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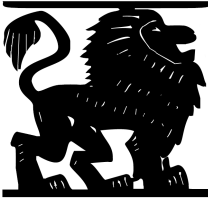
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Tame Fairies Make Good Teachers: The Popularity of Early British Fairy Tales

M. O. Grenby

No one would doubt that the fairy tale has long been one of the most popular forms of children's literature in Great Britain. A task of critics, bibliographers, and cultural historians is to determine how this happened. The standard history can be reduced to a five-stage process. Stage one postulates an indigenous tradition of fairy tales that circulates in oral culture, seldom written down, but occasionally filtering into posterity through works such as *The History of Tom Thumbe* by "R.J." from 1621. Stage two is heralded by the arrival of the new, French fairies in the work of Madame d'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, the *Arabian Nights* and, slightly later, Madame Le Prince de Beaumont; these were all translated into English during the early and mid-eighteenth century. These classical tales, the standard history goes, were popular with adults and children until the second half of the century when they fell out of fashion. The third stage is a lull in the development of the form, usually attributed to suspicion of any writing involving the supernatural. This skepticism can be ascribed either to Enlightenment rationalism or Evangelical fervor, or both. In stage four, the hostility is confronted by innovating publishers such as John Harris, the successor to the house of Newbery, and Benjamin Tabart, whose Popular Stories series began in 1804, which was largely comprised of fairy stories and chapbook tales. Tabart, in particular, has been called "benevolent" because (it is said) he sought to free the imagination and liberate children from the shackles of the over-earnest moral tale. He is called "courageous" because he must have known the rancor with which his tales would be greeted (Moon 5). Theirs were not new tales, but rather retellings of both the French and indigenous British stories, revised, and now marketed directly at children. The fairy tales were often based on their recent dramatization on the London stage. Tabart and Harris routinely advertised their fairy tales as being inspired

by current theatrical productions. Tabart, for instance, boasted that his *Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper* (1804) featured “representations of three of the principal scenes in performance at Drury Lane Theatre.” Sarah Trimmer, noticing that Tabart’s tales depicted “figures . . . in theatrical dresses,” added the charge that they were “representations . . . of play-house scenes” to her indictment of these fairy tales in her *Guardian of Education* (Trimmer 4: 74).

Perhaps the fourth stage of fairy tales was the most significant because it paved the way for stage five, the arrival of a new wave of fairy tales from the European continent; the work of the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen has proved among the most enduring. These were popular, it is generally argued, because they suited a new romantic sensibility, or, in the words of one recent chronicler, appealed to those who were “seeking an escape from the ugliness of industrial society” (Avery 73). Gillian Avery’s historical time period divisions are representative of this standard history, “The Medieval Period,” “The Banishment of the Fairies,” and “The Return of the Fairies” (66–77). According to Jack Zipes and others, it was such tales, cleansed of material deemed unsuitable, which encouraged the bourgeoisie to begin “changing its attitude toward the fairy tale for children during the course of the 1820s and 1830s” (Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* 20). This acceptance ensured that the fairy tale would live happily ever after.

This chronology presents various problems. Ruth B. Bottigheimer in “Misperceived Perceptions: Perrault’s Fairy Tales and English Children’s Literature,” for instance, has questioned whether the classic, French fairy tales were actually as popular as has always been assumed in the period before 1770. One might also take issue with the notion that fairy tales gained popularity in the nineteenth century because they were the perfect antidote to industrialization. Most obviously, though, the chronology is too teleological. It subscribes to what Mitzi Myers called the “whiggish” history of children’s books, which characterizes the history of children’s literature as a struggle between “imaginative” writing, represented by the fairy tale, and more didactically driven, “rational” literature (Myers 31). According to this analysis, moral tales were “largely a reaction against Fairy Stories” (Carpenter and Prichard 358). The fairies’ displacement, in other words, was the necessary prerequisite for the establishment of the moral tale. Most critics have now come to question this dichotomy of “fantasy” and “reason,” which, it used to be assumed, powered the development of children’s literature through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century.¹ But this recognition has not affected the characterization of the later eighteenth century as a hiatus in the history of the

fairy tale. Indeed, any increased scholarly attention to the moral tale has tended to exacerbate the impression that the fairy tale dropped out of common currency in the years before the revival instigated by Tabart and others in the early 1800s. But was the fairy tale really eclipsed in the late eighteenth century, a pivotal stage in the chronology of its development? In fact, it was not. The reasons for so much ostentatious hostility toward the fairy tale will be addressed later in this essay. But the first point I would like to make is that, even during its supposed dark days, the fairy tale enjoyed sustained popularity. Its development is better characterized as smoothly continuous, rather than stutteringly dialectical. What is most striking about the eighteenth and nineteenth century fairy tale is the proficiency with which it was able to adapt itself to the changes demanded by the consumers of children's literature.²

A great deal of well-known *prima facie* evidence does exist that makes the case for a general hostility toward fairy tales, as well as a waning of their popularity, in the last decades of the eighteenth century. A number of often-quoted pieces make the point succinctly. In 1798, for instance, the Edgeworths were confident that fairy tales "are not now much read" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education* 1:335. See also Edgeworth, *Parent's Assistant* xi–xii). Likewise Lucy Aikin observed in *Poetry for Children* (1801) that "dragons and fairies, giants and witches, have vanished from our nurseries before the wand of reason" (iii). If this was something of a lament for the fairy tale, the notoriously cantankerous Andrew Becket's assessment of the Minerva Press's *Fairy Tales, Selected from the Best Authors* (1788) in the *Monthly Review* exalted in their decline:

Fairy Tales were formerly thought to be the proper and almost the only reading for children . . . it is with much satisfaction . . . that we find them gradually giving way to publications of a far more interesting kind, in which instruction and entertainment are judiciously blended, without the intermixture of the marvellous, the absurd, and things totally out of nature. (531).³

