

## A FAIRY TALE IS MORE THAN JUST A FAIRY TALE

Abstract In focusing on the interaction between various mediations of the fairy tale, Zipes refutes dichotomies of print vs oral controversies that scholars – especially Wilem de Blécourt in *Tales of Magic, Tales of Print* (2011) and Ruth Bottigheimer in *Fairy Tales: A New History* (2009) – have been promoting to paint a misinformed history of fairy tales as having literary (rather than oral) origins. Zipes changes the terms of the debate by arguing that researchers should turn their attention to recent sophisticated and innovative theories of storytelling, cultural evolution, human communication and memetics to see how fairy tales enable us to understand why we are disposed towards them and how they ‘breathe’ life into our daily undertakings.

When some one says to you – and I’ve heard this comment in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian – ‘that’s just a fairy tale’, it generally means that what you have said is untrue or unreal. It is a polite but deprecating way of saying that your words form a lie or gossip; your story is make-believe and unreliable and has nothing to do with reality and experience. Fairy tale is thus turned into some kind of trivial story – silly, infantile, not to be believed, moreover, fairy tales are allegedly for children, amusing stories to pass the time away and to be dismissed. If children believe in them, read them and listen to them, they cannot be taken seriously. Yet, we all know that the opposite is true. We all know we believe or want to believe in fairies and fairy tales. We are all ready to answer Peter Pan’s monumental question whether we believe in fairies with a resounding ‘yes!’ We all know that fairy tales are tied to real life experiences more than we pretend they are not. We ward off fairy tales and pretend that they are intended mainly for children because they tell more truth than we want to know, and we absorb fairy tales because they tell us more truth than we want to know. They are filled with desire and optimism. They drip with brutality, bluntness, violence and perversity. They expose untruth, and the best are bare, brusque and concise. They stamp our minds and perhaps our souls. They form another world, a counter world, in which social justice is more readily attainable than in our actual world, where hypocrisy, corruption, hyping, exploitation and competition determine the outcome of social and political interactions and the degraded state of social relations. Though it is impossible to trace the historical origins and evolution of fairy tales to a particular time and place, we do know that humans began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity of speech (Zipes 2012: 1–20). They may have even used sign language before speech originated to communicate vital information for responding and adapting to their environment for survival (Dessalles 2007: 139–210). Units of this information gradually formed the basis of narratives that enabled humans to learn about themselves and the worlds that they inhabited. Informative tales were not given titles; they were simply told to mark an occasion, to set an example, to warn about danger, to procure food, to explain what seemed inexplicable. People told stories to communicate knowledge and experience in social contexts. Though many ancient tales might seem to us to be magical, miraculous, fanciful, superstitious or unreal, people believed them, and they were and are not much different from people today who believe in religions, miracles, cults, nations and notions such as ‘free’ democracies that have little basis in reality. In fact, religious and patriotic stories have more in common with fairy tales than we realize except that fairy tales tend to be secular and are not based on a prescriptive belief system or religious codes.

Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action – to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs while we try to change and make ourselves fit for the world. Therefore, the focus of fairy tales, whether oral, written or cinematic, has always been on finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people and animals that will enable protagonists to transform themselves and their environment and make it more suitable for living in peace and contentment. Fairy tales begin with conflict or a situation that leads to conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict. We are all misfit for the world, and somehow we must fit in, fit in with other people, and thus we must invent or find the means through communication to satisfy and resolve conflicting desires and instincts. Fairy tales are rooted in oral traditions that eventually engendered literary tales such as those by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen, and as explained, these oral tales were never given titles, nor did they exist in the forms in which they are told, printed, painted, recorded, performed and filmed today. They were never specifically intended for children, and yet storytellers and their tales never excluded children. Folklorists generally make a distinction between wonder folk tales, which originated in oral traditions throughout the world and still exist, and literary fairy tales, which emanated from the oral traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print and continue to be created today in various mediated forms throughout the world. In both the oral and literary traditions the tale types influenced by cultural patterns are so numerous and diverse that it is almost impossible to define a wonder folk tale or a fairy tale or explain the relationship between the two modes of communication. There are helpful catalogues of tale types and encyclopaedias of fairy tales such as Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* (1928), revised by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004, my *Oxford Fairy Tale Companion to Fairy Tales* (2000), William Hansen's *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (2002), Donald Haase's *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2007), and the valuable ongoing project, *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, which was begun in 1958 and is still not finished. Yet, despite their value, the intricate relationship and evolution of folk and fairy tales are difficult to comprehend and define. It is also next to impossible to explain how fairy tales, largely during the nineteenth century, were assigned to children in different national cultures in the western world. In fact, together, oral and literary tales form one immense and complex genre because they are inextricably dependent on one another. It is for this reason that I shall use the modern term 'fairy tale' to encompass the oral tradition as the genre's vital progenitor and try to explain the inexplicable fairy tale, its evolution and dissemination, not as genre for children but as a genre that comprises children and adults as listeners, readers and viewers. In other words, my use of the term fairy tale will also refer to the symbiotic relationship of oral and literary currents and the symbiotic relationship between young and old, even if I shall occasionally make historical distinctions concerning the mediation and reception of different tale types. In focusing on the interaction between various mediations of the fairy tale, I want to refute dichotomies such as print vs oral that some scholars are still promoting to paint a misinformed history of the fairy tale (Bottigheimer 2009; de Blécourt 2011), and I want to suggest that researchers should be focusing on the more sophisticated and innovative theories of storytelling, cultural evolution, human communication and memetics to see how they might enable us to understand why we are disposed towards fairy tales and how they 'breathe' life into our daily undertakings. Almost all endeavours by scholars to define the fairy tale as a genre for children have failed because they have

not sufficiently explored its history in different countries of the West, including Slavic countries of Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, Africa, Asia, South America and Australia. Nor have they taken into account the role that adults have played in forging and maintaining the genre. Their failure is predictable because the genre is so volatile and fluid. As Haase has remarked in one of the more cogent descriptions of the struggle by intellectuals to pin down the fairy tale: despite its currency and apparent simplicity, the term 'fairy tale' resists a universally accepted or universally satisfying definition. For some, the term denotes a specific narrative form with easily identified characteristics, but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of other forms may be grouped. Definitions of 'fairy tale' often tend to include a litany of characteristics to account for the fact the term has been applied to stories as diverse as Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Jack and the Beanstalk, Lucky Hans, Bluebeard, and Henny-Penny.

The difficulty in defining the fairy tale in western countries stems from the fact that storytellers and writers never used the term 'fairy tale' until Madame Catherine-Anne d'Aulnoy coined it in 1697, when she published her first collection of tales for upper-class readers. She never wrote a word about why she used the term. Yet, it was and is highly significant that she chose to call her stories 'contes de fées', literally 'tales about fairies' (Jasmin 2002). The very first English translation of d'Aulnoy's collection, *Les contes des fées* (1697–1698) was published as *Tales of the Fairies* in 1707 (Palmer and Palmer 1974a, 1974b), but it was not until 1750 that the term 'fairy tale' came into common English usage. There is a crucial difference in French between *conte des fées*/tale about fairies and *conte féerique*/fairy tale. The *conte des fées* purports to tell about the actions and deeds of fairies, while the *conte féerique* (a term that was not used by French writers) describes the narrative form. Since this term – *conte de fée*/fairy tale – has become so troublesome for scholars and does not do justice in English to the 'revolutionary' implications of its inventor, d'Aulnoy, I should like to explore its historical significance and implications for our contemporary understanding of the complexity of the genre. The most striking feature of the most important foundational period of the literary fairy tale in Europe, 1690 to 1710, was the domination of fairies in the French texts. Up until this point, the literary fairy tale was not considered a genre and did not have a name. Not was it associated with children. It was simply a *conte*, *cunto*, *cuento*, *skazka*, *story*, *Märchen* and so on. No writer had labelled his or her tale a fairy tale in print until d'Aulnoy created the term. If we recall, the title of Giovan Francesco Straparola's collection of stories, which contained a few fairy tales, was *Pleasant Nights or Le Piacevoli Notti* (1550/1553), and Giambattista Basile called his book, written in Neapolitan dialect, *The Tale of Tales or Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634). The Italians were among the early writers of vernacular fairy tales in print, and there were some fairies or fate in the Italian tales, but they were not singled out for attention or played the prominent role that they were assigned by the French seventeenth-century women writers, also known as *conteuses* and *salonnières* (Zipes 1989; Seifert and Stanton 2010). (And, of course, there were some highly significant male writers such as Charles Perrault and Philippe de Caylus, who

