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Once Upon a Time

I came to fairy tales twice, first as a child and years later as an adult. Like mothers and fathers everywhere, my parents read *Hansel and Gretel*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and other popular tales to me. But my most vivid childhood memories of fairy tales came by way of Walt Disney. I remember sitting on the edge of my seat in a darkened movie theater watching *Snow White* and holding my breath as the gamekeeper prepared to cut out the heroine's heart. Like the children around me, I gasped with relief when he disobeyed the evil queen's edict and let Snow White escape. For weeks afterward, I chanted "Hi,

o, hi, ho, it's off to work we go." Today I may have trouble naming l the dwarfs, but the images of the evil queen, Snow White, and the ven dwarfs are forever emblazoned on my memory.

Many years passed before I came to fairy tales the second time. By ien I was teaching at a university where I trained graduate students o do psychotherapy with children. As part of my duties I also taught ıdergraduate courses. One of my favorite courses, a seminar entitled The Psychology of Fantasy and Folklore," grew out of my long-anding interest in the role that fantasy plays in children's lives. The ırpose of the seminar was to explore the meaning of fairy tales and scover how they affect a child's psychological development. Sitting a circle on Monday afternoons, the students and I discussed the assical tales of the Grimm brothers as well as that most famous ventieth-century fairy tale, *The Wizard of Oz.*

I was struck by how impassioned students would become when we lked about the stories. The atmosphere was different from that of :her courses in which students merely sat back and took notes. veryone had a favorite fairy tale from childhood that struck an emo-ɔnal chord. One young woman recalled her mother reading *Cin-rella* at bedtime and insisting that her mother repeat the sequence ith the fairy godmother before turning off the lights. There was ɔmething about the silver and gold gown and the jewels that was ir-sistible.

Why do fairy tales trigger such strong reactions years after they are st encountered? Do they change us in some way, and if so, how? /hat is behind their enduring appeal? In trying to answer these ques-ɔns, I discovered a number of myths that surround fairy tales, many which my students and I held in common.

MYTH 1:
FAIRY TALES ARE CHILDREN'S STORIES

ne thing I learned in studying fairy tales was that a substantial num-er never made their way into children's storybooks. On one level,

this didn't come as a complete surprise. Some fairy-tale collections contain so many stories that they would become unwieldy if reproduced in their entirety. The Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales) contains well over two hundred fairy tales, of which only a dozen or so are ever included in children's books.

Yet the sheer volume of fairy tales is not the whole story. Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (Tales from Mother Goose) contains only twelve fairy tales, including *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, yet some of the stories in his collection are mysteriously missing from modern storybooks. These omissions are especially perplexing since the stories left out are as captivating as the ones left in. One of the missing tales is *Donkeyskin.* It begins like this:

> Once upon a time there lived a king who was so beloved by his subjects that he thought himself the happiest monarch in the world. He was rich beyond compare, and owned stables filled with the finest Arabian stallions. In one of the stables there lived a magic donkey. It was the king's most precious possession for it enjoyed a unique talent: it produced golden dung. When the king's servants arrived at the stable each morning, they found the animal's litter strewn with gold coins. Thus it was that the magic donkey provided the king with an endless source of riches.
>
> After many years of prosperity, the king received the terrible news that his wife was dying. But before she died, the queen, who had always thought first of the king's happiness, gathered up all her strength, and said to him:
>
> "I know for the good of your people, as well as for yourself, that you must marry again. But do not set about it in a hurry. Wait until you have found a woman more beautiful and better formed than myself."

Years go by, but the king's efforts come to naught. There is no one in the kingdom whose beauty surpasses that of the dead queen. One day he realizes there is indeed someone in the land more beautiful than his late wife. That person is none other than his daughter. The

has conveniently remarried and been cleansed of his unholy passion—is invited to the wedding and everyone lives happily ever after.

The reason *Donkeyskin* is deleted from children's storybooks has less to do with the donkey's unique talent—children delight in anything related to excretory functions—than with the king's unnatural longing. Incestuous desire is something one doesn't expect to find in a fairy tale. In some versions of the story, the princess is changed to an adopted daughter to play down the story's incestuous theme. Still, a fairy tale that describes a father lusting after his daughter—adopted or otherwise—is not the kind of story most parents would choose to read to their children.