But we should be careful before we accept these assertions. Such opinions were far from unanimous. First, several prefaces offered spirited defenses of fairy tales. The dedication to an anonymous volume of *Oriental Tales* produced in 1802, for instance, insisted that the first priority of children's literature was to teach children to love reading, "that Fables and Fairy Tales will produce that effect" and "that much good advice and information can be conveyed in a Fable and a Fairy Tale" ("Dedication" n.p.). Similarly, Felicité de Choiseul-Meuse wrote in *The Return of the Fairies* that she was aware that "Fairies have long been

neglected,” but welcomed the fact that “they now make their appearance anew.” “[L]et us kindly bid them welcome,” she wrote, for “Never was imagined a style of more ingenious *badinage*, more pure morality, or more perfect taste” (Choiseul-Meuse vi–vii). A second indication of the speciousness of the argument that fairy tales were universally reproved comes from other reviews. The Minerva Press’s *Fairy Tales*, for example, which Becket had savaged in the *Monthly*, was not always unfavorably received. The *English Review* wrote that:

whoever wishes well to the rising generation must approve [the editor’s] motives for furnishing youth with an instructor at once so pure and pleasing . . . few minds they will not entertain, and we trust still fewer they may not be the means of improving. (471)

The *Critical Review* was more circumspect in its praise, but it gave no hint that a new collection of fairy tales was either a distasteful or an unusual occurrence:

We remember, in these Tales, some of the companions of our nursery, when pleasure was cheaply bought by novelty. We then were pleased with them, and our readers must accept of a decision at an age which alone can decide on these subjects. (157)

But perhaps the most persuasive evidence that the death of the fairy tale has been much exaggerated comes from the fact that William Lane, the commercially astute proprietor of what was to become the Minerva Press, chose to publish this collection of old fairy tales.

Lane’s sustained production of fairy tales provides a major caveat to the idea that the form was falling out of fashion in late eighteenth-century Britain. Between 1788 and the end of the century, he raided d’Aulnoy’s oeuvre to bring out at least six collections of fairy tales. In 1788 alone, Lane produced the two-volume edition of *Fairy Tales, Selected from the Best Authors*, which had excited the *Monthly*’s ire; a separate edition of its second volume entitled *The Palace of Enchantment*; another collection with some of these same tales called *The Mirror; or, Fairy World Displayed*; and *The Pleasing Companion*, a different selection of d’Aulnoy’s stories.⁴ He published second editions in 1794 of *Fairy Tales, Selected from the Best Authors* and *The Palace of Enchantment* and *The Pleasing Companion* were both republished in the same year.⁵ In 1794, Lane also brought out *The Fairiest; or, Surprising and Entertaining Adventures of the Aerial Beings* (its six tales had already appeared in *The Palace of Enchantment*). About this time, he published the undated *Queen Mab; or, Fairy Adventures*; its four tales had already been available in *The Pleasing Companion*. *The Fairiest* ran a second edition

in 1795 and *Queen Mab* in 1796. Assuming a low estimate that the average print run was one thousand, Lane would have published twelve thousand copies of fairy tales in just twelve years. That several of his collections featured the same tales only accentuates Lane's confidence that the old French fairy tales would be popular and profitable. The Minerva was just one press. A trawl of the *English Short Title Catalogue* reveals twelve more London editions of the tales of d'Aulnoy and Perrault produced during the 1780s and 1790s. This does not include all the Dublin, Edinburgh, and provincial publications, chapbook versions, or even the dual-language editions to help children learn French. For example, Lane was competing, probably deliberately, with another collection also called *Queen Mab*, subtitled "*A Select Collection of Only the Best, Most Instructive, and Entertaining Tales of the Fairies*," published by J. Dodsley and his heirs in 1770, 1782, and 1799. Meanwhile, the Newbery dynasty was producing its *Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales*, selections from d'Aulnoy, which appeared in 1773, 1776, 1784, 1790, 1795, and 1799 (Roscoe 49).

In this light, it seems not a little tendentious to claim that "Fairies did not flourish in the utilitarian and sceptical eighteenth century" (Avery 70). Yet, it is beyond doubt that there was a sustained debate about fairy tales, and it is surely this that has given rise to the impression that there was a time when they were banished from polite literature. Very little research has asked why this argument should have been so vigorous. Those who have sought to analyze the motives of individual contributors to the debate have found what can seem rather personal reasons for their ardent attack or defense of fairy tales. According to Alan Richardson, for instance, the increasingly conservative William Wordsworth feared that in the age of the French Revolution crisis the rational children's literature of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, the Edgeworths, Thomas Day, and others, was radicalizing children. Wordsworth turned to fairy tales as more "innocent" fare for the young. Since they derived from an ancient and indigenous popular tradition, Wordsworth felt, they were more likely to return their young readership "to an apolitical, class-specific discourse" (Richardson, "Wordsworth" 45. See also Richardson, *Literature* 115–27).⁶ Nicholas Tucker's sympathetic investigation of Sarah Trimmer's motives for her condemnation of fairy tales has isolated at least ten reasons for her anxiety, most of which revolve around her concern that they might affect the psychological well-being of a child. It was a proposition, which had not then been disproved by the passage of time, Tucker says, and therefore relied on the rather unreliable anecdotal evidence, which Trimmer chose to believe. Her opposition to fairy tales

can be seen as kindly and maternalistic, not austere and curmudgeonly. Trimmer's principal reason for condemning the tales was that she regarded them as anti-Christian. Her piety was uncompromising, and the absence of religious references tended to cause her as much consternation as any actual sacrilege. Her crusade against fairy tales, in other words, was just as personal a campaign as Wordsworth's.

