

But though at first this seems to have happened, the apple's effect is, finally, of course, quite different. After the Queen's artfulness has killed Snow White into art, the girl becomes if anything even more dangerous to her "step" mother's autonomy than she was before, because even more opposed to it in both mind and body. For, dead and selfless in her glass coffin, she is an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy's marble "opus," the decorative and decorous Galatea⁷ with whom every ruler would like to grace his parlor. Thus, when the Prince first sees Snow White in her coffin, he begs the dwarves to give "it" to him as a gift, "for I cannot live without seeing Snow White. I will honor and prize her as my dearest possession." An "it," a possession, Snow White has become an idealized image of herself, and as such she has definitively proven herself to be patriarchy's ideal woman, the perfect candidate for Queen. At this point, therefore, she regurgitates the poison apple (whose madness had stuck in her throat) and rises from her coffin. The fairest in the land, she will marry the most powerful in the land; bidden to their wedding, the egotistically assertive, plotting Queen will become a former Queen, dancing herself to death in red-hot iron shoes.

What does the future hold for Snow White, however? When her Prince becomes a King and she becomes a Queen, what will her life be like? Trained to domesticity by her dwarf instructors, will she sit in the window, gazing out on the wild forest of her past, and sigh, and sew, and prick her finger, and conceive a child white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood? Surely, fairest of them all, Snow White has exchanged one glass coffin for another, delivered from the prison where the Queen put her only to be imprisoned in the looking glass from which the King's voice speaks daily. There is, after all, no female model for her in this tale except the "good" (dead) mother and her living avatar the "bad" mother. And if Snow White escaped her first glass coffin by her goodness, her passivity and docility, her only escape from her second glass coffin, the imprisoning mirror, must evidently be through "badness," through plots and stories, duplicitous schemes, wild dreams, fierce fictions, mad impersonations. The cycle of her fate seems inexorable. Renouncing "contemplative purity," she must now embark on that life of "significant action" which, for a woman, is defined as a witch's life because it is so monstrous, so unnatural.* * * She will become a murderess bent on the self-slaughter implicit in her murderous attempts against the life of her own child. Finally, in fiery shoes that parody the costumes of femininity as surely as the comb and stays she herself contrived, she will do a silent terrible death-dance out of the story, the looking glass, the transparent coffin of her own image.

7. An ivory statue carved by Pygmalion and brought to life by Aphrodite in response to the sculptor's longing for his creation [Editor].

Her only deed, this death will imply, can be a deed of death, her only action the pernicious action of self-destruction.

In this connection, it seems especially significant that the Queen's dance of death is a silent one. In "The Juniper Tree" [190-97] a version of "Little Snow White" in which a boy's mother tries to kill him (for different reasons, of course) the dead boy is transformed not into a silent art object but into a furious golden bird who sings a song of vengeance against his murderess and finally crushes her to death with a millstone. The male child's progress toward adulthood is a growth toward both self-assertion and self-articulation, "The Juniper Tree" implies, a development of the powers of speech. But the girl child must learn the arts of silence either as herself a silent image invented and defined by the magic looking glass of the male-authored text, or as a silent dancer of her own woes, a dancer who enacts rather than articulates. * * *

KAREN E. ROWE

To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale†

I begin not, as one might expect, with a *conte de fées* or a *Märchen*¹ but instead with a story, which provides us with a more ancient paradigm for understanding the female voice in folklore and fairy tale. But to speak about voice in a tale so singularly about the voiceless is immediately to recognize that to tell a tale for women may be a way of breaking enforced silences. I refer to Ovid's account in the *Metamorphoses* of Philomela and Procne, which in Western tradition can serve as a type for the narrative power of the female, capable of weaving in tapestry the brutal story of rape that leads to the enactment of a terrible revenge.² Since the image of Philomela as weaver and nightingale becomes the quintessential type of the woman as tale-teller, it is best to review the story, noticing Ovid's preoccupation with the varieties of utterance and silence and the analogy that can be drawn between the story of Philomela and the art of creating a tale itself. Based upon this paradigm we can begin to explore the lineage of women as tale-tellers

† From Karen E. Rowe, "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1986) 53-75. Copyright © 1986. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

1. French and German terms for "fairy tale" (respectively) [Editor].

2. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), bk. 6, pp. 143-51. All future references from book 6 will be cited parenthetically in the text by page.

FROM: THE CLASSIC FAIRY TALES
Ed by MARCIA TATAR

in a history that stretches from Philomela and Scheherazade to the raconteurs of French *veillées*³ and salons, to English peasants, governesses, and novelists, and to the German *Spinnerinnen*⁴ and the Brothers Grimm. It is a complex history, which I can only highlight in this essay.

To return to Ovid. With "flame bursting out of his breast," Tereus, as Ovid recounts, in his "unbridled passion" is granted a perverse eloquence (p. 144). Although he disguises them as the pleadings of a "most devoted husband," the "crime-contriver" Tereus speaks only false reassurances of protection, honor, and kinship (p. 144). The voyage to Thrace accomplished, Tereus violently seizes Philomela and

told her then
What he was going to do, and straightway did it,
Raped her, a virgin, all alone, and calling
For her father, for her sister, but most often
For the great gods. In vain. (p. 146)

Trembling "as a frightened lamb which a gray wolf has mangled," she vows to "proclaim" the vile ravishment, to "go where people are / Tell everybody," and "if there is any god in Heaven, [He] will hear me" (pp. 146, 147). Fearing already the potency of Philomela's voice, the cruel king Tereus

seized her tongue
With pincers, though it cried against the outrage,
Babbled and made a sound something like *Father*,
Till the sword cut it off. The mangled root
Quivered, the severed tongue along the ground
Lay quivering, making a little murmur,
Jerking and twitching . . .

