Picturing the Rose:
A Way of Looking
at FTs
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CHAPTER 1

Where Is the "Fairy"?

> Fairy: A term loosely used to denote a type of supernatural being, usually invisible, sometimes benevolent and helpful, sometimes evil and dangerous, sometimes just mischievous and whimsical, dwelling on the earth in close contact with man.
>
> from *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend.* Harper & Row, 1984.

Do you remember the first fairy tale you ever heard? Probably not. The very first fairy tale you ever heard probably went into your brain, rattled around for a while, disrupted a few neurons, and departed. But it left its mark on your ability to perceive certain implications about time and space and gender and many other facets of life and language.

In time you heard many other fairy tales. Some you liked and asked for over and over again, and some you hated on first hearing! Some were promptly dismissed. But with each additional tale, you gained a certain level of understanding of these issues: real versus symbolic, here versus somewhere, possible versus "im-". We form a picture of inner and outer life through an understanding, not only of the stories we are hearing, but also which types of stories.

With the exception of literary fairy tales (a genre that has only really been recognized since the stories of the early nineteenth century), all orally transmitted fairy tales are folktales, but not all folktales are fairy tales. By that I mean that all of those stories come from an oral tradition,

ut not all satisfy the requirements—anybody's requirements—for fairy ıles. The exact definition of "fairy tale" has been a matter of debate for a ıng time. Even the "experts" agree that, for a story to qualify as a aditional fairy tale, it must contain certain elements, but they don't all gree on what those elements are. There may be a supernatural or magi-ıl being, a sort of "fairy substitute," if you will! Therefore, stories with enies, ogres, imps, wizards, brownies, witches, sorcerers, oni, or fairies e all fairy tales. Beyond that stipulation, however, it all falls apart. Some riters on the subject firmly believe that if there is no supernatural being, ıen there is no fairy tale. Others feel that any magical occurrence fills the ll. You might say that a talking animal is a magical creature, but in many ɔmmon European folktales (and in Native American and African stories) ıe animals talk up a storm, and the effect is one of ordinariness, not agic. Perhaps it is safe to say that a talking animal is only remarkable hen the story chooses to remark on it. "The King, however, had a lion hich was a wondrous animal, for he knew all concealed and secret ıings." So, in the Grimms' fairy tale "The Twelve Huntsmen," the story self tells us that the lion is magical, not because he can speak, but ecause he has a special vision. He can see the truth.

There are other issues involved in classifying fairy tales. It is generally cepted that if a story is represented as having happened to a real person iving or dead) then it qualifies as a legend—no matter how magical the ents in the story. Likewise, if a story happens at a particular time (that , "in 1492," for example) then it may be history or legend or lie, but it is ually not fairy tale. Issues of time may, indeed, be magical. In the classic panese fairy tale "Urashima" the hero spends three nights under the a, and when he returns to land he finds that three hundred years have ıssed. The Washington Irving story "Rip Van Winkle" employs the me device, but in this case we know the author, so folklorists and ɔrytellers generally regard this as a literary legend, and not one from e oral tradition. That holds true even though Irving may have used any of the local Catskill traditional oral legends in the body of the story.

Another measure of oral story versus literary is the presence of a stinctive "author's voice." This is, at one end of the spectrum, fairly ɔvious. For example, it's obvious that the language in "Rip Van Winkle" the creation of a specific nineteenth-century author, and therefore not

characteristic of a fairy tale. It is highly stylized, and not a product of the oral tradition. "In the High and Far-Off Times the Elephant, O Best Beloved, . . . ," is an opening phrase that marks a story as one of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories.* On the other hand, there are gifted story-writers who choose to hide (or, at least, soften) the evidence of single authorship. Jane Yolen, Richard Kennedy, Eleanor Farjeon, and Alan Garner are just a few examples of contemporary writers whose works have a timeless, classic feel to them.

The task of making hard and fast decisions about what is or is not a fairy tale has become more difficult and complex as the lines between oral and literary have blurred. Most of the literary stories of seventeenth-century author Charles Perrault were oral fairy tales before he wrote them down, and are definitely considered "classic" fairy tales now. But C. Perrault is still in the picture! After all, like the Grimm brothers, Perrault did write, and by writing, codify those stories that we modern tellers adapt, adopt, and tell. He also edited, arranged, and selected the stories. All in all, it is getting harder and harder to separate the folk from the author in most story collections that purport to be "pure."

Even in cases where there are no magical occurrences, no chatty animals, no ogres, there may still be a fairy tale! The story that happens in a place that is more of the mind than of the map—that is a fairy tale. In *Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton Univ. Pr. 1987), Maria Tatar describes a continuum from folklore (oral literature) to literature (the written-down variety). Then she plots an intersecting line that runs between naturalistic and supernaturalistic settings (see diagram p. 4). Tatar describes fairy tales as stories that occur in supernatural settings, and may be either oral or written literature. Folktales are defined as those stories that happen in naturalistic settings and, again, may be either oral or written. According to Tatar, the Grimms' stories fall into all four quadrants, depending on the nature of the story, and on how much creative rewriting was done between the original source and the published version.

If you think about the opening "lines" of a story, any story, you can see that genre usually reveals itself in the first moments of the telling. "In the beginning . . ." —no matter what is said after that moment, this story has marked itself as a myth. Other traditional "myth-markers" would be

Note: Based on a diagram by Maria Tatar with story titles added by author

"Once, in the beginning of days . . ." or "Before people were made. . . ." Personal stories refer to the teller, as in, "When my father was ten, he got his first pet, a pug dog." Obviously, no matter how much rewriting has gone into this tale, it comes from a particular perspective, a personal historical reference. "There was once a farmer and his wife, and they were forever arguing about who had the harder job." There, in one sentence, is a folktale! Now, if the story goes on to describe a test of wills, silly accidents, reconciliation, then it is a common, garden-variety folktale. If, however, an imp comes out of the sugar bowl and creates havoc, or if the husband catches a golden fish that begs for its life, then you have a fairy tale.