What is most noticeable about both Wordsworth's and Trimmer's attitude to the fairy tale, was that they were not constructed from impartial statements of literary opinion. Nor were fairy tales being condemned, or advocated, for what they were, but rather for what they were not. Those who attacked and defended the form had their own particular axes to grind. Becket's review in the *Monthly*, quoted above, for example, was not actually an assault on the fairy tale, but an endorsement of those "publications of a far more interesting kind," by which he meant moral tales. Similarly, Madame de Genlis found fault with fairy tales because, she said, they inspire children "with a dislike for instructive reading," which, of course, she herself was in the business of providing (Genlis 1: 63). Fairy tales were caught up in a sort of "turf-war" that had engulfed all of children's literature in the later eighteenth century. With the whole market for children's literature becoming more vigorous from the 1760s on, and with more publishers producing more children's books for more consumers to buy, it was up to the players in this market to carve out a niche for themselves. Many evidently felt this could best be achieved by condemning rival forms of children's literature. This cut-throat competition formed the context for the assault on fairy tales. In the anonymous *History of Little Louisa* (1829), the author sought to undermine the rival genre by having her narrator address the reader about Louise's literature choices:

I rather think Louisa at eight years old, would have been ashamed to have been seen reading the History of Tom Thumb, or even the Blue Bird and the Princess Graciosa. With all her faults . . . Louisa was, in many respects, a sensible little girl. (17)

Similarly, in W. F. Sullivan's *The Young Liar!!!* (1817), the hero, Wilfred Storey (his surname is significant), is accustomed to falsehood and turned into a liar by the fairy tales told to him by his nursemaid, Nurse Fibwell. Alas, writes Sullivan, subtly promoting the sort of children's literature to which he was adding, when Wilfred was a child

the mode of instruction for youth was by no means so improved as it has been for some years past, nor were there so many useful little tracts, written by respectable persons of sound judgment, for their especial perusal and advantage (7–8).⁷

For Sullivan, the causal chain is clear. Nurse Fibwell told fairy tales so Wilfred became a liar. Because he became a liar, he found himself forced to fight a duel at the university and as a result died. The best way to break the chain is to dispense with fairy tales, to replace them with “useful little tracts” such as Sullivan’s own writing.

Even the abrasive invective of Edgeworth’s *The Parent’s Assistant*—fairy tales waste valuable time, they vitiate the taste of children, they fill the mind with “fantastic visions, instead of useful knowledge” (xi)—seems less severe when read in this light. Edgeworth’s strictures appear in a preface to a collection of her own tales that she designed to provide exactly that “useful knowledge,” which she claimed was missing from fairy tales. Hers was a book published on new principles and a positive reception was hardly guaranteed. To establish her own tales as a new stage in the development of children’s literature, Edgeworth lashed out at the most obvious antithesis, the fairy tale (Edgeworth *Parent’s Assistant* xi).⁸ The debate on fairy tales, then, may be read as an exchange of marketing campaigns for rival forms of children’s literature. This competition made many commentators on children’s literature vocal about their disdain for fairy tales. Modern scholars have tended to take this rather rhetorical hostility at face value. However shrill the abuse, though, the publishing record of William Lane and others demonstrates that fairy tales were not, in fact, banished from late eighteenth century children’s bookshelves.

The criticism of rival forms goes both ways. Critics attacked the rational forms of children’s literature, too. Lucy Aikin, as noted, observed that fairy tales had “vanished from our nurseries before the wand of reason,” but this was written in the context of a defense of her own claim that poetry was the most suitable literary form for children. She was much harsher in her treatment of those “novel-like tales now written for the amusement of youth” than she was of the fairy tale. These moral tales, she feared, would “be productive of more injury to the mind, by giving a false picture of the real world, than the fairy fictions of the last generation, which only wandered over the region of shadows” (Aikin iii–iv).⁹ Such arguments were deliberate attempts to turn the tables on the defenders of the moral tale. Stepheno Bunyano, in *The Prettiest Book for Children* (1770), was also anxious to turn defense into attack. Many modern books for children, he wrote in the preface, “presented my little masters and misses with so many idle nonsensical stories, and such a number of silly and unmeaning rhimes [*sic*], that they have in the end, made greater babies of them than they were before.” This was a denunciation of the “new” children’s literature; at the same time, it was a defense of the tale of giants and magic in the ensuing pages (Bunyano 7).

The attack on the fairy tale is often seen as deriving from John Locke's condemnation of the supernatural as liable to frighten children. Section 138 of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) warned that parents and teachers should be sure to preserve the tender minds of young children from "all Impressions and Notions of *Sprites* and *Goblins*" for such "*Bug-bear* Thoughts, once got into the tender Minds of Children . . . sink deep, and fasten themselves so as not easily, if ever, to be got out again" (Locke 196). More than a century later, the same point, often in the same language, was still being made. Sarah Trimmer, for example, wrote that "the terrific images, which tales of this nature present to the imagination, usually make deep impressions, and injure the tender minds of children, by exciting unreasonable and groundless fears" (2: 185–86). A number of narratives were even constructed to dramatize the point. In "The History of Francis Fearful," a moral tale published separately and as part of *The Lilliputian Magazine; or, Children's Repository* (ca. 1773–74), a boy was put under the care of a nurse until he was eight years old and whose indolent father refrained from checking up on what she was teaching him. Under the tutelage of the nurse, Goody Senseless, Francis imbibed superstitious fears. She told him "stories about Witches and Ghosts, Hobgoblins, and the shrieking woman, the coachman without a head, and houses that were haunted" and of "the tales of the fairies." Francis' susceptibility to the stories was discovered when he was sent to school. There, the slightest thing—a bat, a scarecrow—terrified him. The cause of his timorousness was identified, and the nurse was reprimanded for her folly (Teachum 2: 55–67).

