his brothers, who want to take the credit and the girls.

These stories are full of greed, envy, exploitation, and betrayal: step-mothers are terrible, of course, and stepsisters are pretty awful, but you cannot really trust your friends either,³¹ or your spouse. Husbands beat their wives or condemn them to horrid ends, wives betray their husbands, and blood relations are no better: it is brother against brother, sister against sister, parents against their children. Hence perhaps a motif very popular in French folktales, songs, and sayings: "ma mère m'a tué, mon père m'a mangé"—not unrelated to certain ritual healing practices but, surely, not unrelated to experienced relations either.³²

It would be preferable to attribute cruelty to step-relatives thus casting the responsibility for improper behavior on a stranger to the family. In theory, blood relationship should prohibit cruelty. In practice, the honor of the family and possibly its property, which could be forfeit by a heinous crime, were at stake. So, when in a Grimm story a little boy is invited to look into the apple chest and is murdered by bringing the lid down on his head, it is his stepmother who does it.

In one set of fifteen such French stories from the Dauphiné (where incidentally the lids of chests or kneading troughs are also favored) there is an occasional effort to explain the unnatural act by hunger: the mother's ferocity is due to misery; as for the father, he did not know what he was served.³³ But unlike our world, which excuses everything and understands nothing, this world always exacts retribution, and cruelty always receives a cruel punishment because folk tales, while not particularly moral, reflect the natural belief that punishment should follow crime—and that is what makes a really happy end: a wicked queen may be condemned to dance in red-hot slippers; villains will be slyly asked to name cruel punishments that will then be applied to them; and being rolled in a barrel full of spikes was particularly popular!³⁴

In real life retribution can also come in different ways, and our stories acknowledge this by indirection. The children, in due course, repay the treatment they have received. Hence moral tales are designed to persuade adults that it is in their own interest to be kind to their elders when they have become old and impotent.³⁵ This is the ambiguity of real relationships:

on one hand basic security can be found only in home, family, village; beyond these lay terrors, known and unknown. But the same terrors also lie in wait within the familiar circle, and a lot of folk tales acknowledge just how inescapable these are.

It is a frightening world everywhere, and one can do little to help oneself (or others!). Fairy bread never diminished, *provided* it was not shared with strangers, for generosity stopped at the family threshold. As far as we can tell from eighteenth-century Languedoc, it was unusual to invite passers-by to share one's food or drink.³⁶ Yet also (or perhaps therefore?) this is a world where the gratuitous gesture—kindness, selflessness—is the greatest virtue (perhaps because there is so little to give, perhaps precisely because it is so rare). No wonder that the generous heroes and heroines of many tales invited extraordinary rewards by their extraordinary actions. As another French proverb says, "Every fool has his good sense!" Apparent foolishness paid off, at least in fairy tales. On the other hand, in real life as in tales, a service requested (as by many a fairy figure) and performed (as by many heroes) created obligation. Hence the gifts or promises of eventual service extended by beneficiaries in our stories reflect the values of the working world.³⁷

If we look beyond the commonplaces of everyday life (and I have far from exhausted them) can we discover an ideology which will give us a clue to deeper popular values? We can, but it is really no different from the dominant ideology, from the official ideology of Church and state. Like so much of popular culture, popular ideology appears mimetic. If it is not, then it reflects a coincidence of values which can be attributed to the fact that, *au fond*, the fundamental conditions of life are the same for all: a high death rate, a high incidence of illnesses and accidents, and fairly narrow limits to lived experience, compensated by frequent recourse to the supernatural. The world is finite, in space as in possibilities, and it is contingent, with fortune or misfortune playing a crucial role.

The good and the bad of the lower orders are little different from those of their betters. The work ethos is accepted by everybody, though it does not apply to everybody, since high birth, or success, of beatitude bring escape from labor. Hierarchy—social or supernatural—is affirmed by power and mitigated by luck. Folk wisdom and official values approve of reward and retribution, but experience, in which the relation between cause and effect remains unclear, suggests that many explanations are supernatural and that resignation is the ultimate wisdom.

Almanacs, the most widely distributed repository of popular wisdom, preach a stoic morality: prudence, submission, honoring the great (and to the small a lot of people are great). "Begin the year with resignation and live

prudently" (but even "human prudence is helpless without help from on high"). "Forget what you cannot change." Mind your own business. "Do not judge what is not in your realm," and keep your mouth shut: "To keep silence in patience is a way of gaining favor."⁵⁸

Patient Griselda, who endures every torment and injustice her husband heaps on her, is the model for a score of heroines: she triumphs in the end, which means that her husband stops playing nasty tricks on her, and that is probably the best that common people could expect. So it is not surprising that in a lot of folk tales enduring in silence is one of the most common tests a heroine (or even a hero) has to pass, often despite torment by witches or by devils. Power is arbitrary, people are mercurial, and it is probably impossible to justify oneself, anyway. For common folk, survival must often have depended on silence, and if it is well to be seen but not heard staying unheard may even help one to pass unnoticed.