My own definition of fairy tale goes something like this: A fairy tale is a story—literary or folk—that has a sense of the numinous, the feeling or sensation of the supernatural or the mysterious. But, and this is crucial, it is a story that happens in the past tense, and a story that is not tied to any specifics. If it happens "at the beginning of the world," then it is a myth. A story that names a specific "real" person is a legend (even if it contains a magical occurrence). A story that happens in the future is a fantasy. Fairy tales are sometimes spiritual, but never religious.

It may be cold comfort to the novice teller, but the truth is that after reading and telling dozens of stories you will find that a true fairy tale, like gold, tends to make its presence felt. And, like class, although undefinable, everyone knows it when they see it!

CHAPTER 3

Out of Space, Out of Time

The fairy tale conquers time by ignoring it.
from *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* by Max Lüthi.
Indiana University Press, 1976.

The first way in which the language of fairy tales differs from that of other folktales, of myths or legends, and of common speech (that is to say, speech which exists for the purpose of conveying information), is how it deals with time and place. Simply put, the traditional openings of fairy tales all work to inform the reader/listener that the story is not about the here and now. "Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away," " In a place, neither near nor far, and a time, neither now nor then," "Once there was and was not," "Long, long ago, when stones were soft," all these classic openings set a tone for the story that follows. They constitute both a disclaimer (don't worry about these things, they are not of your time and place) and an enabler (anything is possible, because the events that follow are not bound by the laws of the real world that we know). So, the first thing that language tells us about fairy tales is that they happen within an inner landscape. They belong to a place that is far removed from the plebeian concerns of reality, the physical world, and yet that is familiar to everyone. The stories happen, quite literally, in the country of the mind and of the heart.

Have you ever stopped in the middle of a fairy tale, and asked a child,

"And what do you think happened next?" Nine times out of ten, the listener will come up with a completely appropriate scenario. It might be outrageous or even directly counter to the rules of our physical world, but nevertheless it will be in agreement with the possibilities of the story. The child has internalized the rules of this other world, and can create a logical step in the sequence. Once we make a decision to go "long ago and far away," we are able to accept all the consequences of that decision. Animals can talk (if we say they can), shoes are magically able to leap buildings, a drink of water can change you into a beast, the hedgehog is a prince in disguise. This is not to imply that anything can happen. As teacher and storyteller Hughes Moir notes, every event, ordinary and extraordinary, "must conform to, and contribute to building, a fragile imaginary world that is temporarily believable." All this is possible, even expected, because we are in no-time, no-space.

So, one of the first clues that fairy tales have to offer of their meanings is any mention of time. There are magic and symbolic combinations: three days and three nights, one week, seven years, twelve moons (the use of the moon's cycle as a temporal indicator is frequently used to indicate the female nature of one aspect of the story), quick as a wink—all are significant cultural markers. They may link to seasonal images for some listeners, the number twelve indicating the months of the year. For some they may evoke menstrual cycle or migratory patterns. In some cultures, the celebrations of certain rites of passage go on for a week. However, as Max Lüthi notes, "Narrow and rigid interpretations cannot be ascribed to a dynamic story. . . . One must guard against the desire to interpret every single feature, every thorn and every fly" (*Once Upon a Time*, 33).

The no-space element is often invoked to give the listener the sense that the events of the story happened just out of range. "In a town just over the northern hills" may have given peasant listeners the feeling that strange things could happen outside of the protected walls and meadows of their valley. In some stories the message seems to be, "Stay here! Here you are safe. Out there demons abound!" On the other hand some stories say, "You must journey in order to become more than you are!" In fairy tales, the latter far outnumber the former. Fairy tales acknowledge that true growth demands a kind of travel—not necessarily in geographical terms, but travel in psychic distance—in order to become a wiser, more

capable human. (Even this concept, however, has layered implications. Classic fairy tales delineate between male and female "journeys." Men physically leave their homes; women often journey within, or in a kind of magic terrain. But more about that in a later chapter.)

This time-space displacement happens (and here is another traditional phrase) in the blink of an eye. It is usually the first or second sentence in any story, and is so well known and accepted as a convention that the listener never requires a reminder that the story is otherworldly. Even when place is not indicated, the geography of the story, which might have been familiar to a listener in the eleventh century, is certainly strange to a modern listener. This is one of the ways in which the meaning of the story has changed over time. Perhaps some fairy tales were originally told with a highly cautionary tone, as in "this happened just over that hill." That particular aspect of the story must certainly be softened by the centuries that the story has traveled. Perhaps if we were to say, "Once upon a time, in a suburb just past the interstate, . . ." the story would have a similar resonance for a modern listener. On the other hand, the nature of distance has changed, too. So, in effect, to translate an opening that read, "In a village far over the northern mountains," the modern equivalent might be (as in the Star Wars movies) "Once, in a galaxy far away."

The stories do, of course, have real geography. Tales from Norway may have many of the same themes as those from Italy, but they "feel" colder! Apart from obvious references to weather or terrain, there is an implicit understanding of the effect that these factors have on travel or work, or on the need for shelter from the elements. But, on the whole, fairy tales are easily "moveable"—they are not tied to one particular town or country, like legends, but are allowed to be of their own place.

Within the classic stories there are certain places that have become a recognizable part of fairy-tale terrain. If we say "In a palace . . ." or "In a humble house at the end of the village, . . ." we have automatically accessed a frame of reference in the listener's mind and experience. Not only do these locales lend a certain mood or tension to the story, but they also serve to reinforce the interior nature of the story. They are not, of course, *specific* palaces or cottages. They are generic, no-label, standard palaces or cottages! As Lüthi notes, "In how many so-called 'literary' fairy tales is a city which the hero enters lovingly described: the narrow streets, the picturesque corners and gables, the murmuring fountains? In the genuine fairy tale, there is nothing of the sort. . . . The absence of all desire to describe unessential details gives the European fairy tale its clarity and precision" (p. 50).