Then why does it appear in Perrault's collection? For the simple reason that fairy tales were never meant for children. Originally conceived of as adult entertainment, fairy tales were told at social gatherings, in spinning rooms, in the fields, and in other settings where adults congregated—not in the nursery.

This is why many early fairy tales include exhibitionism, rape, and voyeurism. One version of *Little Red Riding Hood* has the heroine do a striptease for the wolf before jumping into bed with him. In an early rendering of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the prince ravages the princess in her sleep and then departs, leaving her pregnant. And in *The Princess Who Couldn't Laugh*, the heroine is doomed to a life of spinsterhood because she inadvertently views the private parts of a witch. As late as the eighteenth century, fairy tales were dramatized in exclusive Parisian salons where they were considered *divertissements* for the culturally elite.

It was not until the nineteenth century that fairy tales came into their own as children's literature. This happened, in part, through the activities of itinerant peddlers, known as "chapmen," who traveled from village to village selling household wares, sheet music, and affordable little volumes called chapbooks. Costing only a few pennies, chapbooks, or "cheap books," contained drastically edited folktales, legends, and fairy tales that had been simplified to appeal to less literate audiences. Though poorly written and crudely illustrated, they caught the fancy of young readers, who, in their quest for magic and adventure, took them to their hearts.

Myth 2: Fairy Tales Were Written by the Brothers Grimm

In the early 1800s, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm published their famous two-volume collection of fairy tales, *Children's and Household Tales.* Their intent was to create a definitive sourcebook of existing German stories and legends that would reflect the folk origins of the German *volk.* The result was an anthology that many consider the most comprehensive fairy-tale collection of all time.

But Wilhelm and Jacob never actually wrote any of the tales included in their volumes. They merely compiled them, relying on friends and relatives to supply them with stories that had been circulating throughout central Europe for centuries. A number of tales in their collection were contributed by Dorothea Wild, Wilhelm's mother-in-law, and others came from Jeannette and Amalie Hassenphlug, two sisters who later married into the Grimm family. Never mind that most of the stories had French and Italian origins; the Grimms considered them uniquely German and included them in their collection.

Thus, the Grimm brothers' *Aschenputtel* (Cinder Maid) turns out to be a close relative of Charles Perrault's *Cinderella.* In both stories, a mean stepmother and her selfish daughters collude to make the heroine's life miserable, denying her the simplest pleasures and making sure she doesn't come to the attention of the prince. But the Grimm version contains neither a fairy godmother nor a glass slipper; instead, it features a zealous stepmother who mutilates her daughters' oversized feet so that they will fit into a slipper made of embroidered silk.

Similarly, *Little Red Cap*, the Grimms' story of a little girl who dallies in the woods on the way to visit her grandmother, is a more elaborate version of Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood.* The Grimm version features not one wolf but two and ends with one of the wolves drowned. And *Briar Rose*, the story of a slumbering princess, is a drastically revised version of Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods.*

Although the Grimm brothers did not, technically speaking, write any of the tales, they altered them to make them more suitable for young readers. Their alterations were prompted, in part, by Wil-

rincess has blossomed into a beautiful young maiden and now is of
iarriageable age. The king sets out to take her for his bride.

The princess was horrified when she learned of her father's plans. She ran to her godmother, a wise and powerful fairy, who counseled her to put off her father by requesting wedding gifts which the king could not possibly deliver. Following her godmother's advice, the princess asked first for a dress that sparkled like the stars; the next morning she found a star-studded dress lying outside her door. She next asked for a dress made of moonbeams; once again her wish was fulfilled. Finally she insisted on a dress that shone as bright as the sun. The next morning she woke to discover a golden gown of unimaginable brilliance by her door. One by one, her father managed to fill all her requests.

In desperation, the princess returned to her fairy godmother to ask what to do. The old woman advised the frightened princess to demand the skin of the king's prized donkey. The child's godmother was positive the king would never kill the animal for the donkey was the source of all his wealth. "It is from that donkey he obtains his vast riches," the fairy godmother told the royal princess, "and I am sure he will never grant your wish."

To the princess's dismay, the king killed the magic donkey and presented the hide to his daughter as a wedding gift. The godmother, sensing the hopelessness of the situation, told the child she must escape. She instructed her to smear her face and hands with soot, wrap herself in the donkey skin, and leave the palace under cover of darkness.

