

The Moral of the Story: Reflections on the Manipulation of Fairy Tales

A certain wistful disappointment accompanies the discovery that Santa Claus is not real, and the tooth fairy is actually your dad. Learning that one's favorite fairy tales, the Brother's Grimm in my case, have been extensively tampered with, produces a similar feeling. Somehow "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," and "Jack in the Beanstalk" are supposed to be "real," "true" tales faithfully handed down from one generation to the next. But ample proof indicates that fairy tales have long been used as a type of propaganda, to moralize, socialize, and advance various personal or cultural agendas.

In *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Tatar notes that, "In addition to wanting to produce a volume appropriate for children and attractive to parents, the Grimms wanted to give the public a document of German folk culture in its most admirable form."¹ I wonder about the tales that did not pass the Grimm brothers' test for appropriateness, or the stories and themes that dropped out of circulation because they were incompatible with the German nation's self-image. And why do we want to believe in the originality of these tales anyway?

Any disappointment or frustration regarding the altered state in which fairy tales arrive to us today, is further aggravated by knowledge of wholesale censorship or neglect of stories told and/or collected by women. Jenks, in her lecture "Damaged Voice: Women's Silence in Folklore," presents this shocking statistic; "Between 1845 and 1900, women published over two hundred fairy-tale collections in the German-speaking countries," all of which disappeared; allowed to go out of print by the male controlled publishing industry.² Given the different perspectives of the

sexes in almost every other aspect of life, we can be certain that these stories contained something interesting, provocative, and perhaps useful for women today.

But can the perspectives or “meaning” expressed in fairy tales be extinguished? How important is the manipulation of these tales, and the distortion of our fairy tale legacy, to literature, or to our social, political, or psychic health? Have our tales been irrevocably degraded, and has the symbolic message of the stories that remain, the presumably important truth contained therein, been rendered useless or inaccessible? Or, assuming that fairy tales express a “truth,” is that truth inherent, so integral to the structure of the story, in fact providing the structure of the story that it is invulnerable to attack? Can mythological “meaning” be suppressed?

In “Cinderella” for example, a tale that has been mercilessly tinkered with, the central “truth” or point of the tale, and the plot, are essentially one and the same. Cinderella is a special girl, who loses her cherished position in the family when her mother dies. Mother and daughter maintain contact through magical means, and magic brings about Cinderella’s restoration. This magic is always feminine, and usually a form of the dead mother’s spirit. The possible meaning of this story, in all of its profundity, cannot be significantly diminished without creating a story that is no longer a “Cinderella” story.

Criticism of the way that folk and fairytales have been manipulated springs, at least in part, from the sense that particular groups of people or perspectives can be marginalized, to the detriment of that group and/or the larger culture, by attempts to definitively pin down the “meaning” of a myth, or by elevating selected “truths” to a mythic status. Roland Barthes, a scholar of myth, language, and culture, is critical of the study of myth as anything other than a

cultural artifact. “Mythologizing” perspectives which are essentially cultural ideologies can be harmful to groups outside of the dominant power structure. Jack Zipes, who believes that this ideological fixating has occurred with fairy tales, quotes Barthes; “Myth is manipulated speech...its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, *made absent* by this literal sense...”³

I agree that this “freezing” or literalizing of the meaning of these stories is a travesty. Real harm has been, and continues to be, done. Individual people and cultures must be respected for their uniqueness. But, as I think of myth, assigning absolute definitions is not mythologizing, not staying within a mythic framework. One cannot be literal and mythic at the same time. I like the following from Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*; “The word myth is often used nowadays to designate an idea (particularly a wrong idea), but the one thing a myth most certainly is *not* is an idea. It is a narrative that makes possible any number of ideas but does not commit itself to any single one.”⁴

Myth is a flexible tool, and like any other, in the wrong hands it does damage. We have to struggle and think and debate. The mythic impulse, the search for order and meaning, is as integral to our psychic functioning as beating is to the heart. We cannot stop, so we cannot give up.

The fact that fairy tales are used as a type of propaganda, and that people have made innumerable attempts to fix upon them a particular meaning or ideology, is in itself interesting. Modern society is both dismissive of fairy tales, and uniquely attached to them. As Jack Zipes says, “We refer to myths and fairy tales as lies by saying ‘oh, that’s just a fairy tale,’ or ‘that’s just myth’. But these lies are often the lies that govern our lives.”⁵ Or, as Doniger writes, “In our

culture, in particular, myths have been given the shadowy status of what has been called an ‘inoperative truth’, when in fact they might be better characterized as ‘operative fictions.’”⁶

Our contradictory attitudes toward fairy tales probably express our ambivalent relationship with the psyche, and energies, forces, or realities that cannot be understood through the lenses of science and rationality. The existence of a psychological realm or dimension of life is recognized, but it is most often feared or ignored, rather than valued. Jung understood this ambivalence to be the root cause of our modern alienation, of the prevailing existential crisis and lack of meaning. I wonder if a daily dose of fairy tales would be an effective tonic.