There has been endless speculation about the meaning of certain fairy-tale places. The cave may be dark, cold, damp, frightening, sheltering, and/or desolate. It is a place of refuge, or a place of abandonment. In Freudian terms, it is the womb. In Jungian terms it is the interior of the psyche, the place where the collective unconscious dwells. It may be a place where the hero goes to gather strength or wisdom from his/her animal or other-gender sides. The cave is, most of all, a mystery, because you cannot tell what is inside until you enter.

Similarly, the forest is, a place of great danger and great promise. Like a cave, one can see only the very beginning of what a forest holds. You must enter into it if you wish to pursue your quest. If you think about what a real forest looks like, you can see that this is true. That is, a forest presents itself to the outside eye as a screen. You can only see the outer layer of the forest, like a skin. Entering a forest is really entering into a living being. It has its own biology, heartbeat, circulation—even its own eyes. And that image of the forest as a sentient being is reinforced by much of what happens in the fairy tale. If the character performs some action while in the woods, the forest itself seems to know about it. The witch who lives in the deepest recesses of the forest knows what happens at its edges, because she is part of the forest itself. Cutting or damaging a tree can have consequences as serious as cutting off an arm or leg. The cave is a location, a destination, and a mystery. The forest, while still a mystery, is a creature, an alien, a friend or a foe, or perhaps even just a bystander, but it is never indifferent.

The other factor in thinking about the nature of the forest or woods is that in daily life we are surrounded by one of the elements which make up a forest. While we are familiar with the substance, the totality is still a mystery to us. "Wood," writes J. C. Cooper, "depicts the wholeness of the primordial state. . . ." (*Fairy Tales: Allegories of the Inner Life*, The Aquarian Press, 1983, 84.)

Other significant locations in the terrain of fairy tales are defined in

terms of height or depth. The symbolism of going into the earth or up to the highest mountaintop is not really obscure. After all, humans (or, at least, those in Western cultures) have, for millenia, looked upward to the gods, and downward to the "dark forces" of the universe. We define divinity as being unreachably high. The conceit that evil (or the unexplainable and frightening) is within the earth, below our feet, may come from ancient explanations of earthquakes and volcanoes, but it is just as easily understood as an expression of inner conflict, suppressed anger, or sexual drives. There is very little science involved here. It is a matter of which psychological theory (or mix of psychological, anthropological, and theological theories) you choose to adopt for a particular story. The "cave-as-womb" may work for one tale; another one might suggest "cave-as-belly-of-the-beast."

Human beings, perhaps as a function of our curiosity, need to hear the end of a story; we crave closure in the events and relationships of our lives. Similarly, it is vital—particularly when dealing with anything as potent as the fairy realm—to settle one's business with that world before returning to this one. The power of fairy tales lies, at least partly, in the ability they possess to bring us face-to-face with frightening and magical creatures and events. For a child, the possibility that those creatures might spill over into the everyday world is the source of bad dreams and unresolved conflicts. For this reason, and to give a feeling of "roundness" to the story, there must be an act of closure, a spell of binding at the end. Just as "once upon a time" is the incantation that opens the gate to the fairy-tale world, there must be a similar incantation, that closes it.

In many western European stories the popular ending is "and they lived happily ever after." Others include, "and if they are not dead, then they're there still," or "and they feasted for seven days and seven nights. I was there, so I know!" The ending utilized in some Italian stories is "They had a great feast, and here we are with nothing!" Whatever those words might be, they serve to seal off the story world from the "real" one. It is not only a good, satisfying ending for a storytelling experience, but also a protective device for children who might otherwise find it difficult to detach from the story. The words are like a marker: that world, those people and places, they are not now. They do not have the power to harm.

Our goal, as tellers, is not to exactly re-create the political world o
the geographic location in which the story was originally born (even if i
were possible to know), nor to create a "new" interpretation of the story
Our goal is to recognize all the ways in which the geography of story
language affects us, the ways in which it affects the listeners, and then t
get out of the way of those images!

CHAPTER 4

Who Are These People?

> The fairy tale takes its heroes from the remotest branches of society: the prince and the young swineherd, the despised youngest son or the clumsy boy; and the girl who watches the hearth or tends the geese and the princess.
>
> from *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* by Max Lüthi. Indiana University Press, 1976.

In fairy tales, as in life, there are only three ways to uncover the characters' essential natures. You can tell who they are by what they say about themselves, by what others say about them, and by what they do. Character is revealed by the choices we make.

Invariably, the world of the fairy tale is inhabited by a certain kind of royalty. "There was once a king and queen who had no children." Or, "One time there was a princess who refused to marry." Frequently the royals are balanced by peasants. The coming together of rich and poor, or haves and have-nots, is a common theme of fairy tales. By defining a character as royal, the story gives that character a certain flexibility of behavior that is outside the norm for the story-listener. The audience is able to believe that a king may decide (as in Perrault's "Donkey-Skin") to marry his own daughter, and there is nothing anyone can do to stop him. Royalty transcends the limitations and the constraints of the common folk: poverty, ignorance, class, law. On the other hand, a king may have distinct obligations—to marry a certain princess, to fulfill a promise, to

follow the dictates of his country's traditions and his position. In addition, there may be degrees of royalty that dictate what a character may or may not do. The king of a poor country is at the mercy of a richer or stronger king. A prince may be royal-born, but he is constrained by tradition, and is generally limited in power. Historically, a princess had even less flexibility than a commoner! She may never have been allowed to travel alone, and she was at the mercy of her parents (notably, of course, her father), and even her own maids! In the very complex story, "The Girl Who Banished Seven Brothers" (*Arab Folktales*, Pantheon, 1986), a young girl is sent off to retrieve her brothers from a distant land. Her mother provides her with a camel to ride, and two servants to insure that she arrives safely at her destination. But the manservant forces her to change places with the maidservant. They rub pitch onto her skin, to reinforce the image that she is of low birth, but when she meets her brothers, and helps to groom them, her tears fall on her arm and dissolve the pitch, revealing the deception.

