

retired, the women's reign begins. . . .⁹ Within the shared esprit of these late-evening communes, women not only practiced their domestic crafts, they also fulfilled their role as transmitters of culture through the vehicle of "old tales," inherited from oral tradition or the filtered down versions from the *Bibliothèque bleue*, those cheaply printed, blue-covered penny dreadfuls sold by traveling colporteurs.¹

To have the antiquarian Grimm Brothers regarded as the fathers of modern folklore is perhaps to forget the maternal lineage, the "mothers" who in the French *veillées* and English nurseries, in court salons and the German *Spinnstube*, in Paris and on the Yorkshire moors, passed on their wisdom. The Grimm brothers, like Tereus, Ovid, King Shahryar, Basile, Perrault, and others reshaped what they could not precisely comprehend, because only for women does the thread, which spins out the lore of life itself, create a tapestry to be fully read and understood. Strand by strand weaving, like the craft practiced on Philomela's loom or in the hand-spinning of Mother Goose, is the true art of the fairy tale—and it is, I would submit, semiotically a female art. If we then recognize the continuity of this community of female storytellers, then perhaps Madame d'Aulnoy or her carriage trade ladies differ only in status and style from Basile's townswomen, the French *vieilles*, or English old wives and middle-class governesses. We may also wish to reconceptualize Madame d'Aulnoy, Mlle. L'Héritier, and Madame de Beaumont, not as pseudomale appropriators of a folkloric tradition, but as reappropriators of a female art of tale-telling that dates back to Philomela and Scheherazade. As such, they foreshadow, indeed perhaps foster, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emergence of a passion for romantic fictions, particularly among women writers and readers. Moreover, the "curious" socio-literary genres of the salon tale and Perrault's nursery tales (*contes naïfs*) may be re-perceived as a mid-stage, linking the ancient oral repertoire of folktales to the later, distinctively literary canon that embraces collections of folk and fairy tales as well as *Kunstmärchen*, moral and didactic stories, and romantic novels in which fairy tale motifs, structures, and frame narrators exert a shaping influence.

9. Abel Hugo, from *La France pittoresque*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1835), 1:238, as quoted in Shorter, "The Veillée," p. 131. In *Ethnologie et langage: La parole chez les Dogon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), Geneviève Calame-Griaule similarly observes the "parole cachée" (concealed speech) among the Dogon women, who while spinning cotton whisper the stories of their men. It is also while mother and daughter spin that the mother teaches her daughter the necessary knowledge of marriage and sexual relations. These "confidences" are a mode dear to the Dogon women ("une parole féminine"), and as we have seen in European cultures, here too in an African tribe of the French Sudan the associations turn around the ideas of spinning yarn and of a secret, both skills and truths passed from mothers to daughters.

1. Peddlers of books [Editor].

MARINA WARNER

The Old Wives' Tale†

Plato in the *Gorgias* referred disparagingly to the kind of tale—*mythos graos*, the old wives' tale—told by nurses to amuse and frighten children. This is possibly the earliest reference to the genre. When the boys and girls of Athens were about to embark for Crete, to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, old women are described coming down to the port to tell them stories, to distract them from their grief. In *The Golden Ass*, Charite, a young bride, is captured by bandits, forcibly separated from her husband and thrown into a cave; there, a disreputable old woman, drunken and white-haired, tells her the story of Psyche's troubles before she reaches happiness and marriage with Cupid: "The old woman sighed sympathetically. 'My pretty dear,' she said, '... let me tell you a fairy tale or two to make you feel a little better.'" The picture of another's ordeals will console Charite and distract her from her own distress. William Adlington published his exuberant translation of 'sondrie pleasaunt and delectable Tales, with an excellent Narration of the Marriage of Cupide and Psiches . . . ' in 1566; it is most improbable that a writer like George Peele would not have known this earliest recognizable predecessor of 'Cinderella' and 'Beauty and the Beast'.

