CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

MARIA TATAR

Introduction

"Once upon a time" takes us down a road well traveled yet often with a startling twist or turn in the path. "Little Red Riding Hood" may feel like a completely familiar story until we see it reframed in an advertisement for a red-hooded automobile making its way through the woods, father at the wheel and daughter in the back seat. The girl in red has appeared on screen, at a Halloween party, with weapons in her basket "just in case." She has turned up in urban settings, wearing a red hoodie, seeking revenge on a sexual predator. Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us that myths are created through a logic that resembles the workings of a kaleidoscope, "an instrument which also contains bits and pieces by means of which structural patterns are realized." Just one simple twist, and something completely new, yet also deeply familiar, emerges.[1]

Fairy tales, like myths, capitalize on the three concepts the Greeks captured in the term *kaleidoscope*: sparkling beauty, austere form, and visual power. Once told around the fireside or at the hearth, with adults and children sharing the storytelling space, they captured the play of light and shadow in their environment, creating special effects that yoked beauty with horror. Imagine a time before electronic entertainments, with long dark nights around campsites and other sources of heat and light, and it is not much of a challenge to realize that human beings, always quick to adapt, began exchanging information, trading wisdom, and reporting gossip. "Literature," Vladimir Nabokov tells us, "was born on the day when a boy came crying 'wolf, wolf,' and there was no wolf behind him."[2] And that boy's story was no doubt both compact and vivid. Once the conversation started about that wolf, it was easy enough, in subsequent versions, to begin exaggerating, overstating, inflating, and doing all the things that make for lively entertainments. Fairy tales are always more interesting when something is added to them. Each new telling recharges the narrative, making it crackle and hiss with cultural energy. The simple story of a wolf and an

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

encounter in the woods can take up questions of predator/prey relationships, innocence and seduction, or monstrosity and alterity. Over time, it is given layers of depth as it is interpreted and refashioned by successive storytelling cultures.

What once belonged to the childhood of culture has been relegated to the culture of childhood, even though fairy tales continue to circulate today not just in the nursery but also in adult cultural production, where they often appear in disguised form as memes, talismans, and tropes. Today we make fine calibrations in the repertoire of traditional tales, with everything from gentle, child-friendly versions to fractured, twisted productions for the grown-ups. The agendas in fairy-tale books for children take a mellow turn, with writers and illustrators walking a fine line between melodramatic plot lines and constructive messaging. By contrast, NBC's crime-horror series *Grimm*, ABC's mind-bending *Once upon a Time*, and Guillermo del Toro's disturbing *Pan's Labyrinth* pump up the stories for adult audiences, infusing them with existential torment, surreal plot twists, and explosive special effects.

Despite our constant efforts to turn fairy tales into instruments for conveying messages and morals, we remain drawn to the stories in large part because they open up the great question of "What if?" Giving us worst-case-possible scenarios along with best-possible outcomes, they set in motion a chain of perils and adventures larger than life and twice as unnatural. Giambattista Basile and Charles Perrault began the trend of mining stories for messages when they published their tales, appending a moral, sometimes two, at the end of each tale. Stories that had once indulged in portraying sexual excesses and taboo desires suddenly had a moral, one that was sometimes as entertaining as the story itself, a punch line as it were. These early efforts to teach and preach were marked by high irony, along with the candid acknowledgment that trying to extract a tidy moral is part of the narrative fun.

Basile's *Tale of Tales*, published under a pseudonym in 1634 and 1636, indulged in an extravagant baroque style that quickly becomes evident even in the summaries prefacing each tale. Here is the synopsis for "Sun, Moon, and Talia," a version of the story that today goes by the name of "Sleeping Beauty":

> Talia dies because of a little piece of flax and is left in a palace, where a king chances to pass by and causes her to have two children. The children fall into the hands of the king's jealous wife, who orders that they be cooked and served to their father and that Talia be burned. The cook saves the children and Talia is freed by the king, who has his wife thrown into the same fire that had been prepared for Talia.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

Appended to a story that puts on display necrophiliac desires, cannibalistic urges, and theatrical punishments is a pithy moral about how "for those who are lucky, *good rains down even when they are sleeping*."