In numerous tales the princess is promised or bartered to another royal family, to become the bride of a prince who is not her choice. These stories most certainly reflect the political reality of the day, and in fact "real" princesses probably rarely managed to alter their fates, as fairy-tale princesses do! "Maid Maleen" (Grimm, #198) spends seven years imprisoned in a tower because of her love for a prince who is unacceptable to her father. When the time finally comes for her to be set free, she realizes that no one will free her, so she frees herself, only to find that the prince, believing her dead, is to marry another, an "ugly princess." She presents herself at the castle, and the ugly princess forces Maid Maleen to stand in for her at the wedding. But as she goes toward the church, Maid Maleen sings to the nettles by the side of the road (and to the sea, and to the church door) "Nettles stand aside, I am the true bride." That night, the ugly one takes her place in the bridal bed, but when the prince asks her about the songs she had sung, she denies them, and the switch is revealed. Maid Maleen regains her proper place, and the story provides resolution. True nobility is recognized.

The nature of nobility, in fairy tales, lies not in birthrights, but in intangibles. A kind and generous spirit, a sense of honor and duty, the ability to transcend physical limitations (for example, to wear out three

pairs of iron shoes in search of one's lover) are the true marks of aristocracy. For more examples, see "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," "The Black Bull of Norroway," and "White Bear Whittington," all of which involve a long quest by the heroine before she can regain her husband.

In the classic fairy tales, characters frequently are nameless. Or if they have names, those names are designations of a quality or talent or secret that the characters possess. The princess may be "Bellissima," or "Rose Red," but these are more accurately descriptions rather than proper names. The same is true of the commoners. "There was once a miller who had a wife." Through the rest of the story, these two will be referred to as Miller and Miller's Wife. They are Everyman. In medieval days they would have been easily recognizable to the listeners. Their lives are defined by their jobs, and the fact that the fairy tale presents them with some magical offspring ("Hans, My Hedgehog") or some remarkable adventure might explain part of the appeal that these stories have held for "commoners" like us through the ages. If the Miller's daughter can outsmart the little man who spins straw into gold, if she has the courage, then she might become the Queen. If the poor Vassilissa can remember her dead mother's words of advice, and be kind to all she meets, then she may come home with a basket full of gold. Whether these lessons actually translate into actions that assist us in real life is open for debate! If fairy tales only feed dreams, then they serve us poorly. But if they empower children (and adults) to behave nobly in everyday situations, if we can use our wits as an alternative to brute force, then fairy tales can give us options for solving problems.

Of all the many characters who are the mainstay of fairy tales, the most prevalent are the Three Siblings. They may be the three sons of a poor farmer, or the three princesses of the king, or the three daughters of the merchant, whatever the case, there are certain characteristics that will be true of all of them. The youngest child will invariably be the parent's favorite! The youngest child is frequently the "fool of the world," neither the strongest nor the smartest, but she will inevitably succeed where the others fail. In some stories the youngest child will have to overcome not only the trials and tasks of the story, but also the animosity and deceits of the older siblings.

These stories make a great deal of common sense, when you consider

the legal and social positions of youngest children. In European countries most inherited wealth went to the eldest male child. Younger sons might get a portion of land, but more often they would be taught a trade and left to fend for themselves. The oldest daughter would be first in line for a good marriage. The youngest daughter might be relegated to spinster status, kept at home to care for aging parents. If she had a brother, he would be responsible for maintaining her upon the death of the parents. If not, then she would inherit whatever land and/or property there was, but these would be her dowery if and when she married. Consequently, an older spinster would have been either a burden or a "catch," depending on whether or not she had brothers. It stands to reason that stories that portrayed the adventures and triumphs of youngest children would have been very popular! They are our surrogates, the Davids who triumph over countless Goliaths!

The heroes of fairy tales are virtuous and/or clever, kind and brave, honest and, most of all, lucky! In fact, one classic fairy tale is called "The Luck Child" or, in some versions "The Child of Fortune." The element of luck is one that the poorest story-listener could understand. Some people simply seem to be born under a lucky star or sign. Perhaps it is easier to accept disasters if they are matters of destiny, and cannot be called your fault. Frequently, fairy tale heroes do absolutely nothing at all to deserve whatever largess eventually befalls them. More than one leading character has reacted to adversity by sitting down and sobbing! But as Vassilissa's little doll told her, "Never fear! Have a little to eat, and go to bed. The morning is wiser than the evening." Help always comes to the ones who are honest, hard-working, or dumb! The "fool of the world" somehow manages to befriend just the right combination of talented fellows, which proceeds to help him in his quest for the Tsar's daughter.

It would be impossible to avoid the issue of "wicked stepmothers" in this book, but it would be equally impossible to cover the subject extensively. Whole books (or long, erudite chapters in other books) have been written on the psychological implications of this character. Long treatises have been expounded on the place of this character in the repertoire of contemporary storytellers, and more than a few literary fairy tales have been written in an attempt to correct the imbalance in the portrayal of stepparents as evil. Although Freudian analysts have likened the bad step-

mother to that mother who, for whatever reason, is unable or unwilling to fulfill a child's every wish immediately, this explanation does little to allay the genuine and understandable fears of stepmothers and their children. The suggestion has been made that these stories have no place in modern life, and certainly there are plenty of other stories to go around. A storyteller can easily eliminate those stories that mention stepparents from his or her programs.

There is, however, another way to deal with the problem of what to do with a story you love that contains a reference you don't: prepare. You can prepare yourself and your audience for the story by saying, "You know that there are a lot of things in stories that aren't real today, like ogres or monsters. Well, this next story has an evil stepmother. Now you know, and I know, that this is a story, and that is a story-kind of evil stepmother, and that's not the way it is in real life." In her cogent and down-to-earth book *The Ordinary and the Fabulous*, (Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1978) Elizabeth Cook writes, "Children are frightened of giants or dogs with eyes like mill-wheels as long as they feel that what happens in a story might literally happen to them. J. R. R. Tolkein has interpreted 'Is it true?' quite rightly. 'They mean: "I like this, but is it contemporary? Am I safe in my bed?" The answer "There is certainly no dragon in England today," is all that they want to hear'" (40).