"Go as far as you can," she told her. "Your dresses and jewels will follow you underground, and if you strike the earth three times, you will immediately have anything you need."

The adventures of a beleaguered young girl who flees her father by
idopting an animal disguise is a common theme in fairy tales. In an
talian fairy tale titled *L'Orsa* (The She Bear), the princess places a
nagic stick in her mouth that temporarily turns her into a bear so that
she can escape the castle and her father. In *Allereiruh* (Many Furs), a
German folk tale, a maiden demands that her father, the king, manu-

facture a dress made of the pelts of a thousand different animals. When he delivers the fur dress, thereby fulfilling her "impossible" request, she disguises herself by putting it on and escapes into the countryside.

The frightened princess in *Donkeyskin* also flees into the countryside, where she comes across a prince's castle. She secures work as a washerwoman in the castle laundry and keeps to herself, hoping no one will recognize her. But she is ridiculed by her coworkers, who dub her "Donkeyskin" because of the foul-smelling animal hide she wears. The princess endures their taunts in silence, not wanting to reveal her identity.

One day, weary of her slovenly appearance, the princess strikes the ground and retrieves her dresses. She tries on the one made of moonbeams and for a few moments relives her former glory. The prince, who happens to be inspecting the inner courtyard of the castle at the time, spies her in her finery and is dazzled by her beauty. He instantly falls in love with the mysterious maiden but is too love-stricken to approach her. He retires to his chambers and falls into a royal funk.

Eventually, though, true love wins out. The prince gets his mother to invite the maiden to the palace and devises a clever ruse involving a ring that will fit only the finger of a princess. Donkeyskin arrives at the great hall clad in the filthy donkey skin.

"Are you the girl who has a room in the furthest corner of the inner courtyard?" the prince asked.

"Yes, my lord, I am," answered she.

"Hold out your hand then," continued the prince, and, to the astonishment of everyone present, a little hand, white and delicate, emerged from beneath the black and dirty skin. The ring slipped on with the utmost ease, and, as it did, the skin fell to the ground, disclosing a figure of such beauty that the prince fell to his knees before her, while the king and queen rejoiced.

Donkeyskin concludes with the prince asking the princess for her hand in marriage, which she gladly gives. Her father—who by now

n's puritanical leanings. But commercial concerns also played a
The children's market for fairy tales, fueled by a growing recog-
on that children had their own unique interests, was growing
endously, and publishers were more willing to invest money in
ks that parents found acceptable.
any of the tales "written" by the Grimms continued to be altered
ney underwent translation. The preface to an English-language
on of their work published in the nineteenth century contains the
wing statement by the translators.

e have omitted about a dozen short pieces to which English mothers
ght object, and for good and satisfactory reasons have altered, in a
ght way, four other stories. The mixture of sacred subjects with
ofane, though frequent in Germany, would not meet with favor in an
nglish book.

s saturated with blatant sexual references thus yielded to stories
catered more to childhood sensibilities. And in the process, peo-
assumed the versions they were reading were authored by the
nms.

MYTH 3:
FAIRY TALES TEACH LESSONS

third common misconception has to do with the didactic value of
tales. Some folklorists believe that fairy tales offer "lessons" on
ect behavior, advising young readers on how to succeed in life.
e *Red Riding Hood*, it is thought, exhorts children to listen to their
hers and to refrain from talking to strangers, especially while
ling through the woods. *Sleeping Beauty* allegedly cautions chil-
not to venture into places where they don't belong; the heroine
as this lesson all too well when she wanders into a forbidden room
pricks her finger on a poison spindle.
he belief that fairy tales teach lessons can be traced, in part, to
ault, whose stories came equipped with quaint morals, many of

them delivered in rhyme. *Little Red Riding Hood* ends with the following caution:

Little girls, this seems to say
Never stop upon your way.
Never trust a stranger-friend;
No one knows where it will end.

Reasonable advice, except that *Little Red Riding Hood* has more to do with food and cannibalism than with avoiding strangers in the woods. It is doubtful that young women in New York refrain from chatting with strange men in Central Park because they read *Little Red Riding Hood* as children.

Some of Perrault's so-called lessons contain questionable advice and incline toward cynicism. Consider the caution he includes at the end of *Cinderella:*

Godmothers are useful things
Even when without the wings.
Wisdom may be yours and wit,
Courage, industry, and grit—
What's the use of these at all,
If you lack a friend at call.