The same dissonant chords are sounded at the end of the tales written down by Charles Perrault. "Donkeyskin" recounts the flight of a young woman from her home, after her father proposes to her following the death of his wife. Donkeyskin not only survives but also marries the prince of a neighboring kingdom. "It is not difficult to see that the moral to this story teaches children that it is better to expose yourself to harsh adversity than to neglect your duty," Perrault tells us. He adds:

> Virtue may sometimes seem ill fated, but it is always crowned with success. Even the most powerful logic is no defense against frenzied love and ardent ecstasy, especially when a lover is prepared to squander his rich treasures. Finally this story shows that pure water and brown bread are enough nourishment for young women, so long as they have beautiful clothes, and that there is no woman on earth who does not believe that she is beautiful and who does not see herself as getting the golden apple if she were to be mixed in with the three beauties of that famous contest.

In the proliferation of morals added to a tale about the abuse of paternal authority, we can see a desperate effort to cover up the simple facts rather than to reveal the complicated truths of the narrative.

Fairy tales, rather than sending messages, teaching morals, or constructing lessons, get conversations going. Piling on one outrage after another, they oblige us to react, to take positions and make judgments, enabling us to work through cultural contradictions using the power of a symbolic story. We are in "once upon a time," rather than in the here and now, in a safe space that allows us to debate the terms of plots that turn on family conflicts ranging from sibling rivalry and parental abandonment to maternal jealousy and paternal belligerence. Whether they are delivered to us through oral storytelling cultures, books, or electronic media, they are to double duty bound, entertaining and provoking, and above all ensuring that a culture of silence cannot descend on us.

Much of the magic of fairy tales derives from their mutability. In a flash Hansel and Gretel turn into witch hunters rather than abject victims. In *The Singer of Tales*, Albert Lord reminded us that there is really no conflict between preserving traditions and creating them anew. Tradition is, rather, preserved by constantly re-creating it.[3] Today it is often the iconoclasts who keep the tales alive, and in fact it is the fate of iconoclasts to preserve the very stories that they seek to destroy. Stories like Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" or Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg," the poems in Anne

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

Sexton's *Transformations*, and films like *Wolf* (1994), *Shrek* (2001), or *This Very Moment* (2003) seek to subvert the premises of the stories on which they draw, but as they do so, they take us back to the traditions from which they derive, challenging us to identify differences and deviations. *Shrek* elevates beastliness and monstrosity into a position of moral superiority; Roald Dahl's Little Red Riding Hood becomes a gun-toting predator; and Jon Scieszka's *True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* turns the wolf into a victim who becomes the target of our sympathy. Suddenly we begin to wonder why the new departs from the old and we ask ourselves what that reveals about our own cultural values.

The term "fairy tale" has not served the genre well. Often dismissed as an infantile confection, the fairy tale in fact rarely features the sprightly supernatural creatures so prominent in its name. It was the French, more specifically Mme d'Aulnoy, who gave us the term "contes de fées," leading us to frame the stories as if they turn on the lives of diminutive woodland folk rather than ordinary people. In English, the term was first used in 1749, casually by Horace Walpole, and with self-conscious purpose when Sarah Fielding called a story embedded in *The Governess*, published in 1749: "The Princess Hebe: A Fairy Tale." The German term "Märchen" points to the origins of the stories in the notion of news, reports, tall tales, rumors, and gossip – in short of talk and social exchanges. Fairy tales hover somewhere between tall tale and high fantasy, anchored in the real world, but with embellishments and misrepresentations that turn their lies into higher truths.

There is magic in these tall tales, and the presence of enchantment is perhaps the defining feature of the genre.[4] We are not so much in the realm of fairies as in the domain of what J. R. R. Tolkien referred to as *Faërie*, that "Perilous Realm" where anything can happen. The wolf that appears on the forest path can converse like a gentleman; a boy takes a bite of lettuce and turns into a donkey; a young woman leans against a tree and it turns into a handsome prince; a horse's head nailed to a gate speaks poetry. Again and again we witness transformations that break down the divide between life and death, nature and culture, animal and human, or beauty and monstrosity. Fairy tales take up deep cultural contradictions, creating what Claude Lévi-Strauss called "miniature models" – stories that dispense with extraneous details to give us primal anxieties and desires, the raw rather than the cooked, as it were. They use magic, not to falsify or delude, but rather to enable counterfactuals, to move us to imagine "what if?" or to wonder "why?" And that move, as both Plato and Aristotle assured us, marks the beginning of philosophy. While fairy-tale heroes and heroines wander, we track their moves and wonder, in both senses of the term, at

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

their adventures. It is no surprise that the term "wonder tale" has been proposed and embraced as an alternative to the misleading "fairy tale."