If, however, these words (or some very like them) do not come trippingly off the tongue, or if you are in any doubt about the ability of your audience to distinguish between reality and fairy tale, then the only proper response is not to tell the story. Just as with those stories which promulgate a view of women that you find distasteful, it is better to refrain from telling them than to bastardize them in an attempt (doomed to failure!) to be politically or socially "correct."

The class of heroes/heroines is balanced by villains on one side, and by magical helpers on the other. Together they form the triumvirate of fairy tale classic characters. These three categories balance each other, and create endless plot possibilities as they are juggled with other classic elements to form fairy tales.

The enduring presence of stereotypical characters—"The Hero," "The Witch," "The Evil Stepmother"—has been both the blessing and the bane of many storytellers and parents' existences. They are staples of

folk literature because they are so powerful and so clear. Since they are a
best one- or two-dimensional, they are guideposts for the action an
repositories for our expectations. Evil is vanquished, the helpless an
defenseless are triumphant; because this is possible, then it stands t
reason that it is possible for a child (helpless) to survive against seemingl
impossible odds (poverty, injustice) and overpowering forces (adults
While it is not always possible for an adult to feel comfortable with ever
fairy-tale message—and there are some stories that harken back to centu
ries of racism and misogyny that are best left behind—we should try t
see beyond our own fears of those traditional, stereotyped character
Children who are old enough to enjoy fairy tales are already aware of th
difference between reality and fantasy. And they are also aware of th
ways in which stories *mimic* certain aspects of reality. Certain adults an
children are, indeed, bullies. That doesn't mean children think that fair
tale ogres are wandering the playground! Of course, it's important to b
sensitive to children's fears, but we should allow for the possibility tha
kids are more resilient than we give them credit for being.

CHAPTER 5

When Is a Stick Not a Stick?

> Talisman: A wonder-working object; a charm possessing and transmitting certain qualities. . . . Many of the magic objects of folktale—the cap of invisibility, the seven-league boots, the self-setting table, etc.—can be classed as talismans (sic), for they have a positive power of themselves.
>
> from *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend.* Harper & Row, 1984.

When is a stick not a stick? When it's a magic wand, of course. In fairy tales, it's a sure bet that certain objects will take on unusual importance, as they can give the protagonist a magical leg-up in dealing with perilous situations. The use of these objects varies, according to the nature of the character who wields them, but they are usually given to our hero or heroine in recognition of acts of kindness, or to assist the character in pursuing his or her rightful path. This motif is so widely accepted that modern story-writers use it with facility. In "Petronella," by Jay Williams (from *The Practical Princess, and Other Liberating Fairy Tales*, Parents Magazine Press, 1978), the heroine is kind to an old man who, in gratitude, tells her what she must obtain in order to escape from the enchanter. Petronella works for the enchanter, and in payment for her service she requests and receives a comb, a mirror, and a ring. When, at the end of the story, she is being pursued, she throws the comb behind her, and it becomes a forest of trees. The mirror becomes a huge lake, and

the ring becomes a snare to trap the enchanter. These images are almost identical to those in the Russian fairy tale about Vassilisa the Brave. (The difference is that Vassilisa escapes from the witch, Baba Yaga, but Petronella discovers that her pursuer is quite enamored of her—and he's no slouch himself—so she frees him! These are the kinds of plot twists that only modern literary stories can take.)

It's important for the teller to recognize that the magical powers of these objects is selective. I mean that the comb is just a comb until it is used in a particular way. As Freud is said to have remarked, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

Particular importance is given to those objects which are relics or remembrances: Vassilissa carries the doll her mother gave her before dying. The doll becomes not merely a reminder of, but also a spiritual link with the mother, who provides counsel to her daughter. Cinderella plants a hazel twig on her mother's grave, and the tree that grows from that twig becomes her guardian and comfort in her trials. Not only that, but "a little white bird always came to perch in the tree, and if Cinderella wished a wish, whatever it was, the bird would bring it to her." The twig truly is the original magic wand: a living thing that is a connection between the two worlds, a link to the dead, and to supernatural powers. The bird is the traditional spirit messenger of folk and fairy tales.

The properties of a "magic object" will always be appropriate to the element or the nature of the object. That is, an organic object has the power to grow, but an inorganic object will not. A boot might be capable of striding seven leagues, but it will not produce food. There is a kind of common sense relationship between the realistic properties of an object and the special powers it assumes in fairy tales. When you see a story that violates those rules, you have found either a rewritten story, one that has been clumsily doctored, or else a true iconoclast, the rare tale that follows a totally different internal logic that is specific to its own cultural messages.

When magic occurs in a fairy tale, it is of interest for several reasons: First, because it provides the hero (or, sometimes, the villain) with extra powers with which to accomplish his goal. That is, the magic object is an extension of the user, and can only perform in a way that is consistent with the user's will or ambitions. If the heroine is required by her tormen-

tor to complete a task, the magic object will not destroy the villain. It can only help to perform the task. Secondly, the magic object will usually be something quite commonplace, something with which the listener is familiar. This fact serves to make the magical nature of the object even more remarkable! Think, for example, of the horror stories of such masters as Stephen King. If the scene is a spooky basement, then the events are too predictable. But if the horror occurs in a brightly sunlit park, then the impact is intensified. The same thing is true for magic. The most ordinary object creates a more extraordinary effect when it is found to possess magic powers.

Another noteworthy point about magic is that it never extends beyond what is needed. There is no waste, no excess when it comes to supernatural occurrences. If the spindle, shuttle, and needle (from the Grimms' story of the same name) wish to direct the Prince's attention to the young maid, they do not build a palace for her to inhabit. Instead, they decorate her humble hut with remarkable tapestries. In this way, the ordinary becomes exceptional.