What almost all of these rewritings of Locke's anxiety have in common is the presence of a corrupting servant: Goody Senseless in "The History of Francis Fearful," or, forty years later, Nurse Fibwell in *The Young Liar!!!* Locke himself had characterized fairy tales as being used by servants "to awe children, and keep them in subjection," and re-reading his strictures, one realizes that he was primarily warning against the servants who tell the tales, not the goblins in them. It is the servant's presence that, though seldom explicit, lies at the heart of the attack on fairy tales in the children's literature of the later eighteenth century. The propagators of Locke's warning were chiefly concerned not that fairy tales would create a race of milksops, but that those narratives were the cultural property of the lower orders. Fairy tales, despite their French aristocratic lineage, were seen as part of the "old" children's literature. Their putative oral origins and their continuing dissemination through tawdry chapbooks seemed to confirm this below stairs identity. The "new" children's literature, which had emerged since John Newbery's

time, was premised on its respectability and its middle class values. It taught piety and decency, and commercial virtues such as diligence, honesty, frugality, and forethought. The foundation of its appeal to parents, the intended purchasers, was that it could improve the life of the children who read it, and especially that it could inculcate the values that would bring them worldly success. Even those works that emphasized morality and religion, rather than more temporal virtues, were concerned to provide the reader's betterment, the moral and spiritual progress of the reader. Both the rational works of the Newbery tradition and the increasingly Evangelical moral tales were forms of children's literature marketed as an investment in a child's future. Those who were buying this new generation of children's books, hoping to inscribe success on a tabula rasa, as Locke had taught them to view their children, did not want to purchase humble fairy tales, the sort of literature that was available without spending a shilling or two at a bookshop, and which was already the cultural property of servants. Fairy tales acted as an anchor that threatened to prevent children's literature from rising above its popular and plebeian roots, and to undo all the progress that had been made to establish the genre. According to Alan Richardson's analysis, this was precisely why Wordsworth's favored the form over all other kinds of children's literature. Fairy tales were of the people; therefore they could safely be for the people ("Wordsworth" 46). More recent children's books, Wordsworth felt, were more likely to encourage self-improvement and even social mobility. This same logic persuaded others that fairy tales should be condemned, for they not only served no useful purpose themselves, but undermined the reputation of children's literature as a medium of personal development. Those involved in the production of the new children's literature in the late eighteenth century may have been every bit as socially conservative as Wordsworth would become, but they were engaged in a more important project to recast children's literature as a respectable, middle-class genre that would promote upward mobility.

The clearest indication of the association of fairy tales with lower-class culture is the attempt of the producers of late eighteenth century fairy tales to emphasize the compatibility of the form with the aims of the new children's literature. The modifications that Lane and Newbery made to their collections were designed to reassure the consumer that these volumes were no less respectable, genteel, and likely to improve the reader than any other children's book. Actually, they were publishing the same old tales, which as recently as the 1770s, had been, according to their subtitle, "*Selected for the Entertainment of Young People*" not, one notices, for their instruction. The complete title of the 1775 book,

published by R. Snagg and W. Nicoll, is *The Entertaining Tales of the Fairies Selected for the Entertainment of Young People, from the Library in the Court of Queen Mab*. In the 1780s and 1790s, the titles underwent a subtle transformation. The Newbery collection of d'Aulnoy's tales was subtitled "*For the Amusement of All Those Little Masters and Misses Who, by Duty to Their Parents, and Obedience to Their Superiors, Aim at Becoming Great Lords and Ladies.*" Similarly, the title page of Lane's *Queen Mab* informed readers that the book contained "a series of incidents wonderful and surprising, in which are painted the happiness attendant on virtue; and the punishment that necessarily follows vice, illustrated from example." *The Pleasing Companion* was apparently "calculated to improve the heart: the whole forming a system of moral precepts and examples for the conduct of youth through life." Clearly the aim was to disarm accusations that fairy tales were unedifying or immoral, plebian, or vulgar. These new subtitles and accompanying prefatorial manifestos may have constituted merely changes to the packaging, but they are indicative of a desire to fuse the fairy tale with the new values of the moral tale.

In their bid to absorb the fairy tale into the new, respectable children's literature, publishers were also prepared to manufacture what almost amounts to a new subgenre of children's literature, the "moral fairy tale." The works fused the didactic aims of the moral tale with the themes, language, and style of the fairy story. Alan Richardson has already pointed out that the schism between the moral tale and the fairy tale was not as pronounced as superficially appears. He sets out four principal means by which the two became fused. First, the "packaging" from fairy tales could be added to moral tales. Thus, Jack the Giant Killer was pressed into service to provide introductory material for an essentially didactic work, such as John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* (1744). Second, the actual form of the fairy tale could be used for what were otherwise conventionally didactic stories. In this way, John Aikin and Anna Laetitia Barbauld occasionally used settings, motifs, and plot lines drawn from fairy tales in their *Evenings at Home* (1792–96). Less obviously, the author of a moral tale could silently expropriate from a fairy story a particular motif, as when the eponymous heroine of John Marshall's *Primrose Prettyface* (ca. 1783) becomes a second Cinderella by rising from her humble origins to marry Sir William. Last, Richardson argues that already existing fairy tales could be "cleaned up," with scurrilous or vulgar material expurgated, and, more radically, overtly instructive or moral material added. Benjamin Tabart's edition of *Jack and the Bean-Stalk* (1807) includes a new character, a fairy, whose only

purpose is to explain to Jack that his depredations and homicide (or giantocide?) are morally permissible (Richardson, *Literature* 116–18).