In Latin, the phrase Apuleius uses is literally 'an old wives' tale' (*anilis fabula*); the type of comic romance to which 'Cupid and Psyche' belongs was termed 'Milesian', after Aristides of Miletus, who had compiled a collection of such stories in the second century A.D.; these were translated into Latin, but are now known only through later retellings. The connection of old women's speech and the consolatory, erotic, often fanciful fable appears deeply intertwined in language itself, and with women's speaking roles, as the etymology of 'fairy' illuminates.

The word 'fairy' in the Romance languages indicates a meaning of the wonder or fairy tale, for it goes back to a Latin feminine word, *fata*, a rare variant of *fatum* (fate) which refers to a goddess of destiny. The fairies resemble goddesses of this kind, for they too know the course of fate. *Fatum*, literally, that which is spoken, the past participle of the verb *fari*, to speak, gives French *féé*, Italian *fata*, Spanish *hada*, all meaning 'fairy', and enclosing connotations of fate; fairies share with Sibyls knowledge of the future and the past, and in the stories which feature them, both types of figure foretell events to come, and give warnings.

† Excerpt from "The Old Wives' Tale" from *From the Beast to the Blonde* by Marina Warner. Copyright © 1994 by Marina Warner. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.

from: The Classic Fairy Tales Ed. by Marina Warner

Isidore of Seville (d. 636), in the *Etymologies*, gives a famous, sceptical definition of the pagan idea of fate and the Fates: 'They say that fate is whatever the gods declare, whatever Jupiter declares. Thus they say that fate derives from *fando*, that is, from speaking. . . . The fiction is that there are three Fates, who spin a woollen thread on a distaff, on a spindle, and with their fingers, on account of the threefold nature of time: the past, which is already spun and wound onto the spindle; the present, which is drawn between the spinner's fingers; and the future, which lies in the wool twined on the distaff, and which must still be drawn out by the fingers of the spinner onto the spindle, as the present is drawn to the past.' These classical Fates metamorphose into the fairies of the stories, where they continue their fateful and prophetic roles. But fairy tales themselves also fulfil this function, quite apart from the fairies who may or may not make an appearance: 'Bluebeard' or 'Beauty and the Beast' act to caution listeners, as well as light their path to the future.

Although they do not have the same root, 'fairy' has come under strong semantic influence from 'fay' and 'fair', both of which may be derived ultimately from the Middle English '*feyen*', Anglo-Saxon '*fegan*', meaning to agree, to fit, to suit, to join, to unite, to bind. Thus the desirable has the power to inspire—even compel—agreement, as well as to bind. Binding is one of the properties of decrees, and of spells. Interestingly, this root also gives 'fee', as in payment, for transferrals of money too arise from agreed bonds, as a response to a desire, a need.

Although the ultimate origin, in time and place, of a fairy tale can never really be pinned down, we do sometimes know the teller of an old tale in one particular variation, we can sometimes identify the circle of listeners at a certain time and place. The collectors of the nineteenth century occasionally recorded the name of their sources when they took down the story, though they were not as interested in them as historians would be now. One salient aspect of the transmission of fairy tales has not been looked at closely: the female character of the storyteller.

Italo Calvino, in his 1956 collection of Italian *Fiabe*, or Tales, the Italian answer to the Grimms, drew attention to this aspect of the tradition, noticing that several of the nineteenth-century folklore anthologies he drew on and adapted cited female sources. Agatuzza Messina, the nurse of the Sicilian scholar and collector of tales Giuseppe Pitré, became a seamstress, and, later, a quilt-maker in a section of Palermo: 'A mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, as a little girl, she heard stories from her grandmother, whose own mother had told them having herself heard countless stories from one of her grandfathers. She had a good memory so never forgot them.' The *Kalevala*, the national poem of Finland, was collected from different oral sources and reshaped by Elias Lönnrot in the mid-nineteenth century in the form in which it is read today; Sibelius, who would compose many pieces in-

spired by the *Kalevala*'s heroes and heroines, heard the epic in part direct from Larin Paraske, a woman bard, who held eleven thousand lines of such folk material in her head. Karel Čapek, the utopian Czech writer most famous for his satire *RUR* (which introduced the concept of Robots), wrote an acute essay about fairy tale in 1931, in which he decided:

A fairy story cannot be defined by its motif and subject-matter, but by its origin and function. . . . A true folk fairy tale does not originate in being taken down by the collector of folklore but in being told by a grandmother to her grandchildren, or by one member of the Yoruba tribe to other members of the Yoruba tribe, or by a professional storyteller to his audience in an Arab coffeehouse. A real fairy tale, a fairy tale in its true function, is a tale within a circle of listeners. . . .

He himself remembered his mother and his grandmother telling him stories—they were both millers' daughters, as if they had stepped out of a fairy tale. The *traditio* does literally pass on, as the word suggests, between the generations, and the predominant pattern reveals older women of a lower status handing on the material to younger people, who include boys, sometimes, if not often, of higher position and expectations, like future ethnographers and writers of tales.

So although male writers and collectors have dominated the production and dissemination of popular wonder tales, they often pass on women's stories from intimate or domestic milieux; their tale-spinners often figure as so many Scheherazades, using narrative to bring about a resolution of satisfaction and justice. Marguerite de Navarre, in the *Heptaméron*, gives the stories to ten speakers, five of whom are women: they too, like the narrator of *The Arabian Nights*, put their own case, veiled in entertaining and occasionally licentious fantasy. Boccaccio, and his admirer and emulator (to some degree) Chaucer, voiced the stories of women, and some contain folk material which makes a strong showing in later fairy stories; the Venetian Giovan Francesco Straparola (the 'Babbler') reported the stories told by a circle of ladies in his entertaining and sometimes scabrous fantasies, filled with fairytale motifs and improbabilities, called *Le piacevoli notti* (The Pleasant Nights), published in 1550; the Neapolitan Giambattista Basile, in *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Tale of Tales), also known as *Il Pentamerone* (The Pentamerone), published posthumously in 1634–6, featured a group of wizened and misshapen old crones as his sources.

The women who inaugurated the fashion for the written fairy tale, in Paris at the end of the seventeenth century, consistently claimed they had heard the stories they were retelling from nurses and servants. Mme de Sévigné, writing to her daughter, revealingly reported a metaphor borrowed from the kitchen to describe the new enthusiasm: '*cela*

s'appelle les [contes] mitonner. Elle nous mitonna donc, et nous parla d'une île verte, où l'on élevait une princesse plus belle que le jour (it's called simmering them [tales]; so she simmered for us, and talked to us about a green isle where a princess grew up who was more beautiful than the day).

Charles Perrault's collection of 1697 bore the alternative title of *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose Tales); in an earlier preface, to the tale 'Peau d'Ane' (Donkeyskin), Perrault also placed his work in the tradition of Milesian bawdy, like the tale of 'Cupid and Psyche', but he added that he was passing on 'an entirely made up story and an old wives' tale', such as had been told to children since time immemorial by their nurses. While referring to a written canon, he thus disengaged himself from its élite character to invoke old women, grandmothers and governesses as his true predecessors. He was quick to add, however, that unlike the moral of 'Cupid and Psyche' ('*impénétrable*'), his own was patently clear, which made it far superior to its classical predecessors:

These Milesian fables are so puerile that it is doing them rather an honour to set up against them our own Donkeyskin tales and Mother Goose tales, or [they are] so filled with dirt, like *The Golden Ass* of Lucian or Apuleius . . . that they do not merit that we should pay them attention.