The theme of transformation is so pervasive in fairy tales that it can be used as one of the markers for the classic European fairy tale genre. Objects, animals, people all change in the blink of an eye. They are changed in response to curses or blessings, because of the violation of taboos (eating or drinking forbidden foods, reading forbidden books, entering a forbidden room, etc.), or because of the possession of magic objects, ie., enablers. If I have a cloak of invisibility, then I can alter my appearance. Even ordinary, non-magic disguises, such as a cloak of moss (as in the British version of the story "Tattercoats") or a veil can constitute a transformation. "These disguises, whether of rags, animal skins, rushes or whatever, are, like the veil, a symbol of separation—both a physical separation from her true station in life and a spiritual severance of Paradise. . . . This removal of the disguise or veil is also a transformation symbol; . . ." (Cooper, 84). Myths also contain transformation motifs, but those motifs are frequently the point of a myth, whereas they are merely the path of the fairy tale. By this I mean that when the story tells how seven brothers danced up into the sky until they were changed into stars, the transformation is the end of the myth. But in a typical fairy tale setting, the brothers would have to perform some task as stars, or they

might travel to another location, where they would then resume the proper form. In other words the transformation is a means to a large end!

Some of these changes happen before the story starts—"off stage," you will. They prepare the way for the action of the story. The mous who shows up in response to the need for a "sweetheart" has alread undergone one transformation, and is awaiting another. But even in th instance the fairy tale has no "history." In screen writing, people tal about the "back story," the history of the characters before the first fram of the movie. But fairy tales have no such pre-life. The transformation that are in place before the story starts are merely there to facilitate th story. The hero has no life outside of the fairy tale.

Transformation can be seen as either a boon or a curse, depending o the situation. The princess who has been changed into a frog will be abl to find the suitor who sees past the exterior. So her transformation ha actually been a blessing in disguise. On the other hand, the old man wh is given three wishes soon realizes the dangers of this gift when he acc dentally utters the fateful words, "I wish this pudding was on your nose! But in all fairy tales, transformation is a means of ascending (if you ar one of the "good" characters) or descending (if you are a "bad" character The heroine will continue to change until she arrives at maturity, whole ness, what psychologists call "individuation"—the ability to recogniz one's self as being separate and distinct from one's parents. A grown-up

The ways in which the hero or heroine of a story utilizes a magi object can reflect growth, maturity, and a highly evolved ability to mak choices and decisions. That's a fancy way of saying that the characte changes in many of the same ways that children change. And the magi object which, at the beginning of the story is used selfishly, may later b used in a more considerate or generous fashion. If both the hero and th villain have the opportunity to use a magic object, they will each use according to their natures.

In some stories the "object" is a creature, an animal which perform extraordinary acts to aid the protagonist. In the many classic fairy-tal motifs, *Grateful animals*, there are a variety of traditional scenarios: th protagonist either saves the life of a creature who is threatened, or refuse to perform some act of cruelty (unlike other story-characters). When thi

happens the animal may respond by giving the protagonist a talisman with which to summon magical powers. The fish who is rescued may give one of its own scales, the fox three hairs from his tail. If no object is given, then the animal simply says, "I will repay your kindness," or "Call on me if ever you are in need." And in this way a simple act of kindness takes on larger significance. If there is anything to be learned from this motif, it is that there is magic in each person when they choose to act with humanity and generosity of spirit. And it takes no special talent to practice "random, senseless acts of charity."

It would be a mistake to imagine that every magical event or object in a fairy tale can be explained. There is in every story at least a kernel of the inexplicable, the wondrous. And for generations children and adults have returned to fairy tales to savor the possibilities!

CHAPTER 6

Politics and Sex

To talk about fairy tales today, especially feminist fairy tales, one must, in my opinion, talk about power, violence, alienation, social conditions, child-rearing and sex roles. It is no longer possible to ignore the connection between the aesthetic components of the fairy tales, whether they be old or new, and their historical function within a socialization process which forms taste, mores, values, and habits.

from *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* by Jack Zipes. Routledge, 1989.

If you approach traditional, orally-transmitted fairy tales with a late-twentieth century set of sensibilities, you are bound to be disappointed. In many of the areas in which we have tried to change as individuals and as a society, fairy tales are hopelessly "politically incorrect." They are primarily the products of traditional, male-oriented, highly class-structured European cultures, and as such they are reflections of the ways in which power can be used, misused, circumvented, or ameliorated. Even non-European fairy tales tend to speak from a social and political and sexual context that some modern tellers find uncomfortable, to say the least. But if we only see the stories as being out of step with current thinking, then we miss the point. If we try to make the stories dance to the fashion of our time, then we run the risk of destroying all of the imaginative "what-if-ing," all of the theorizing, psychic healing, fun, and vicarious experimentation that these stories can provide. And yet, "The

relationship between man and woman is one of the fundamentals of the fairy tales" (Cooper, 79).

One of the most frequent criticisms from modern storytellers concerns the treatment of women. The political reality of the Middle Ages is that women of high birth were valuable commodities. They were the legal possessions of their fathers, who could then bestow them upon a mate. High-born women were expected to be skilled in a variety of crafts—needlepoint, music, dance (as of the late Middle Ages, before which it was considered sinful), and housekeeping. This last including budgeting, for a woman would be expected to run the house when her husband was away fighting, hunting, or visiting other nobles. And, as is true even today, women had primary responsibility for child care. Girls were cared for exclusively by women until marriage, and boys until puberty, when the task of training them in "manly arts" was turned over to various instructors.

In houses of less than noble stature, a woman's position was somewhat different, although still inferior to a man's. The birth of a daughter could foretell real hardship, for while a son was responsible for maintaining his parents, a daughter would be married off, eventually to help care for someone else's parents. And a girl would have to have a dowery in order to find a good husband. As with her royal counterpart, a peasant girl had to learn certain skills: making cloth (spinning and weaving), churning butter, cooking and baking, basic healing skills, tending to animals. She, too, was the legal possession of her father (or, in his absence, the oldest male relative), but marriage was more likely to be negotiated with the consent of the woman, because there was less to be gained by forcing a woman to marry against her inclination. Expectations were different.