Richardson characterizes the relationship between the fairy tale and the moral tale as an “appropriation” by the latter of the former (*Literature* 115). This does not do justice to the moral fairy tale. Authors did not set out to write a moral tale, and only then, as an afterthought, include one or two fairy tale elements. Rather, these were fairy tales that had been carefully adapted to suit a new agenda. The relationship between the two forms was really one of symbiosis, rather than colonization of one by the other. Which was the dominant form, for instance, in “The Lilliputian History,” one of the works that made up *The Lilliputian Magazine*? Here King Tom Thumb of Lilliputia, and his able lieutenant Jack the Giant Killer make war with the two giants, later identified as Ignorance and Superstition. There are some stirring deeds by our heroes, but the real fighting is done by their army, divided into regiments such as the “Alphabetical Infantry,” the “Orthographical Grenadiers,” and the “Intrepid Sons of Syntax” (Teachum 1: 9). Was this a fairy tale rewritten with a didactic agenda, or a book of instruction employing fairy tale characters? The answer is surely that it is both.

The forms taken by these moral fairy tales are so various that Richardson’s four categories require substantial expansion. One common technique not covered in his taxonomy, for instance, was an elaborate instructive allegory that used a fairy tale setting but was heavily indebted to Bunyan. A notable example was Catherine Talbot’s “Education: A Fairy Tale.” “One of the most successful of the kind,” according to A. K. Elwood, in *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies* (Elwood 1: 143). The compliment in itself helps to situate Talbot’s work among a substantial tradition of such tales. The narrative begins with an old crone approaching a group of boys. Most either run away or call her a witch, but Henry and his friend Little George remain, and they accompany the woman, who reveals herself to be a fairy named Instruction. She takes them to her castle and they are lectured by various statues that come to life. Modesty, for example, warns George about the puddle Disgrace and the enchantress Flattery. The castle is meant to be understood as a sort of school. After being there some time they long for the field they can see outside. At last Instruction reappears to let them out for the holidays. George had been given a key, which would only work if it did not grow rusty. Since he had forgotten his Spur (to prick him to assiduity) and his Staff of Application, he forgets to polish the key and finds he cannot get back into the castle when the holidays are over. He eventually gains admission with the help of Amendment. He and Henry climb up the castle, placing

everything worthy of attention in their Cabinet of Memory, until at last they attain the Temple of Honor at the top.

The rigid schematism of Talbot's tale apparently did not inhibit its popularity. The date of its first appearance is uncertain, although it was not published before Talbot's death in 1770. But by the early nineteenth century, it was printed under several titles in fairy tale collections and chapbook form.¹⁰ *The Adventures of the Six Princesses of Babylon, in Their Travels to the Temple of Virtue* (1785), by Lucy Peacock, was constructed on a comparable model (but owed more to the *Faerie Queene* than *Pilgrim's Progress*); it also proved popular. By 1820, four more English editions were printed, if the title pages are to be believed. Peacock followed it up with the similar *Knight of the Rose, an Allegorical Narrative* (1793). Other fairy tale moral allegories could be more subtle. The anonymous *Almerine and Shelimah* (ca. 1815), for example, was a much more enjoyable story. It began with a querulous fairy cursing Shelimah, a newborn princess, to eternal ugliness. She is cast out of the palace into an obscure part of the kingdom. Meanwhile, a prince falls in love with the beautiful Almerine, but finds she is plotting to poison him. All this time, there is no hint of the allegory that is working itself out. Only once the prince has hastily vowed to wed the most hideous woman in the kingdom, rather than marry Almerine, and thereby rediscovered Shelimah, are we told that Shelimah's ugliness and contentment were meant to stand for temperance and humility, and Almerine's beauty and wit, for pride and vanity (31–32).

This kind of moral fairy tale flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, giving the lie to any idea that the fairies were banished from a newly rational, or increasingly Evangelical, society. Instead, they simply conformed to the new demands of their readership and critics. By the 1810s, for instance, even Mary Martha Sherwood, "the most fiercely didactic of all writers of the moral tale" (Carpenter and Prichard 483) was writing moral fairy stories, even though she had been the expurgator of fairy tale material from her 1820 revision of Sarah Fielding's *The Governess*. The original 1749 version had contained some of the first examples of moral fairy tales, as well as a discussion of whether such tales were beneath the notice of refined young girls. Sherwood's *The Rose* (1818) opens with the narrator being unable to sleep on a moonlit May night. When she ventures outside, she stumbles upon a convocation of fairies, with their queen about to award a fairy rose to the most deserving of her subjects. This is Sherwood's excuse for an investigation of what constitutes virtue. After several nominations have been assessed, the rose is bestowed on a mother who has taught her fairy

daughters “to love home, and render themselves useful in retirement, rather than to seek admiration abroad” (Sherwood 21 and 26). That an Evangelical, such as Sherwood, was using the moral fairy tale form demonstrated that even the most cautious and orthodox of writers had emerged from the shadow of fairy tale criticism. From here, it was only a short step to the violently moralized temperance fairy tales of George Cruikshank (1853–64), or the series of books actually entitled *Moral Fairy Tales*, published by A. K. Newman in about 1825.¹¹

There is insufficient room here to explore the whole range of moral fairy tales produced in the two or three decades on either side of 1800. This means ignoring such intriguingly titled works as *Fat and Lean* or *The Fairy Queen, Exhibiting the Effects of Moral Magic*. Or not considering curious works such as *The Enchanted Mirror, A Moorish Romance*, which begins with a long verse debating whether nature or nurture is most responsible for human character and concluding that the fairy tale that follows will settle the argument. These moral fairy tales have been most fully surveyed by Samuel F. Pickering (*John Locke* 61–69). But, like Richardson, Pickering sees didactic authors as having commandeered elements of the fairy tale. Both underrate the abundance and sophistication of the two forms, as well as the degree of synthesis achieved between them. Symptomatic of this is Pickering’s characterization of Eleanor Fenn’s *Fairy Spectator* as “an anti-fairy tale.” Fenn included some fairy elements only to dash them. Her heroine steadfastly refuses the magic gifts offered by her fairy guardian, which can be seen as Fenn’s pointed, public repudiation of the fairy tale tradition (Pickering, *John Locke* 66–67). Fenn’s concern to mitigate the reception of her fairy tale motifs is undoubtedly important, but it does not demonstrate that her use of certain fairy motifs was merely cosmetic. Rather, her emendations to the traditional fairy story are indicative of a determination to confront the criticism of the form and pioneer a new kind of fairy tale. Her heroine may reject such conventional fairy tale articles as the ever-full purse, a bonnet that would transport her wherever she wished to go, and a ring that would make her invisible; but she has no such qualms about accepting enchanted mirrors and magic lockets, which point out her faults and prompt her reform (Fenn 29–83). This was the cleansing of the fairy tale of objectionable aspects, not an attempt to subvert, suppress, or supersede the genre. The mirrors and lockets perform exactly the same role in the narrative as the more traditional fairy tale artifacts, allowing the protagonists to achieve their pre-ordained goal of moral reform, the happily-ever-after of the moral tale. They were the exact counterpart to Jack the Giant Killer’s coat, cap, sword, and boots, which allowed him to