Perrault may have had his tongue in his cheek when he protested that 'Donkeyskin', a tale of father-daughter incest, was morally impeccable. But a contemporary pedant, the Abbé de Villiers, took his argument at face value, and rounded in outrage on Perrault and the writers of fairy tales, penning a pamphlet against the genre, 'As a preventive measure against bad taste.' There he lumped women and children together as the perpetrators of the new fad: 'Ignorant and foolish, they have filled the world with so many collections, so many little stories, and in short with these reams of fairy tales which have been the death of us for the last year or so.' The diminutive form of the nouns (*sorinettes, bagatelles, historiettes*) recurs in the rhetoric of detractors and supporters alike; the former branding fairy stories as infantile, the latter praising them as childlike. This tension between opposing perceptions of the child informs the development of the tales and continues to do so.

Villiers sets up an imaginary debate between a fashionable Parisian and a sensible visitor from the provinces. The provincial calls them *sottises imprimées* (follies in print) and compares them derogatorily to fables, scorning them as 'Tales to make you fall asleep on your feet, that nurses have made up to entertain children'. The Parisian counters that nurses have to be highly skilled to tell them. To which the provincial retorts that if such tales ever contained a coherent moral purpose,

they would not be considered in the first place 'the lot of ignorant folk and women'. The battle was joined, over the value of fairy tales; their female origin was not really contested.

Villiers's Parisian was putting forward the views of poets and literati like Mlle Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon (1664–1734), a cousin and close friend of Perrault, who defended the form with fighting spirit precisely because it conveyed the ancient, pure wisdom of the people from the fountainhead—old women, nurses, governesses. In her preface to the story 'Marmoisan, ou l'innocente tromperie' (Marmoisan, or the innocent trick) of 1696, she declared herself a partisan of women and their stories, remembering: 'A hundred times and more, my governess, instead of animal fables, would draw for me the moral features of this surprising story. . . . Why yes, once heard, such tales are far more striking than the exploits of a monkey and a wolf. I took an extreme pleasure in them—as does every child.'

L'Héritier could never rid her praise of its defensive tone ('the moral features'), and for good reason. The phrase 'old wives' tale' was superficially pejorative when Apuleius used it on the lips of his hoary-headed crone of a storyteller; it remained so, in the very act of authenticating the folk wisdom of the stories by stressing the wise old women who had carried on the tradition. It is still, in English, an ambiguous phrase: an old wives' tale means a piece of nonsense, a tissue of error, an ancient act of deception, of self and others, idle talk. As Marlowe writes in *Dr Faustus*, 'Tush, these are trifles and mere old wives' tales'. On a par with trifles, 'mere old wives' tales' carry connotations of error, of false counsel, ignorance, prejudice and fallacious nostrums—against heart-break as well as headache; similarly 'fairy tale', as a derogatory term, implies fantasy, escapism, invention, the unreliable consolations of romance.

But the idealistic impulse is also driven by dreams; alternative ways of sifting right and wrong require different guides, ones perhaps discredited or neglected. Women from very different social strata have been remarkably active in the fields of folklore and children's literature since the nineteenth century. The Grimm Brothers' most inspiring and prolific sources were women, from families of friends and close relations, like the Wilds—Wilhelm married Dortchen, the youngest of four daughters of Dorothea Wild, who possessed a rich store of traditional tales, and she provided thirty-six for the collection. Dorothea, the Grimms' sister, married Ludwig Hassenpflug, and his three sisters passed on forty-one of the tales. From the Romantic literary circle of the artistic aristocratic von Haxthausens (who contributed collectively no fewer than sixty-six of the Grimms' tales) Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, the poet, and her sister Jenny were among the women who eagerly took part in telling the brothers the stories they had heard as children and more recently from their local area of Westphalia. Oscar