What is also true of both high- and low-born women is that, like their counterparts in every age, many found various paths, subtle or overt, to power. Since they were responsible for child rearing, women could and, one guesses, frequently did affect the messages that society gave about the value of girls. In European cultures, storytelling seems to have been an "equal opportunity employer." And, although there are notable examples of cultures in which formal storytelling was reserved for men, there are just as many instances of female bards, minstrels, and honored professional tellers. This does not even take into account the informal, hearthside storytelling that was probably a staple of medieval life. In *The World of Storytelling* storyteller, linguist, and collector Anne Pellowski cites instances of women as storytellers in France, Japan, Hungary, Russia, and India, as well as throughout the Latin countries.

Lüthi notes that ". . . the Grimm brothers' informants were predominantly women. And today children learn fairy tales mainly from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and female kindergarten and school teachers. . . . Furthermore, our era, whose character, despite everything, is still determined by men, feels the strong and clear need for a complementary antipole. The woman is assigned a privileged position, not only by social custom; in art and literature, as well, she has occupied a central position since the time . . . of the late Middle Ages" (*Once Upon a Time*, 136). Lüthi claims that this "privileged position" of women as symbols in art, as well as in the role of storytellers, explains the predominance of female characters in the stories. However, despite this fact, prior to the twentieth century, women only rarely shaped their own destinies, except in the stories.

Fairy-tale heroines frequently behave in atypical or socially unacceptable fashions: they leave home (and the protection of their fathers) to go out on quests—usually for a mate. Or they control their fates through the device of a riddle. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's father has devised a test for all of her suitors, and she herself is grateful to him, and administers the test even after his death. Shakespeare may have borrowed this device from a popular folktale. The test involves guessing which of three caskets holds the princess' portrait. Since the caskets are of gold, silver, and lead, the choice tests the values of the suitors. Does this man equate marriage to the princess as a pure business venture, involving only material wealth? The theme of the princess who riddles with her suitors is echoed in the opera *Turandot*. In many fairy tales it is the princess herself who poses questions, riddles, or tests to suitors. By doing so she is able to control her own fate, and the man who succeeds is often not a prince, but a low-born man who is inventive, clever, persistent, patient, or possessed of simple common sense! Even a princess who is adverse to marriage finds herself won over by such qualities. They can then form a bond that will be stronger than conventional marriage. Freudian psychologists have the-

orized that the fairy-tale marriage of man and woman in a union that is born of equality and strength, not of compulsion, symbolizes the maturation of the individual, and the union of male and female aspects. "This search for the true partner occurs in all myth and religious allegory; it is the quest for personal completion in relationship and sharing, a resolution of contraries into unity, symbolized by the yin-yang opposites contained in the unifying circle" (Cooper, 79). The implication is that fairy tales are not depicting "real" men and women, but rather female and male aspects of a single individual. Unfortunately that analysis, while very appealing in the abstract, is basically unsatisfying for the storyteller. What is, perhaps, more useful to us is a sense of rightness, of appropriateness, that the story has, at its end, brought together the two who are worthy of each other. Any analysis that overemphasizes philosophy and sophistry denies the experience of the first teller! After all, the old woman who told the stories to the people gathered in front of the fire at the end of an exhausting day was not concerned with the yin-yang of a successfully integrated personality! She was reflecting her own past and present, through the prism of her own imagination. And so does every storyteller to this very day.

The greatest influence that has been brought to bear on European fairy tales, the ones we naively call "the classic fairy tales," was that very imaginative element, the influence of the teller. The grandmothers, the spinsters (again, notice the use of the job title to designate a woman of a particular rank), the crones, the wise-women—these were the primary transmitters of fairy tales. Other stories—harvest-related tales, work and/or war stories—may have been told by men, but the stories that lingered were the stories that were mixed with the smell of smoke from the hearth and the sound of knitting or other women's crafts in the background! So why, you might ask, are so many of the stories antagonistic or downright cruel to women? In part because of the nature of the hierarchy in which they lived. A teller can only reflect what she knows or what she can hypothesize, imagine, or foresee! Also, it is fair to say that some small number of fairy tales have a cruelty that is not directed specifically at women. But the other side of the story is that women are as often depicted as possessing great powers, either through the choices they make or through the use of supernatural or spiritual forces. Women can

affect events because of their appetites, sexual or other. In Rapunzel, t
pregnant mother has an unnatural desire for rampion, or rapunzel—
kind of lettuce. The force of that desire drives her husband into t
witch's garden, and precipitates the bargain that is the focus of the stor

In certain other stories the heroine is able to discover the hiding pla
of all potential suitors. All, that is, until our humble hero comes along. H
destiny (fate, strength) is to test, and his is to help and be helped. In t
Grimms' tale, "The Little Sea Hare," the princess can look out of t
twelve windows of her tower and see all things on the earth and the sea, a
the air, so she can find the hiding places of all would-be suitors. When th
fail to hide from her, she has them killed, and their heads mounted on pik
When ninety-seven heads adorn the palace grounds she thinks, "Now
shall be free forever!" In that one phrase she (and, by extension, the wom
who told the story) expresses a truth about marriage in her time. Marria
can be equivalent to bondage if it joins unequal parties. But the humb
man who, through the assistance of the animals he has befriended, manag
to hide from the princess successfully is a match for her in wit and
persistence. And she recognizes that. Even after his first two failed a
tempts, she doesn't order him executed. The reason for her decision
spare him is not in the text. Only the tellers, the truly expressive, sugge
tive, real and raunchy women who told the stories, could have given the
audiences the reasons for the princess's restraint, because it is not in t
written language of the story. It is understood and suggested, as so mu
story meaning is, in the glance of the teller. The princess makes choic
that are confluent with her recognition of the true value of this man.
doing that, by making choices and by accepting the consequences of the
actions, women exercise real power.