If a common ideological basis makes some sense, there is yet another reason for the coincidence of popular and official wisdom and motifs: quite simply that folk thinking was colored, and often fashioned or refashioned, by what their betters thought or wanted them to think. The obvious agency of indoctrination here was the Church: Christian morality came to color the language and the thinking of even the humblest folk.⁵⁹ Yet, though I shall not dwell on this, Christian motifs in real folk tales seem ambiguous. Perhaps the clearest example of high culture turned to "low" can be found in the *bibliothèque bleue*, the little books bound in cheap blue paper covers that peddlers sold (along with almanacs and images) to be read or looked at by the common folk. The core of the *bibliothèque bleue* consisted of medieval legends about brave knights and fair ladies, legends mostly rewritten over and over since their vogue in the fifteenth century or so, but which in any version have nothing to do with the experience of the peasant public that inherited them and kept them alive when the sophisticated public had moved on to something else.⁶⁰ The interesting thing about these knightly tales is that they include a lot of the incidents and the motifs of folk tales, especially those found in the "once upon a time" sort. There are enchanted animals and forests and castles, giants and wicked stepmothers and nasty mothers-in-law, and treacherous brothers. There are wizards as well, though that very familiar figure, the witch (except as ogress), does not appear in knightly tales in which men retain the monopoly of what is, after all, a high-class profession. There is every reason to think that this sort of stuff trickled into the villages and the taverns, there to be reshaped to the needs and the mentalities of a popular public.

The *bibliothèque bleue* declined and died after mid-nineteenth century, about the same time that *märchen* went out; in both cases this happened

because conditions changed, and because something better was becoming available, which the people took up as eagerly as they had taken up almanacs or images or knightly tales. Changing material conditions meant that the realistic substance of *märchen* no longer matched experience. Schools and military service were teaching the national language, and discipline and patriotism, so that the stories about people who could not make themselves understood away from home lost their old meaning except in places like Brittany; the deserters who figure in a number of tales were no longer heroic; the violence was now frowned on as disorderly and immoral—and the Grimms themselves in their second edition dropped a bloody story about children who play at killing each other.

The new national institutions also taught hygiene. The use of soap was generalized, as taxes on soap were abolished in the later nineteenth century. Lice were getting scarce, and only philologists remember that in Occitan the little finger was called *kill-lize*. Forests were cut down and roads were built through what was left of them, so fear of wolves, of forests, and of other vast waste places no longer figured as a fact of life. There were more police. Money circulated more, and so did people.

Even more fundamental changes took place: famines became rare as agricultural productivity increased (the last great European famine flared in mid-nineteenth century), and local subsistence crises (which were really *transport* crises) disappeared as railroads became capable of carrying food to places where it was lacking. After mid-nineteenth century diet improved. Poor people, especially country people, remained far more herbivorous than their urban betters, but they did eat meat and drank wine. The caloric intake rose, and hunger became a private affair, no longer a recognizable public issue.

Mortality rates fell too. Up until the eighteenth century, adult mortality followed by remarriage might be compared to divorce today. It certainly furnishes one major theme of folk tales. Now, the family gradually became more stable and affected the better integration of children and also the nature of current fantasies. To take only one example: when the nineteenth century opened, expectation of life for women in the Lower Burgundy of Restif and Coignet was about twenty-five years. By mid-nineteenth century this had risen into the forties; by 1900 it hovered around fifty-two. There would be a lot fewer orphans and stepmothers, just as there was a lot less hunger and want. The practical need that had made for speedy remarriage grew less urgent. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries three or four out of every five widowers remarried within the year of their spouse's death. By the twentieth century not quite one in five both-
ered to do so.

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Meanwhile, the control that ordinary people could exercise over life increased. By the nineteenth century cattle were no longer left to look after themselves as best they could. They were fattened, selected, *bred*. Men presided over their couplings and came to look on breeding as a technique like any other. If animal life could be regulated, human life could be regulated too. By 1840 the peasants in certain French rural communes were having half as many children as their forebears three-fourths of a century earlier. There were fewer parents forced to accept Death for a godfather because they had so many children that no one else was left to accept the charge.⁶¹

So what had been realistic detail became distant and unreal. The morality that had made sense in its own terms no longer quite fit conditions and possibilities as they were now perceived. Endogamy became less oppressive, and stories about robber bridegrooms no longer warned against the dangers of marrying away from the familiar community. Escapist fantasies became less necessary and also less relevant because the fantasies themselves were changing with the times. The storytellers perceived this, and by the latter part of the nineteenth century they treated fairies and goblins and werewolves only as *past* realities: their grandfathers knew them, yes, but they left the region about the time of the French Revolution.⁶²

It was not just that the wisdom of the folk tale was no longer useful. Their relative entertainment value also declined as the folk moved out of the do-it-yourself era into the new market of an industrial age. As the nineteenth century wore on, homemade amusements were discarded along with homemade clothes. Both could be found in the market now, and not only were they available but they could also be afforded. Sensation, excitement, amusement became available in print, in images, in access to urban facilities or to developing centers of rural sociability and fun—cafés, cabarets, and so on. Home crafts were declining and more homes enjoyed some kind of light and (even better) heat, so the *veillées*—the evening work bees at which most of the tales were told—declined. Meanwhile, the stories that could be heard in school or read in schoolbooks were more varied, more impressive, more prestigious than the old tales.

The world was being domesticated. Mysteries were explained away. A nature that, only a short while before, could only be handled by analogy was being analyzed into working parts. Manure took the place of magic. Time became an element of everyday life, novelty was both available and desired (the press brought news, and new sensations), and change was perceived not only as a fact of life but as desirable. As Nadaud insisted, change was progress. The press, the schools, the public speeches, and one's own life, confirmed this. In such a context the images that the old tales offered were no longer familiar or acceptable. Their wisdom became nonsense and supersti-

tion—which is precisely how it had been denounced for centuries by voices and authorities the public steadfastly ignored as long as the old wisdom still made sense. Now the services the yarns had rendered were no longer required, indeed could be dispensed with on every sort of level. They could be relegated to the world of children, along with fairies, fair maidens, and brave knights, to become the entertaining fictions that the educated classes had long appreciated as such.⁶³