If fairy-tale protagonists seem always to be on the move, traveling lightly and quickly, the tales themselves are constantly migrating into new cultures and new media, reinventing themselves along the way. These days fairy tales are passed on to us through what media gurus call multiple "delivery systems," and the stories have reclaimed a multi-generational appeal. Perhaps that is why fairy tales seem to be on steroids today, for the mythical power of fairy tales seems amplified in an age of electronic entertainments, with stories like "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Hansel and Gretel," "Cinderella," "Briar Rose," or "Puss in Boots" taking front and center stage in Hollywood films but also flashing out at us from productions for which fairy tales seem unlikely source material. Who can forget the shoe that fits in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* or the sleeping beauty Broomhilda von Shaft in his film *Django Unchained*? Lévi-Strauss's "bits and pieces" are all there even when they do not necessarily lead to the kind of structuring pattern that would make the work an adaptation rather than the repository of fairy-tale tropes and motifs.

Many of the most revered experts have insisted on a strict typological divide between fairy tales, banished to the culture of childhood, and myth, foundational tales that are treated with reverence as sacred stories belonging to high culture. "Fairy tales are told for entertainment," Joseph Campbell declared. "You've got to distinguish between the myths that have to do with the serious matter of living life in terms of society and of nature, and stories with some of those same motifs that are told for entertainment."[5] Campbell correctly recognized the shared repertoire of motifs in fairy tales and myth, but unlike Lévi-Strauss, who believed that all versions of a story belong to a larger mythical narrative, he trivialized the fairy tale as a form of cultural production told merely to entertain with no higher spiritual mission.

Just how robust is that shared repertoire and the commitment to working out cultural conflicts? If we turn to Greek mythology, we discover that one tale begins with a girl, a basket from mother, a meadow of flowers, and a god disguised as a bull. Instead of the marauding wolf in fairy tales recorded by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, we find a bull, less ferocious than tame, playful, and seductive. The ancient tale about Zeus and Europa, which has, of course, been read by generations of schoolchildren raised on *Bulfinch's Mythology* and Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, informs not only "Little Red Riding Hood" but also "Beauty and the Beast." Both tales circulate comfortably in the world of children's literature, even though, for the Greeks, as for us today, the story of Europa's abduction challenges us to think hard about the line dividing rape from seduction. Both myth

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

and fairy tale take up powerful questions about innocence and predatory behavior through the optic of the nature/culture divide.

That it is possible to miniaturize myths and dilute their "seriousness" and sacred energy becomes evident when we read Nathaniel Hawthorne's version of the Zeus/Europa encounter in his *Tanglewood Tales*. In that recasting, the girl (and I use that term advisedly) meets the god, who has disguised himself as a remarkably beautiful bull. Seduced by the scent of ambrosia and the sounds of sweet music, Europa climbs on the bull's back and is carried off to the sea. "Was there ever such a gentle, sweet, pretty, and amiable creature as this bull, and ever such a nice playmate for a little girl?" Hawthorne asks.[6] Just as Hawthorne lightens the myth, fairy tales, I would argue, can rise to the "seriousness" that Campbell demands, as any reader of Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, or Joseph Jacobs can testify.

Part of the art and magic of fairy tales has to do with their power to make something from nothing. Once told around campfires and firesides, these stories were nourished not just by attentive audiences but also by the chiaroscuro effects outdoors and in interior spaces. It is the sorcery of words that kept them alive, as they endlessly transformed themselves, erasing their traces at times but also migrating into print culture, where they have been preserved in a material form with the potential now to change into bits of information traveling along circuits via electronic impulses. This second industrial revolution has been weightless in many ways, requiring hardware to be sure, but nothing like the printing press or the fossil-fueled modes of transport that serve as a delivery system for print materials.