employed fairies in their tales.) When Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy included the fairy tale 'The Island of Happiness' in her novel *Histoire d'Hippolyte, comte de Duglas* in 1690, she was not aware that she was about to set a trend in France that became epidemic among her acquaintances and other members of her social class. Though the nymphs in this tale were not called fairies, their resemblance was clear. Moreover, the princess whom they served was definitely a fairy, and the paradisiacal island represented an ideal fairy realm or utopia. (It should be noted that, after Adolph, the protagonist, foolishly abandons this island, he is murdered by Father Time; happiness is lost forever; d'Aulnoy's tales thereafter mark what is lacking in the mundane world and depict how fairies must intervene to compensate for human foibles.) Within six years after the publication of 'The Isle of Happiness', the literary fairy tale, which heretofore had been a simple oral folk tale or a printed conte, cuento, or favola, became the talk of the literary salons, or what had been the talk in these salons now came to print. Orality was, as numerous French critics have recently demonstrated, inseparable from print fairy tales and defined in many diverse ways (Defrance and Perrin 2007). D'Aulnoy promoted the cause of fairy tales in the Parisian salons, in which she recited them. Storytelling, riddles, and other parlour and salon games had been common in Italy, Spain, England and France since the sixteenth century (Crane 1920; Seifert and Stanton 2010). D'Aulnoy's tales were part of a creative explosion that became contagious and featured 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. BTWO\_2.1&2\_Zipes\_95-102.indd 98 7/11/13 2:25:38 PM Intellect Ltd. 2012 Not for Distribution

A fairy tale is more than just a fairy tale 99 powerful and precocious fairies in more than twenty books about fairies written by highly educated and talented French writers. It was only after d'Aulnoy had introduced the title *contes des fées* in 1697 or before in the salons that other writers began using the term that signified much more than tales about fairies. The use of the term was a declaration of difference and resistance. It can be objectively stated that there is no other period in the western literary history when so many fairies were, like powerful goddesses, the determining figures of most of the plots of tales written by women – and also by some men. These tales were programmes of actions or social symbolic acts projecting moral and ethical conflicts in alternative worlds. There are several reasons why marvellous tales became chock full of omnipotent fairies and why so many writers labelled their tales *contes de fées*, a term that has stuck in French and English to the present day. These reasons also may help us understand why today we fail to recognize or understand the term's immense subversive significance when we use or try to define fairy tale. It may also be a reason why children, as listeners and readers, were attracted to the fairy tale as genre, for children are by their very honest and innocent nature subversive. In my opinion, they are drawn to the subversive and liberating elements of fairy tales. To begin with, we must recall that