Thinking about fairy tales in this fashion, and identifying them as vehicles for the expression of some psychic or psychological truth, links these tales to myth. But is this a legitimate connection? O’Flaherty, in *Other People’s Myths*, works mightily to define myth. She writes,

Myth, then, is a story, or a narrative [...] the stories that I want to talk about as myths [...] are about the sorts of questions that religions ask, stories about such things as life after death, divine intervention in human lives, transformations, the creation of the world and of human nature and culture- and, basically, about meaning itself.⁷

She goes on to suggest that myths are not so much “literally true answers,” as they are “a culture’s best representation of those questions.”⁸ For myself, a myth is a story- a story that is not literally true, in fact *can’t* be literally true, but nonetheless expresses truth. The bridge between literal truth and perceived truth is metaphor and symbol. Metaphor is our best attempt to communicate the things that are too big, too deep, too mysterious really, to articulate any other way.

The symbolic nature of the fairy tale places it then, in the realm of mythic expression. Although scholars have attempted to distinguish between myth and tale on the basis of subject matter- tales of gods and divine intervention are “myths”- this distinction seems a debatable technicality which does not address the question of whether or not fairy tales spring from the same mythic impulse that motivates other, sometimes equally ambiguous, forms of mythic expression. Joseph Campbell focused on the symbolic character of myth, and in his writing about fairy tales said, “The function of the craft of the tale, therefore, was not to simply fill the vacant hour but to fill it with symbolic fare. And since symbolization is the characteristic pleasure of the human mind, the fascination of the tale increased in proportion to the richness of its symbolic content.”⁹

So, as fairy tales take their place alongside other forms of mythic expression, the question of the importance of their manipulation, and their vulnerability to such manipulation, returns. Is the manipulation of fairy tales simply a phenomenon, a characteristic of our interaction with the stories? Is it a problem? Or is our reshaping and revising of the tales, with the intention of promoting such and such a position or agenda, simply utilizing the tale as it should be used?

Campbell attributed four functions to traditional mythologies: metaphysical or mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological. In describing the sociological function, he said, “... it has ever been that of validating and maintaining some specific social order, authorizing its moral code as a construct beyond criticism or human emendation.”¹⁰ Campbell continues; “The fourth, which lies at the root of all three as their base and final support, the psychological: that, namely, of shaping individuals to the aims and ideals of their various social groups, bearing them on from birth to death through the course of a human life.”¹¹

Campbell's analysis of the functions of myth makes sense to me, but his apparent lack of concern about the relationship or slippage between myth and ideology seems symptomatic of his position as a white, well-educated, American male, coming of age in the 1940's. Campbell believed in the existence of universal themes and assigned them the highest value. He writes,

And whereas the cosmological and sociological orders have varied greatly over the centuries and in various quarters of the globe, there have nevertheless been certain irreducible psychological problems inherent in the very biology of our species that have remained constant [...] there run through the myths of all mankind the common strains of a single symphony of the soul.¹²

The existence of a "single symphony of the soul" was the key for Campbell- the details in-between were not his focus.

But as more diverse voices are now heard, expressing a wider range of experience, we see that the in-between does matter. Maybe the power of stories and tales can be effectively used to give voice to, and garner respect for, perspectives silenced in the past. Zipes suggests that folk and fairy tales in particular, with their roots in the life experience of common people, have always contained a subversive element. In *Fairy Tale as Myth; Myth as Fairy Tale*, he writes; "Individual imaginations were countering codified myths of a tribe or society that celebrated the power of the gods with other 'non-authoritative' tales of their own that called upon and transformed the supernatural into magical and mysterious forces which could change their lives."¹³ This sounds like a David and Goliath scenario- and we know how that story ended.

National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition" news program recently ran a story about new achievement tests used by New York state to measure the quality of their secondary school education.¹⁴ A scandal was provoked by the revelation that the policy committee, in overseeing the development of the test, had insisted upon the editing of literary passages used in the reading

comprehension sections of the test. Passages taken from published literary works, including, for example, the words of living author Annie Dillard, were changed without any indication of such to the reader/test taker, or approval from the author. The revisions were made to remove from the passages any potentially distracting racial or cultural biases that might negatively affect the students and their test performance.