There is really only one important "rule" concerning the depiction
women (or, for that matter, other minorities) in fairy tales. It is this: If t
story makes you even a little uncomfortable, don't tell it. There a
thousands of fairy tales, hundreds of thousands of folktales, myths, legend
all waiting to be told. If your impulse is to "improve" the story, to alter it
fix it or adjust it, then my advice is leave it alone. It is not your story to te
Find the story that speaks to you in its own voice, and tell that one. It is f
better to lose a story that projects messages that are anathema to you tha
to castrate the story to serve your agenda. Just let it go.

CHAPTER 7

What's My Motivation?

> The simpleton . . . illustrates the spontaneous acceptance of things as they are, complete naturalness in action without ulterior motives, as well as openness of mind in recognizing limitations and being ready to accept aid, be it natural or supernatural, when faced with difficulties outside ordinary experience.
>
> from *Fairy Tales: Allegories of the Inner Life* by J. C. Cooper. Aquarian Press, 1983.

In a standard show-business joke, a young actor asks the director, "What's my motivation?" "If you don't do it," says the director, "you're fired." In real life, people have motives. In fairy tales, although there may be reasons for certain actions, characters do what they must as a result of situation and because of their essential natures. In fact, plot is definitely very low on the list of fairy tale essentials. Characters are confronted with strangely arbitrary options, magical helpers appear at just the right moments, the third (or youngest) child will inevitably emerge victorious: very few fairy tales utilize original or "realistic" plot lines. Max Lüthi declares, "Motivations are not obligatory in the fairytale. They may be there: The hero's going out into the unknown is almost always justified. . . . Other things are not given any justification, not motivated, not explained" (*The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, Indiana University Press, 1984, 67).

In a random sampling of fairy tales you might find the following

"motives" for action: The desire/yearning for a mate; the need to "learn fear"; idle curiosity; laziness; fear of death; quest for _____ (fill in the blank: honor, wealth, revenge, magic powers, food, the water of life, a feather from the Firebird, three hairs from the beard/head of the Devil, a "real" princess . . . etc.) All of these though reasonable in a fairy-tale sort of way, are a far cry from the complexities of real life. "[But] the general human demand for motivation always competes with the genre, and it is the battle between the two that gives life to the fairytale. . . . the fairytale has motivated and unmotivated side by side" (Lüthi, 113).

In keeping with the hypothesis that people (and story characters) reveal themselves by their choices and actions, it would seem that the fairytale plots exists primarily to allow the characters the opportunity to grow in response to trials and challenges, and to examine their true natures. The oldest child may seek to save the princess out of a sense of bravado; the second child tries because of "me-too-ism"; but the third child goes out of a sense of destiny. It is his fate, because of his birth position, to venture and to succeed. Each character has the chance, within the action of the story, to display his or her best and worst natures. Even "our hero" may take a wrong step, make a selfish or ill-informed choice, ignore good advice (usually several times before the lesson is learned!) But those choices are like a child's mistakes: they are the vehicles for growth.

The story forces the protagonist to confront his fears and longings, because only by doing so, by running a physical and emotional gauntlet, can he ascend to a higher plane of existence. It is not by accident that many protagonists (would-be heroes or heroines) are forced at some point in the tale to choose whether or not to forfeit that possession which is most dear to them. The Miller's Daughter can only become Queen by nearly losing her child. There is an understanding, in fairy tales, that wisdom comes at a price. If the oldest daughter requests a dress of gold, and the second of silver, then the youngest daughter will inevitably request some garment far more humble. At first glance that might seem to be a "good" choice, but in the code of fairy tales she has shamed and embarrassed her sisters by blatantly pointing out their weaknesses, and she will have to pay dearly for her too obvious humility. Real hardship

will be endured (banishment) before the heroine can evolve to her proper place as consort to a more powerful and wealthy man. In this resolution, the fairy tale is a reflection of its own time and sensibilities. There can be no more prestigious position in the hierarchy of a monarchical society than royalty. One can get there by accident of birth, or by marriage or adoption (only in fairy tales can one achieve royalty by cooking a broth for the prince or by answering three riddles!). In the modern equivalent the story might come out of the notion that "anyone can grow up to become president."

But we are not talking about real wealth or power here or at least not exclusively. The great and abiding strength of fairy tales is that they mirror our own growth, rites of passage, losses, gains, and eventual ascension to adulthood. "The tension of fairy tales," writes Lüthi, "their inner dynamism, depends very little on the question What's going to happen?—for the outcome is more or less clear to the accustomed fairytale listener, especially because the happy ending for the hero or heroine, with whom the male and female listeners respectively can identify, is as good as certain. That the same listener wishes to hear the same fairytale several times—completely in contrast to the case, say, of the joke—shows that it sets in motion a pattern of internal experience, sets off a sequence of tension and relief of tension, of concentration and relaxation, similar in effect to that of a musical work, whose interest is also not exhausted by a single hearing and which one needs to hear time and again, since the effect is deepened through repeated listening" (Lüthi, 73). Fairy tales place our inner struggles right up there with the conflict to be worthy of and to inherit a throne. Our hopes and aspirations and dreams take on a grander metaphor. That is not merely psychobabble, as you can see if you ask a child about his or her favorite story. A child can talk about battling injustice, about being generous and gracious, about fighting dragons (adults) and ogres (schoolyard bullies) because of the context of story. In fact, as more and more educators are discovering, children who have a rich fairy tale repertoire are able to see the possible consequences of their actions, even to solve problems and conflicts in a greater variety of ways, not all of which are violent. The violence in the stories (sword-play, etc.) is translated into a more appropriate set of actions: standing up to a bully, or defending a weaker child. In fact, a preponderance of stories offers a

variety of non-violent techniques for solving problems: negotiation, co-operation, or the out-maneuvering of an evil opponent. There is instinctive nobility in children that is reinforced by fairy tales, and that nobility can remain latent in children who have never become comfortable with the world of story. Fairy tales provide us with the safe opportunity to play out our worst fears and our dearest hopes, and perhaps, come to an understanding that reality lies somewhere in between the two.