Wilde's father, a doctor in Merrion Square, Dublin, in the mid-nineteenth century, used to ask for stories as his fee from his poorer patients: his wife Speranza Wilde then collected them. Many of these were told to him by women, and in turn influenced their son's innovative fairy tales, like 'The Selfish Giant' and 'The Happy Prince'. At the end of the century, the omnivorous Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang relied on his wife Leonora Alleyne, as well as a team of women editors, transcribers and paraphrasers, to produce the many volumes of fairy stories and folk tales from around the world, in the immensely popular *Red, Yellow, Green, Blue, Rose Fairy Books*, which he began publishing in 1890. The writer Simone Schwarz-Bart stitched her memories of Creole stories from her Martinique childhood into her poetic, adventurous, linguistically hybrid fictions. The grandmother Reine Sans Nom (Queen-With-No-Name) in *Pluie et vent sur Téliumée Miracle* (1972) embodies survival and history, and keeps the memory of slave culture, and of Africa before that. With the help of her friend, a sorceress, she passes on lore, fables, fairy tales, ghost stories to her granddaughter. As Simone Schwarz-Bart once said in an interview, 'The tale is, in large part, our capital. I was nourished on tales. It is our bible. . . . I don't have a technique, but I know. I'm familiar. I've heard. I've been nourished. . . . When an old person dies, a whole library disappears.'

It would be absurd to argue that storytelling was an exclusively female activity—it varies from country to country, from one people to another, and from place to place within the same country, among the same people—but it is worth trying to puzzle out in what different ways the patterns of fairytale romancing might be drawn when women are the tellers.

The pedagogical function of the wonder story deepens the sympathy between the social category women occupy and fairy tale. Fairy tales exchange knowledge between an older voice of experience and a younger audience, they present pictures of perils and possibilities that lie ahead, they use terror to set limits on choice and offer consolation to the wronged, they draw social outlines around boys and girls, fathers and mothers, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the ruled, they point out the evildoers and garland the virtuous, they stand up to adversity with dreams of vengeance, power and vindication.

The *veillées* were the hearthside sessions of early modern society, where early social observers, like Bonaventure des Périers and Noël du Fail in the sixteenth century, describe the telling of some of today's most familiar fables and tales, like 'Donkeyskin' and 'Cinderella'. These gatherings offered men and women an opportunity to talk—to preach—which was forbidden them in other situations, the pulpit, the forum, and frowned on and feared in the spinning rooms and by the wellside. Taking place after daylight hours, they still do not exactly anticipate the leisure uses of television or radio today—work continued, in the

form of spinning, especially, and other domestic tasks: one folklore historian recalled hearing the women in her childhood tell stories to the rhythm of the stones cracking walnuts as they shelled them for bottling and pickling. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay on 'The Storyteller':

[The storyteller's] nesting places—the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears. . . .

Benjamin never once imagines that his storytellers might be women, even though he identifies so clearly and so eloquently the connection between routine repetitive work and narrative—storytelling is itself 'an artisan form of communication', he writes. And later, again, it is 'rooted in the people . . . a milieu of craftsmen'. He divides storytellers into stay-at-homes and rovers—tradesmen and agriculturalists, like the tailors and the shoemakers who appear in the stories, on the one hand; on the other, the seamen who travel far afield adventuring, like the questing type of hero. He neglects the figure of the spinster, the older woman with her distaff, who may be working in town and country, in one place or on the move, at market, or on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, and who has become a generic icon of narrative from the frontispiece of fairytale collections from Charles Perrault's onwards. The Scottish poet Liz Lochhead, who has drawn on much fairytale imagery in her work, has written:

No one could say the stories were useless
for as the tongue clacked
five or forty fingers stitched
corn was grated from the husk
patchwork was pieced
or the darning was done . . .

And at first light . . .
the stories dissolved in the whorl of the ear
but they
hung themselves upside down
in the sleeping heads of the children
till they flew again
into the storyteller's night.

Spinning a tale, weaving a plot: the metaphors illuminate the relation; while the structure of fairy stories, with their repetitions, reprises, elaboration and minutiae, replicates the thread and fabric of one of women's principal labours—the making of textiles from the wool or the flax to the finished bolt of cloth.