The unauthorized alteration of copyrighted material is shocking, a case of overzealous political correctness that was just plain dumb. But what struck me were the comments of a student who was interviewed for the story. This indignant, young woman said that the whole affair was insulting to the students, and an example of how adults habitually underestimate kids.

She made an excellent point. The truth is, none of the messages that we receive, mythic or otherwise, exist in a vacuum. Conflicts between messages, or between message and personal experience, are continual. Each of us is constantly evaluating the messages that we receive, measuring their meaning, and calculating their truthfulness. Most people today resent and resist manipulation of their beliefs and opinions, although we cannot always see such manipulation clearly, or agree on its form. If a manipulation is obvious, not artful, then we are disdainful and frequently impervious to it.

I found what I thought was an example of an obvious, artless, and ineffective manipulation of a fairy tale in William Bennet's, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*. Bennet, a conservative Republican who served as President Reagan's Secretary for Education, adapted material for his book from a variety of sources, including Grimm's Fairy Tales. I compared his version of the fairy tale, "The Shoemaker and the Elves" with one of the Grimm Brothers' later versions of the same story.

An entire paper could be written on the changes that were made, and their relative success or failure from both a literary, and propagandizing, perspective. The original story is more efficient, a bit shorter, and more interesting. Details added in the Bennet adaptation, presumably to update the setting and characters, seem colorless or gratuitous. There is an interesting attempt at “Disneyization” of the elves- now a troop of “brownies” with “big, round eyes” who “giggle” when they find the gift of the clothes.¹⁵ The gifts are now given on Christmas Eve. But the primary issue is the “moral” that was drawn from this story, and the degree to which the revisions successfully sharpen the intended moral point.

The story, in brief, is one of a poor but virtuous old shoemaker and his wife. They fall upon hard times through no fault of their own, and just when the situation is at its bleakest, and the shoemaker has used all of his remaining money to buy leather to make one last pair of shoes, magical help enters. Marvelous shoes are made every night and sell the next day for high prices. Good fortune returns, and the shoemaker and his wife resolve to discover the nature of their magical help. They secretly watch one night, and find that they have been assisted by two elves. Full of gratitude, the husband and wife make little shoes and suits of clothing for the elves, as they are naked and cold. When the elves return the following night and find the clothes, they immediately take them up and gleefully exclaim that they will work no more. They leave immediately and never come back. The shoemaker, in expressing his gratitude, loses the magic help!

I find it curious that Bennet included this story, which is found in the chapter entitled “Virtue of Work.” Magic is unpredictable; its source unknown. Divine help is not magic, and magic has a tenuous relationship to virtue. The stated value of this tale is to, “remind us that

service given is owed service in return.”¹⁶ Both versions of the story imply that the shoemaker deserved magical help because he was a good, kind person. Bennet reinforces this idea, presenting a hardworking shoemaker who falls sick and is incapable of working. Presumably, he knew the value of work. But why was his “reward” for expressing gratitude the loss of the help?

The elves apparently occupy their own story of enchantment and servitude, a story that intersects that of the shoemaker, but is not explained. Neither version of the story resolves the mystery of the elves or makes sense of the situation in which doing good seems to bring about bad fortune. Interestingly, the Grimm’s version of the story concludes: “After that they never came back, but the shoemaker prospered till the end of his days, and succeeded in everything he set his hand too.”¹⁷ The Bennet version ends with the shoemaker and his wife wondering what happened to the brownies--don’t we all--until the shoemaker concludes, “Perhaps the elves are helping someone else who needs them.... Of course I am well now, so we can work for ourselves.”¹⁸ The Bennet ending feels much less comfortable with the action of the story, and in omitting the mention of continuing prosperity, undermines the stated moral of the tale. Who wants to go back to the same old grind?

Marie Louise von Franz believes that fairy tales play a compensatory role in the individual and collective psyche. She provides the following example in *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*:

We have also an overwhelming number of stories where the hero excels through just plain laziness; he simply sits on a stove and scratches himself, and then everything falls into his lap. These stories also compensate for the collective attitude which puts too much emphasis on efficiency.¹⁹

I don't know the meaning of the "Shoemaker and the Elves", but I suspect a compensating attitude, a subversion of the all-mighty work ethic, and that is how I would approach this tale.

The impulse to revise stories or create new ones, may be motivated by the desire to put forth new meanings, or disable the power of harmful stories, of versions that have been pressed into the narrow service of literal meaning. Fairy tales, as myths, must evolve along with us.