Despite a drive to de-materialize, fairy tales also embrace the reality principle, for their tellers repeatedly emphasize an engagement with material culture when they spin their yarns and weave their plots. The tales themselves work hard to create vivacity, mobilizing just the right words to enable us to visualize characters, scenes, and artifacts. Words become wands when we hear about a princess tossing her golden ball into the air, a house with windows of spun sugar, or a beautiful bird that emerges from a blazing tree surrounded by a mist. Fairy tales use a minimalist style to evoke luminosity, the enchantments that draw us into their world to escape the unbearable weight of everyday life and to embrace a lightness of being. On the one hand, there is a drive to create substance, materiality, or thingness, and on the other hand, a compulsion to affirm the weightless charms of light, airy nothingness.

Let us look for a moment at "Hansel and Gretel," a story set in a time of famine, when there is literally hardly anything left to "bite" or "break." In this time of want and need, Hansel and Gretel use their wits and cunning

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

in vain. They are abandoned in the forest, forced to subsist on a few berries lying on the ground. Famished and exhausted they lie down and fall asleep. It is at this point that privation is transformed into lightness and creates a gateway into a zone of wish fulfillment. Italo Calvino, after reading Kafka's "The Bucket Rider," concluded that the tale of a man who sets out in the middle of winter to beg for coal can be read in optimistic terms: "The empty bucket, symbol of privation and desire and seeking, raising you to the point at which a humble request can no longer be satisfied – all this opens the road to endless reflection." And so the abject bucket rider, stripped of all means of subsistence, becomes a model of transcendent asceticism – rising into the regions of the "ice mountains" and "lost forever."[7] Lost to the world, perhaps, but perhaps not to himself, and certainly not to us. What Kafka may be telling us is that having nothing translates into something of incomparable ethereal value. And so it is only when Hansel and Gretel lose everything, even consciousness, that a world of seeming plenty emerges before their eyes, offering them bread, cake, and sugar on the outside, and milk and pancakes with sugar, apples, and nuts on the inside.

Much as "Hansel and Gretel" takes to an extreme what Vladimir Propp famously called "lack," as the foundational condition of the fairy tale, and celebrates it as the gateway to adventure, conflict, and happily-ever-after, it also, in a dialectical move, installs material objects, pearls and jewels, as the embodiment of its highest good.[8] As Max Lüthi has told us, fairy tales give us the beauty of shimmering surfaces and sparkling exteriors to express what matters, privileging metal and mineral forms above all else.[9] And so the solidity of pearls and jewels serves as an antidote to the poverty and lack described at the beginning, symbolizing a source of plenty and plenitude that has its analogue in the meal shared in the final scene of the tale by the two children with their father.

In many ways, we can applaud the fairy tale's refusal to romanticize poverty. Instead it aestheticizes wealth, showing that there is something renewing and life-saving about the properties of material objects. And yet recall that for readers the charismatic material objects remain without substance, just words that evoke solidity and vivacity, animating us with their kaleidoscopic power – once again, beauty, austere form, and visual power.

The spirit of storytelling animates the chapters in these volumes. The contributors all focus on a specific tale or set of tales to model an interpretive pathway and to dig deeply through the historical and symbolic layers of the fairy tale. The study of fairy tales offers up many challenges, not the least of which comes in the form of a text that is unstable and indeterminate, a text that exists only in copies of itself. Valdimar Hafstein's chapter on fairy tales, copyright, and the public domain opens the volume by interrogating

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

the division between authorship and folk tradition and proposing a third term, the collector-editor, to help us manage our ways of thinking about cultural production. Collaborative creativity, as he points out, is the norm rather than the exception, even today, yet we persist in installing the notion of a solitary genius as the source of originality and authority in our cultural imagination. Taking as his point of departure a tale by H. C. Andersen and on the Danish author's indignation that he might be seen as a collector or *bricoleur* rather than a genius poet, Hafstein sets the stage for how we understand the status of the tales studied in chapters that follow.

In the contributions that follow, fairy tales in collections edited by the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and others to the *Thousand and One Nights* become the targets of inquiry and analysis. The tight focus on Western traditions, for the most part, may seem narrow and limiting to some, but it has the advantage of building on and consolidating a growing knowledge base on European traditions, including what those traditions appropriated from other cultures and what circulated back in turn.