fulfill his destiny, and bring his narrative to a close, by defeating the giants and marrying a duke's daughter. The mirrors and lockets were not merely fairy paraphernalia scattered throughout a moral tale to add color, but remained intrinsic to the structure of the work.

What Fenn certainly did do was confront head-on the concern that fairy tales encouraged susceptible children to believe in the supernatural, perhaps at the expense of their Christian faith, making them scared ever after, as Locke had put it, of "Shadows and Darkness" (196). This is why Fenn insisted in her preface that "no Fairy watches over you" (vi). It was a common ploy on the part of moral fairy tale authors.¹² The anonymous author of *Robin Goodfellow* (1770), a splendidly vibrant moral fairy tale first published by Francis Newbery, chose to confront the charge in a very whimsical way:

Fairy Land is neither a continent nor an island; and yet is both, or either; it exists in the air, at the distance of about five feet and a half of six feet at most from the surface of the earth which we inhabit; and is of all other countries the most agreeable. . . . The name of the present reigning monarch is FANCY, WHIM is his royal consort, and the eldest son is called IMAGINATION. (1–2)

The point was reinforced by a map of the human body (Fig.1), showing Fairy Land to be located in the head, as opposed to the "Land of Courage" in the heart and the "Land of Dumplings" in the stomach. The anonymous author of *The Wren; or, The Fairy of the Green-House* (1787) attempted a subtler defense. The book features a fairy wren, in the tradition of the moral tale, that lectures three boys on their behavior. The author recognized that the concept was open to disparagement; in one dialogue, a boy asks the wren why some who profess to love truth, by which he means his nurse, make up stories about bears and wolves who attack naughty boys, when such creatures are never actually to be seen. The wren answers that the boy who needs such stories to keep him good is a sad fellow, but adds that the nurse has at her disposal no other means of instilling virtue, so she is forced to fictionalize a threat. For making up stories about bears and wolves we should read making up stories about talking fairy wrens. This was, in other words, a coded defense of the author's use of an unrealistic device; the fundamental argument being that the ends justified the means (59–65). However elegant these justifications of the use of fairies, these ploys were still fundamentally a way of telling readers that fairies did not exist. They were a reply to the warnings of many, such as Sarah Fielding in *The Governess* (1749), whose Mrs. Teachum would just about countenance fairy stories (she told her pupils): "provided you read them with the proper Disposition of

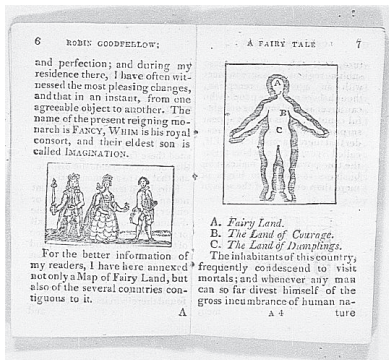


Figure 1. From *Robin Goodfellow. A Fairy Tale Written by a Fairy, for the Amusement of All Pretty Little Faies and Fairies in Great Britain and Ireland*. 1770. rpt. London: J. Harris, 1815, 6-7. This, and other images of texts discussed in this essay, are available online on the Hockliffe Project website at <http://www.cta.dmu.ac.uk/projects/Hockliffe>.

Mind not to be hurt by them” and that you “by no means let the Notion of Giants and Magic dwell upon your Minds.” In other words, she was concerned fairy land was depicted in such a way that it could not be taken seriously (Fielding 67–68).

At least one author went beyond attempting simply to rebut the charges levelled against the fairy tale. The anonymous author of *The Flower Basket* (1816) counter-attacked, claiming that it was the moral tale that was too idealized. It would never “have entered my head to offer any thing in the shape of a Fairy Tale to this enlightened age, when such productions have long been banished from all juvenile libraries” the author confided, were it not the case that “a child is less likely to be misled by what is avowedly fictitious,” the fairy tale, “than by those high-wrought characters of perfection,” the protagonists of moral tales, “which they would have little better chance of meeting with in the world, than the fantastic agents of Oberon” (iii–iv).

The Flower Basket is interesting; it has rather a complicated structure, apparently designed simultaneously to show skepticism and approval of fairy tales. Three children live in a decaying castle. Ursula, an old family retainer, educates them. She is the embodiment of the servant vilified by Locke for frightening children with supernatural stories. Ursula would keep the children at their work by:

singing old ballads, and relating marvellous histories, to which they would listen with an eagerness and interest that banished all wish for any other kind of entertainment. Of these she had an abundant store, but what afforded the highest delight to her auditors, was the dextrous feats, or beneficent acts, that she would record of fairies, a race of beings that she professed to have personal knowledge of (8–9).