Hopper, in "Myth, Dream, and Imagination," suggests that the construction of countermyths is a necessary step between the death of the old myth and the emergence of the new. These self-conscious, intermediate forms may not be very artful or convincing. He says "We can contrive countermyths to show up what is false or archaic in pseudomyths, but countermyths will also betray their falsity if their motivation is just polemical."²⁰ In other words, our "operative fictions" must have a genuine resonance, a resonance that is not captured through mere intellect or political sensibilities. Does this resonance approach the realm of "belief," and how is belief connected to myth or mythmaking?

The preponderance of popular, classic fairy tales are "wonder tales," stories that involve magic in some form. What is the source of our uniquely deep attachment to these unbelievable stories? Are we resisting the prevalent worldview, in all of its scientific, materialistic, dualistic simplicity, in its reductionism? Jenks notes that,

Belief forms a frequent thread in many definitions of myth--and rightly so. But in contrast, it is alleged that folktales are completely imaginary and call for no belief... certainly the details of a specific fairy tale, like Snow White or Cinderella, aren't going to inspire belief, yet under all the trappings of plot and costume I'd like to suggest that storyteller and listener alike share a belief in a *world* wherein magical powers, for good or ill, *do* exist.²¹

Have we placed our hope in a beneficent force that watches over us, in the magic horse or the fairy godmother? Is “god” still present in our lives as “magic,” or is magic a hedge against judgments delivered strictly by the book? Maybe fairy tales are ostensibly for children because it’s not grown-up to believe in magic. But our affection for fairy tales lasts well beyond childhood, and we can all find something frightening in the dark.

Fairy tales, and wonder tales in particular, may be the containers for our continuing belief in the existence of another world and other possibilities. Although they have been distorted and revised, these tales are fragments of another time, another consciousness, still relevant, treasured, and shared, if not consciously understood. In this sense, the details of the stories can be manipulated up to a point, but as long as the tales exist in recognizable forms, they can provide this psychic function for us. Strangely, we may be creating a new mythic consciousness to serve the future, through preservation of elements of a consciousness presumably past.

Mythologizing and storytelling are essential, integral activities of human consciousness, as is the impulse to interpret our stories and discover their meaning. Marie Louise von Franz says, “we interpret for the same reason as that for which fairy tales and myths were told: because it has a vivifying effect and gives a satisfactory reaction and brings one into peace with one’s unconscious instinctive substratum, just as the telling of fairy tales always did.”²² Or more simply, to be human is to look for meaning, to revel in symbol and metaphor, to tease out and ponder the mysteries of life. Fairy tales are both a method and an expression of our search for meaning.

The manipulation of these stories, as well as our debate and critique of the manipulation, is a microcosm of the larger, world and life-encompassing debate about belief, meaning, and value.

If one asserts, as I do, that fairy tales contain powerful messages in the symbolic language of the psyche, that transcend their assignment to the nursery, then these tales cannot stay “pure.” As we create, and recreate, our vision of reality, guided by the shared mythopoetic impulse, our narrative forms, however cherished, must follow the example of the phoenix; eternally destroyed and reborn, changeless and endlessly changing.

Notes:

¹ Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), p. 31.

² Kathleen Jenks, “Damaged Voice: Women’s Silence in Folklore,” unpublished lecture, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, California, 3 May 2002, p. 6.

³ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth; Myth as Fairy Tale*, (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1993), p. 6.

⁴ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), p. 81.

⁵ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth; Myth as Fairy Tale*, p. 4.

⁶ Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, p. 25.

⁷ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “Other People’s Lies: The Cave of Echoes.” *Other Peoples’ Myths*, (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1995), p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimensions of Fairy Tales, Legends, and Symbols*, (New York: Harpers, 1990), p. 35.

¹⁰ Joseph Campbell, “Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art.” *Myths, Dreams, and Religion*, ed. Joseph Campbell, (Dallas, Texas: Spring Pub, 1970), p. 140.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth; Myth as Fairy Tale*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *NPR’s Weekend All Things Considered*. National Public Radio. KCRW 90.7, 29 Palms and Yucca Valley. 9 May. 2002.

¹⁵ William J. Bennett, *The Book Of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1993), p. 372.

¹⁶ William J. Bennett, *The Book Of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, p. 370.

¹⁷ *Grimm’s Tales for Young and Old*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, (Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor Press, 1977), p. 144.

¹⁸ William J. Bennett, *The Book Of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, p. 372.

¹⁹ Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, (Boston: Shambala, 1996), p. 65.

²⁰ Stanley Romaine Hopper, “Myth, Dream, and Imagination.” *Myths, Dreams, and Religion*, ed. Joseph Campbell, (Dallas, Texas: Spring Pub, 1970), p. 118.

²¹ Kathleen Jenks, *MS 602 Folklore and Fairy Tales Reader*, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, California, 2002, p. 8.

²² Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, p. 45.