Perrault seems to be preaching that intelligence, hard work, and courage count for little unless one has acquaintances in high places. It's not who you are but who you know; forget about native strengths and abilities if you don't have connections. Useful advice perhaps for someone entering politics, but not a laudable lesson for children barely out of the nursery.

If one wants to instill lessons in the young, it is better to look to Aesop's fables or other children's stories specifically meant to provide useful advice. *The Hare and the Tortoise* teaches children that slow and steady wins the race, that frivolous pursuits are to be avoided if one hopes to succeed. *The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* teaches that you may end up paying a heavy price for pretending to be someone you're not.

The Little Engine That Could—a testimony to perseverance—ar-
for the need to have faith in one's abilities ("I think I can, I think
. . . "). Fairy tales have many appealing qualities, but teaching
ıs is not one of them.

The meaning of fairy tales

ıat is it about fairy tales that makes them so captivating? Why do
ınd the Beanstalk, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella* have such enormous
ıl? The most obvious explanation is that fairy tales are an unpar-
d source of adventure. Few children's stories contain death-
ıg chase sequences such as one finds in *Jack and the Beanstalk*.
e is nothing that focuses one's attention as much as a cannibalis-
re breathing down one's neck. And then there is *Hansel and Gre-*
ow many tales from childhood can boast a sequence in which an
ent child is rescued from certain death at the very last moment?
es like *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little Engine That Could*,
h delightful in their own right, do not provide the hair-raising
; that fairy tales do.

fairy tales are more than suspense-filled adventures that excite
nagination, more than mere entertainment. Beyond the chase
s and last-minute rescues are serious dramas that reflect events
; place in the child's inner world. Whereas the initial attraction
iiry tale may lie in its ability to enchant and entertain, its lasting
lies in its power to help children deal with the internal conflicts
ace in the course of growing up.

s is why fairy tales endure. It is the reason anniversary editions
ney classics sell out year after year and movies such as *The Lit-*
rmaid and *Aladdin* break box office records. How else can one
n the appeal of a story like *Hansel and Gretel* in which innocent
en are sent into the woods to die of starvation? How can one
a story like *The Little Mermaid*, in which the heroine's tongue
from her mouth merely to seal a bargain? Fairy tales, in addi-
o being magical adventures, help children deal with struggles
re a part of their day-to-day lives.

The Psychoanalytic View: Cinderella Meets Oedipus

What precisely is the nature of these struggles? Followers of Sigmund Freud contend that they are sexual by and large, rooted, as it were, in oedipal concerns. Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst and author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, maintained that the hidden text in fairy tales revolves about such matters as penis envy, castration anxiety, and unconscious incestuous longings. According to Bettelheim, hidden psychosexual conflicts are the driving force in a whole host of fairy tales ranging from *Little Red Riding Hood* to *Rumpelstiltskin*.

The Freudian emphasis on sexuality leads to a number of fanciful, if somewhat far-fetched interpretations. The struggle between Snow White and her stepmother, for example, supposedly derives from Snow White's oedipal longing for her father. The older woman embarks on her murderous quest because she believes that the seven-year-old poses a sexual threat. Her incessant query, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" literally reflects her fear that the king will find Snow White more appealing than her. It thus is the implicit sexual struggle between the young girl and the queen, rather than the queen's preoccupation with her looks, that fuels the plot.

Snow White's relationship to the seven dwarfs inspires a similarly inventive interpretation. Referring to the dwarfs as "stunted penises," Bettelheim writes, "These 'little men' with their stunted bodies and their mining occupation—they skillfully penetrate into dark holes—all suggest phallic connotations." It is because of their diminished sexual capacities that the dwarfs pose no threat to the pubescent Snow White. Since they are unable to perform, they provide the child with a safe haven at a time in life when she is sexually vulnerable.

Even *Cinderella* does not escape the swath of the psychoanalytic brush. In the Grimm brothers' version, the stepmother's wish to have the prince take one of her daughters as his bride is so intense that she orders them to cut off their heels and toes so their feet will fit into the slipper. When the prince notices blood flowing from the shoe, he naturally becomes distraught. But his distress, according to psychoanalytic doctrine, is prompted not so much by the stepmother's wanton brutality—or her efforts to deceive him—but by the castration anxi-