This claim is not unfounded. When the children’s parents die, the fairy Felicia, an old acquaintance of the family, comes to their aid. She will

look after them, she says, but adds, giving voice to the motto of the moral fairy tale, that “you secure my good offices only by deserving them” (23). Felicia gives the children a basket that contains three flowers, each with special powers if the children behave properly. Each child chooses one of the flowers, but inevitably they do not heed Felicia’s warnings (inevitably, because thus far, the story conforms to the most basic fairy tale formulae, as set out by Vladimir Propp [see Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* 3–4]). The oldest child, Adrian, who chose the rose, becomes avaricious; he fails to distinguish between impostors who demand alms and those who really deserve them. His money quickly dries up. The second child, Amaranthé, cannot cope with the attention she receives as a beautiful woman; her jealousy and vanity cause her good looks to fade. What happens to the third child and her lily is never fully explained. By the time the rose and the hyacinth have withered, Benigna, a superior fairy to Felicia, has whisked the children away from their home. Benigna criticizes Felicia as “injudicious.” She tells the children that “the few gifts that she has to bestow, are more likely to ensnare than to benefit those whom she means to serve” (75). Instead they are set to work in a library, not the creation of any fairy, but set up by a friend of their mother. It will be their first task to study a big book, the Bible presumably, for there they “will find how unnecessary is the aid of fairies to your welfare, when by humbly imploring that of the all-powerful Being who never forsakes those who resort to him, you will secure those endless blessings that magic has not to bestow” (78). Here, at last, they find contentment. The tale’s conclusion explains why: “They were happy because they were rational; and being rational, they felt well disposed to laugh heartily at all absurd stories about Fairies, Flower Baskets, and White Wands!” (82–83)

What was a child to make of this? *The Flower Basket* was a fairy tale, but it closed with an injunction to reject the supernatural. Its prefatorial defense of fairy tales, and allegation of the moral tale’s bankruptcy, only deepens the paradox. Furthermore, its final purpose was apparently to insist that contentment was available only through education, a rationalist emphasis redolent of the children’s literature tradition derived from Locke and Newbery. Yet there was also a Christian message so orthodox that it would have satisfied even Sarah Trimmer. But the author evidently did not think the work would collapse under the weight of its own contradictions, nor should this be considered an “anti-fairy tale.” What consistently comes through, from the title page epigraph onward (“I never may believe / These antick fables, nor these fairy toys,” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), is an awareness of, and determination to

address, criticism of the fairy tale, but not to capitulate to it. The first task, as usual, was to make it clear that the fairies depicted were not real. Here Benigna, a fairy herself, teaches the children “to laugh heartily at all absurd stories about Fairies.” It was a paradox deliberately employed, consistent with the argument of the preface, that “avowedly fictitious” works were less likely to injure a young reader than an over-idealized moral tale. The second part of the tale, after Benigna’s intervention, was to counter accusations that moral fairy tales, however pious or improving, would still fail to help a child get on in life, either morally or practically. The *Monthly Review*, for instance, reviewing *Arabian Tales* in 1793, worried that those who read supernatural works would be more likely to “wonder” at the world “than to enquire,” and would be apt “to seek a solution to difficulties in occult causes, instead of resorting to facts.” (Review 11: 154) This is why the author of *The Flower Basket* rejected the more superficial style of moral fairy tales, which simply used fairies to enliven a dry moral story, generally relying on allegory as their principal technique. The first part of the tale, the story of Felicia’s flowers, had done just that. It used a fairy tale mechanism to teach key lessons of the moral tale, including how to spend money, give alms, and be modest. But it was nevertheless guilty of encouraging children to rely on “occult causes” for their education and future happiness. Benigna’s exposé of the falsity of this method of achieving happiness emphasizes personal endeavor as a means of achieving virtue, fulfillment, and social advancement:

The content Felicia bestowed on you, was not the happy result of a well-regulated mind, satisfied with its own exertions, and the performance of those duties incumbent on all rational beings. It was indolence mistaken for a virtue. A being endued with reason, of which it obeys not the dictates; with faculties, of which it makes no use, but is content to occupy its station in life without fulfilling the purposes for which it was placed there, is scarcely less censurable than those who waste their time in riot and dissipation (76).

Whether or not fairies were to be found in the world, *The Flower Basket* concluded, the only way for children to improve themselves was through hard work and religious faith. Benigna’s disavowal of Felicia’s methods represents the repudiation of the straightforward splicing of the moral tale and the fairy story, and its replacement by a more thoroughgoing synthesis of the fairy tale and the more serious and purposeful forms of children’s literature. This was a fairy tale that was proof against the attack of either the rationalists, of the school of Newbery, or ardent Christians, such as Trimmer.

Fairy tales had a protean nature. They could be adapted to suit any pre-existing agenda. The criticism that was levelled at the form forced a change in the kind of fairy tales that were written, but did not lead to even the temporary eradication of the genre. For a time, the moral fairy tale was the dominant generic strain. Many late eighteenth and early nineteenth century children would have made their first acquaintance with Benigna and her allies, rather than the fairy inhabitants of either indigenous British moral culture or the more refined French tradition.¹³ When Benjamin Tabart and John Harris, and then the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, brought new collections of fairy tales to British children, they were not resuscitating an almost lifeless genre. Nor did this new wave of tales replace the moral fairy tale, nor even necessarily prove more popular. Rather, they competed, and sometimes merged, with an already flourishing tradition. Their innovations represented simply another of the mutations which punctuate, and even characterize, the history of fairy tales.

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Notes

¹ See, for instance Pickering, *John Locke* viii–ix, or Richardson, *Literature* 112–18, where the older view, set out most fully in Summerfield, is challenged.

² The astonishing adaptability of fairy tales has long been recognized. See, for instance, Zipes *Fairy Tales*.

³ Attribution to Becket from Nangle: 253. For references to Becket's "ready and caustic wit" see the "Biographical Notice of the Author" in Becket, *Dramatic* 1: xiv.