Fairy tales are stories which, in the earliest mentions of their existence, include that circle of listeners, the audience; as they point to possible destinies, possible happy outcomes, they successfully involve their hearers or readers in identifying with the protagonists, their misfortunes, their triumphs. Schematic characterization leaves a gap into which the listener may step. Who has not tried on the glass slipper? Or offered it for trying? The relation between the authentic, artisan source and the tale recorded in book form for children and adults is not simple; we are not hearing the spinsters and the knitters in the sun whom Orsino remembers chanting in *Twelfth Night*, unmediated. But the quality of the mediation is of great interest. From the mid-seventeenth century, the nurses, governesses, family domestics, working women living in or near the great house or castle in town and country existed in a different relation to the elite men and women who may have once been in their charge, as children. The future Marquise de la Tour du Pin recalled in her memoirs how her nurse was her mainstay and that, when she turned eleven and a governess was appointed instead, 'I used to escape whenever I could and try to find her [the nurse], or to meet her about the house.' Another noblewoman, Victorine de Chastenay, also wrote that her own mother alarmed her and dominated her, and that she took refuge with her nurse and her nurse's family. The rapports created in *ancien régime* childhood shape the matter of the stories, and the cultural model which places the literati's texts on the one side of a divide, and popular tales on the other, can and should be redrawn: fairy tales act as an airy suspension bridge, swinging slightly under different breezes of opinion and economy, between the learned, literary and print culture in which famous fairy tales have come down to us, and the oral, illiterate, people's culture of the *veillée*; and on this bridge the traffic moves in both directions.

Women writers like Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy mediated anonymous narratives, the popular, vernacular culture they had inherited through fairy tale, in spite of the aristocratic frippery their stories make at a first impression. Indeed, they offer rare and rich testimony to a sophisticated chronicle of wrongs and ways to evade or right them, when they recall stories they had heard as children or picked up later and retell them in a spirit of protest, of polite or not so polite revolt. These tales are wrapped in fantasy and unreality, which no doubt helped them entertain their audiences—in the courtly salon as well as at the village hearth—but they also serve the stories' greater purpose, to reveal possibilities, to map out a different way and a new perception of love, marriage, women's skills, thus advocating a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny. The fairy tale looks at the ogre like Bluebeard or the Beast of 'Beauty and the Beast' in order to disenchant him; while romancing reality, it is a medium deeply concerned with undoing prejudice. Women of different social positions

have collaborated in storytelling to achieve true recognition for their subjects: the process is still going on.

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ZOHAR SHAVIT

The Concept of Childhood and Children's Folktales: Test Case—"Little Red Riding Hood"†

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Children's literature today enjoys centrality in cultural awareness and constitutes such a sizeable proportion of new educational materials that it is hard to imagine publishing activity without it. However, although children's literature is today a "natural" phenomenon taken for granted in any national literature, it is a relatively new development—less than two hundred years old. Books written especially for children were virtually unknown until the eighteenth century, and the children's book industry did not begin to flourish until the second half of the nineteenth century, when adult literature (in the modern sense) had already been established for at least one hundred years.

The reasons contributing to the late development of children's literature are diverse, but undoubtedly among the most important was the total absence of the concepts of "child" and "childhood" as we perceive them today. Before children's literature could be written, "childhood" itself had to come into existence and receive recognition and legitimation as a distinct time period in the life of the individual, or in the words of Townsend: "Before there could be children's books, there had to be children—children, that is, who were accepted as beings with their own particular needs and interests, not only as miniature men and women."¹

In this article I will analyze along general lines and only in their principal features the creation and crystallization of the prerequisites for the development of Western children's literature—the development of the concept of the "child" in culture—and I will examine the relationships between this concept and texts written for children. In other words, I will ask how the nature of the concept of the child in literature and the meaning that has been given to the nature have to a large extent determined the character and the structure of texts for children, and how the changes that occurred in this concept were largely responsible for the changes that came about in texts for children. In

† From *Little Red Riding Hood: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 129–52, 156–58. Originally published in *Hebrew in Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 4 (1983): 93–124. Reprinted by permission.

1. J. R. Townsend, *Written for Children* (London: Penguin, 1977), 17.