the French women writers were all members of literary salons where they told or read their tales before having them published. These private salons afforded them the opportunity to perform and demonstrate their prowess at a time when they had few privileges in the public sphere. It could be argued that the fairies in their tales signal their actual differences with male writers and their resistance to the conditions under which they lived, especially regulations that governed manners and comportment in their daily routines within the French civilizing process (Zipes 2006). It was only in a fairy tale realm, not supervised by the church or the dictates of King Louis XIV that they could project alter-natives that stemmed from their desires and needs. It was in the salons that they shared their tales, forged alliances, exchanged ideas and came to look upon themselves as fairies. For a short period in their lives, they delighted in embracing a fairy cult without establishing a specific code. Their tales spelled out new diverse standards of behaviour that were intended to transform the relationships between men and women, primarily of the upper classes. In this sense, French women writers wanted to live their tales as specially gifted artists and created and called upon the fairies they created to arbitrate on their behalf. But their fairies were not always just; they could also be 'witch-like' and had supernatural powers that they used to test or contest ordinary mortals. In general the awesome fairies with their kind and nasty personalities stood in opposition to the court of Louis XIV and the Catholic church, and they were the antithesis of the pietistic Madame de Maintenon, Louis' morganatic wife, who insisted on introducing a reign of strict piety at the court and preached against secularism and worldliness. D'Aulnoy's tales about fairies and those of her contemporaries merged with a long and profound stream of tales, heard in oral traditions and read when print came into fashion, that stem from Greco-Roman myths and may even have more ancient pagan roots. We must remember that a supernatural creature like a fairy may have been called something else and may have existed in the minds, ritual practices of humans and stories for thousands of years. D'Aulnoy's invention or coinage of the term *conte de fée* only indicated a pronounced emphasis on the significance of fairies that informed the tales she wrote and told as well as many other tales by the *conteuses* and male writers of her time. In the eighteenth century these fascinating tales and many others from European oral traditions were printed in cheap books, sanitized, revised and disseminated among all social classes that knew how to read. They were also incorporated into books for young girls such as Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) and Madame Leprince de Beaumont's *Le Magasin des enfans* (1757). The most interesting transformation within the genre of the fairy tale takes place at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century when many fairy tale anthologies began to appear. As Martin Sutton, Brian Alderson, David Blamires, Jennifer Schacker and more recently Matthew Grenby have pointed out from different perspectives (Sutton 1996; Schacker 2003; Grenby 2006: 1-24), books of fairy and folk tales for middle-class children and adults remained popular in western Europe and North America from the eighteenth century up through the nineteenth century. Their reception was ambivalent because these tales of fantasy and magic were questioned by conservative religious groups but not totally rejected. Debate always centred on their moral qualities and how they might

be used and printed to elevate the behaviour of young readers. Then and now many fundamentalist religious groups believed fairy tales were somehow tainted by the sin-complex, what F. J. Harvey Darton described as ‘the belief that anything fantastic on the one hand, or anything primitive on the other, is inherently noxious, or at least so void of good as to be actively dangerous’ (1982: 99). I also believe that this suspicion by conservative groups up to the present also unconsciously comprehends the subversive elements of the genre and how vital the notion of the fairy was to the proto-feminist writers of the seventeenth century. Despite objections to fairy tales, interest in them flourished as they were sanitized and made more appropriate for the so-called ‘innocent’ children in most countries. In English-speaking countries the most significant publication was Edgar Taylor’s two volumes of *German Popular Stories* in 1823 and 1826. By emphasizing how historically significant the tales were and how pure and refreshing they were for children, Taylor, following the Grimms, wanted to appeal to the scholarly interests of adults and the curious, ‘innocent’ minds of young readers. Indeed, Taylor employed an editing process that was geared to propriety, something to which the Grimms also paid attention, but Taylor was much more the consummate censor: he artfully made the tales more succinct, changed titles, characters and incidents, mistranslated rhymes, deleted references to God and Christianity, downplayed brutality, and eliminated sexual innuendoes. Ultimately, Taylor’s tales spread throughout Great Britain and America and continue to be published even today. He is primarily responsible for the sanitization and infantilization of fairy tales, perhaps even responsible for the remark, ‘that’s just a fairy tale’. Yet, we must ask whether fairy tales can become or have ever become totally infantilized? We must ask whether there is something about these tales that we call fairy tales that resists definition and constraints no matter how we adapt them and categorize them. Is there something inherently subversive and utopian in fairy tales of manifold types that keep us returning to them throughout our lives and hoping that they might open the portal to another world?

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