In "Female Tricksters as Double Agents," I attempt to identify a female trickster and to trace her "origins" to Scheherazade, who tells stories to save her own life as well as to transform the culture of violence in which she lives. I then move to consider how the Grimms' Gretel and her literary progeny reinvent the archetype for modern times. Desperate times (like famine) require desperate measures, and hungry heroines develop strategic measures to survive and to effect social change. Shuli Barzilai takes up a very different cultural heroine in her chapter "While Beauty Sleeps," showing how the nexus of sleep, beauty, and sexual violence persists over a period of centuries from the medieval *Perceforest* to Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*. Much as we celebrate the mutability of the fairy tale, its constant reinvention as it migrates into new times and places, is there in fact a durable core that resists eradication?

Cristina Bacchilega turns attention to the web of cultural practices encoded in every fairy tale and its adaptations. In "Snow White and Rose Red" she uncovers non-linear genealogies in a range of hypertexts that reshape our understanding of the ideological and cultural work invested in the fairy tale as discursive formation rather than as solitary, free-standing story. By contrast, Francisco Vaz da Silva takes on an array of fairy-tale hypertexts arranged around "The Tale about the Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" and, through anthropologically informed analysis, reveals the stable components in that story, along with the cultural stakes at the heart of the tale.

The vexed question of fairy-tale morality and reader response to fairy-tale ethics is raised by both Nancy Canepa, in "Trickster Heroes in 'The Boy

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

Steals the Ogre's Treasure,'" and Maria Nikolajeva, in her chapter "Exploring Empathy and Ethics in Tales about Three Brothers." The protagonists of fairy tales are notorious for their bad manners – lying, cheating, and stealing their way to success. Kindness may be valorized, but cleverness reigns supreme. "What do we learn about the moral fiber of fairy-tale heroes?" and "What do we discover about how our own minds process narratives?" are the questions posed in chapters that draw on a host of trickster hypertexts as well as the tools of cognitive poetics.

Armando Maggi and Stephen Benson take up the interpretive challenges of fairy tales, with a meditation on how our homogenizing constructions of a story like "Cinderella" deprive it of its richly textured history, and a reading of the lyrical intensity of "The Juniper Tree." Occasionally our confidence about knowing a fairy tale gets in the way of interpretive work, just as our confidence about reading a fairy tale can obstruct our understanding of its deeper meaning. Fairy tales are layered with cultural complications and emotional nuance, and both these chapters gently remind us that all interpretive efforts can only be partial and provisional.

Ulrich Marzolph builds bridges between the European sources and traditions to the *Thousand and One Nights*, showing how the heterogeneous collection has in many ways become oxygenated rather than depleted through its multiple and varied cultural interactions even as he identifies a disturbing tendency to turn the *Arabian Nights* into European cultural property. Appropriation, exploitation, and commodification are the concerns voiced by Jack Zipes in his chapter on the "media-hyping of fairy tales" – strategies used to de-historicize fairy tales and place them in the service of a consumer culture that celebrates "meaningless and wanton consumption." In a sense, Zipes shows us how corporate fairy tales lead directly to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, a vast cultural wasteland in which content has been emptied of historical referentiality and symbolic meaning. This is not the zone of happily-ever-after but a toxic environment that deprives us of the utopian possibilities encoded in the fairy tale.

In the chapter that closes the volume, Holly Blackford takes a competing tradition, the *Kunstmärchen* or literary fairy tale, and traces its migration from Germany into the United States, showing how wizards and automata were resettled and transformed into artists, confidence men, self-made activists, and entrepreneurs. Like Hawthorne's scarecrow "Feathertop," the new fairy tale is made from a "ragbag of fine materials that represent various European nations, combined with common farm items." Engaging in *bricolage*, tinkering, patching, repairing, and reinventing, these American artists made the tales their own – just as their European counterparts once did.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03101-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales
Edited by Maria Tatar
Excerpt
More information

NOTES

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966), 36. The Little Red Riding Hood examples cited include Episode 60 in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series as well as David Slade's *Hard Candy* (2005).
2 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 5.
3 Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 29.
4 As Stephen Swann Jones puts it, "fairy tales depict magical or marvellous events or phenomena as a valid part of human experience." See his *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.
5 Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1991), 167–8.
6 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tanglewood Tales* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1913), 92.
7 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 28.
8 "Lack" and "Lack Liquidated" are two of the key functions in Vladimir Propp's thirty-one functions of the dramatis personae in fairy tales. See his *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edn. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).
9 See in particular the chapter on the abstract style of fairy tales, in *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 24–36.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org