⁴ That *The Palace of Enchantment* is composed of the second volume of *Fairy Tales, Selected from the Best Authors* is revealed by St. John 2: 597. I have not been able to see a copy of *Fairy Tales, Selected from the Best Authors*. It is possible that, just as its second volume appeared under a different title, its first volume was similarly published, perhaps as *The Pleasing Companion*.

⁵ Another, undated version of *The Pleasing Companion*, with a different title page from both the 1788 and 1794 editions, is also in the British Library (which

hazards ca. 1790 as its publication date). However, only the recto and verso of the title page show changes from the 1788 edition, and the text itself is identical, right down to the book's "finger-prints"—the printer's marks for ordering the sheets. This suggests that Lane merely reissued the old edition with a new title page. The 1794 edition was printed afresh, and there is no suggestion that the second edition of any of Lane's other collections of fairy tales were "false" editions.

⁶ Thomas Spence, one of the most extreme anti-establishment activists in 1790s Britain, would have disagreed with Wordsworth. He indicated the power of fairy tales to radicalize their readers: "the stories of enormous and tyrannical giants, dwelling in strong castles, which have been thought fabulous, may reasonably be looked upon as disguised truths, and to have been invented as just satires upon great lords. For, if those fabulous monsters were said to eat the people and their children, your real monsters really eat their meat and the savour out of every enjoyment . . . These are the monsters, or giants, that the world wants to be rid of. The extirpation of these should employ the philanthropic giant-killers, the deliverers of mankind." (Spence 2: 209)

⁷ When Wilfred was growing up, Sullivan comments, the "children's library" consisted mostly of "the Fairy Tales of the Countess D'Anois [D'Aulnoy], Persian Tales, Valentine and Orson, Arabian Nights, and Gulliver's Travels," as well as *Robinson Crusoe*. All, save perhaps the latter, were "either too frivolous, improper, or incomprehensible, for children" (8). Sullivan's comments, though doubtless exaggerated, provide an interesting indication of children's reading during the period of his own youth (he was born in 1756). Certainly, there is no suggestion that fairy tales had been successfully banished from the nursery.

⁸ Even the harshest fairy tales critics did not condemn them if they were clearly understood as something from a past. Then, of course, they could hardly pose a challenge to the new children's literature, in which so many writers had such a substantial investment. Trimmer, cheerfully approved of fairy tales that appeared in the older children's book, *Instructive Lessons* (apparently part of 1779 *The Lilliputian Library*, compiled by Richard Johnson). She applauded these for having "a very good moral" (*Guardian of Education*, 1: 508). Mrs. Markham, author of several successful history textbooks, allows a fairy tale in *New Children's Friend* after she has clearly identified them as belonging to a bygone generation (1: 175).

⁹ At least one reader agreed with Aikin. Anna Jameson, born in 1794, remembered that when she was a child, a parish clerk had lent her "religious tracts and stories, by Hannah More." She wrote that she was certain these works, presumably More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795–98), did "more moral mischief" than the fairy tales she would have preferred to read, for they "first introduced me to a knowledge of the vices of vulgar life, and the excitements of

a vulgar religion.” She concluded, “My fairy world was better!” (Jameson, rpt. Sanders 85).

¹⁰ In *Mother Bunch’s Fairy Tales. Published for the Amusement of All Those Little Masters and Misses* (Aulnoy 60–72), it was called “The Story of Little George.” Under the same title it appeared in *Stories of Prince Lupin, The Yellow Dwarf, Little George, and Little Red Riding-Hood* (25–32), and as “Education. A Fairy Tale,” it could be found in *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (Gregory 127–60).

¹¹ The British Library possesses one title from the series, Miss Selwyn’s undated *Mary and Jane; or, Who Would Not Be Industrious? A Moral Fairy Tale*. It is a thirty-four-page story of a fairy’s reward to an industrious and charitable daughter and her condemnation of her lazy and selfish sister. On the outside back cover are advertised two other books in the series: *Letitia and the Fairy; or, A Cure for Pride and Little Anna; or, Who Would Not Be Honest?* (published by A. K. Newman). The Osborne Collection in Toronto contains a collected edition of *Moral Fairy Tales* by Miss A. Selwyn (published by Dean and Munday, n.d.), which contains these three tales along with the “History of Farmer Darwin” and “Flora and Edward.” Like much of Selwyn’s oeuvre, these were fairly standard moral tales, without any supernatural elements. An advertisement for “Fairy Tales. By Miss Selwyn,” priced 2s. is found at the back of Catherine Ward’s *Cottage Stories*, published by A. K. Newman in 1825, suggesting a publication date for all the *Moral Fairy Tales*.

¹² Other such disclaimers include the anonymous *Toy-Shop* (ca. 1785), in which Lady Meanwell introduces her fairy story: “fabulists have invented such beings, in order to give variety to their moral tales” (107). The anonymous *History of Good Lady Kindheart* (ca. 1790) is about “The Story of the cruel Giant BARBARICO, the good Giant BENEFICO, and the little pretty Dwarf MIGNON.” It is prefaced with this warning: “Before I proceed with my story I must beg leave to make some observations on these kind of Tales, and which I would have you communicate to all your little friends. Giants, magic, fairies, and all sorts of supernatural assistances in story, are introduced only to amuse and divert; therefore by no means let the notion of giants, or magic dwell on your minds. I do not therefore so thoroughly approve, as to recommend them much to your reading; except, as I said before, great care is taken to prevent your being carried away by them” (22–23).

¹³ Benigna and her rather serious fairy colleagues were also no doubt the inspiration for those rather ironically moral fairies of the mid-Victorian period: Catherine Sinclair’s Fairy Teach-All (*Holiday House*, 1839), Francis Paget’s Lady Abracadabra (*The Hope of the Katzekopfs*, 1844), William Thackeray’s Fairy Blackstick (*The Rose and the Ring*, 1855), and Charles Kingsley’s Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Bedonebyasyoudid (*The Water Babies*, 1863).

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