. . . [and] even then, Tereus
Took her, and took her again, the injured body
Still giving satisfaction to his lust. (p. 147)

What Tereus has injured, we might keep in mind, is not only the organ of speech, but the orifice of sexuality itself—and when the ravaged Philomela speaks later through another medium, it is on behalf of a body and spirit doubly mutilated. Philomela, who supposedly lacks the "power of speech / To help her tell her wrongs," discovers that

grief has taught her
Sharpness of wit, and cunning comes in trouble.
She had a loom to work with, and with purple
On a white background, wove her story in,
Her story in and out, and when it was finished,
Gave it to one old woman, with signs and gestures

3. Evening gatherings [Editor].

4. German for "female spinners."

To take it to the queen, so it was taken,
Unrolled and understood. (p. 148)

Remember too this old woman, whose servant status belies her importance as a conveyor of the tale. Having comprehended her sister's woven story, Procne enacts a dreadful punishment. She slaughters, stews, and skewers her beloved son Itys as a fitting banquet for the lustful defiler of flesh, Tereus, doomed to feast greedily "on the flesh of his own flesh" (p. 150). As we know, the gods intervene to thwart a further cycle of vengeance by transforming Tereus into a bird of prey (the hoopoe or a hawk), Philomela into the onomatopoeic image of the quivering tongue as a twittering swallow, and Procne into the nightingale. The Romans (with greater sense of poetic justice) transposed the names, making Philomela into the nightingale who sings eternally the melancholy tale of betrayal, rape, and maternal sorrow. As such, she comes down to us as the archetypal tale-teller, one who not only weaves the revelatory tapestry but also sings the song which Ovid appropriates as his myth.⁵

Ovid's account forces upon us the analogy between weaving or spinning and tale-telling. Classicist Edith Hamilton elaborates upon this connection by noting that "Philomela's case looked hopeless. She was shut up; she could not speak; in those days there was no writing. . . . However, although people then could not write, they could tell a story without speaking because they were marvelous craftsmen. . . . The women . . . could weave, into the lovely stuffs they made, forms so life-like anyone could see what tale they illustrated. Philomela accordingly turned to her loom. She had a greater motive to make clear the story she wove than any artist ever had."⁶ And when Procne "unrolled the web . . . with horror she read what had happened, all as plain to her as if in print." What is notable about Hamilton's account is the ease with which she elides the acts of weaving or spinning, narrating a tale in pictorial or "graphic" terms, and writing that is to be read and understood by the comprehending audience. But Hamilton's elisions find their basis in the semiotics of Greek itself, which Ann Bergren brilliantly analyzes in her study "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought."⁷ Bergren argues cogently that "the semiotic⁸ activity peculiar

5. See also Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 21–22.

6. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: New American Library, 1940), pp. 270–71.

7. Ann L. T. Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," *Arethusa* 16, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring and Fall 1983): 71. See also Ann L. T. Bergren, "Helen's Web: Time and Tableau in the *Iliad*," *Helios*, n.s. seven, no. 1 (1980): 19–34. For discussions of the shifting aesthetic theories of the relationship between art and literature, picture and poetry, see Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Richard Wendorf, ed., *Articulated Images: The Sister Arts from Hogarth to Tennyson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

8. Pertaining to signs [Editor].

to women throughout Greek tradition is not linguistic. Greek women do not speak, they weave. Semiotic woman is a weaver. Penelope is, of course, the paradigm," to which we might add, among others, Helen, Circe, the Fates, and Philomela. But the semiotic relationships are far more complicated. For if women weave and use the woven object, be it tapestry or robe, as a medium for narrating the truth, it must also be recalled that Greek culture inherited from Indo-European culture a tradition in which poets metaphorically defined their art as "weaving" or "sewing" words. Having appropriated the terms of what was "originally and literally woman's work par excellence," as Bergren illustrates, Greek poets "call their product, in effect, a 'metaphorical web.'" Bergren's emphasis falls upon the male appropriation of women's peculiar craft of spinning as a semiotic equivalent for the art of creating Greek poetry itself. For my purposes, the intimate connection, both literal and metaphoric, between weaving and telling a story also establishes the cultural and literary frameworks within which women transmit not only tapestries that tell stories, but also later folklore and fairy tales. In this respect, Bergren's analysis of Philomela again becomes germane, for she writes: "Philomela, according to Apollodorus (3.14.8), *huphēnasa en peploi grammata* 'wove pictures / writing (*grammata* can mean either) in a robe' which she sent to her sister. Philomela's trick reflects the 'trickiness' of weaving, its uncanny ability to make meaning out of inarticulate matter, to make silent material speak. In this way, women's weaving is, as *grammata* implies, a 'writing' or graphic art, a silent, material representation of audible, immaterial speech." Similarly, when later women become tale-tellers or *sages femmes*, their "audible" art is likewise associated with their cultural function as silent spinners or weavers, and they employ the folk or fairy tale as a "speaking" (whether oral or literary) representation of the silent matter of their lives, which is culture itself.

What then are the multiple levels through which Philomela's tale is told, that is, in which the silent tapestry is made to speak so graphically? First, we might acknowledge the actuality of Tereus' rape itself, the truth of an act which is re-presented to us in various forms. When Philomela threatens to seek an audience to whom she will tell her story, Tereus belatedly recognizes the terrible power of the woman's voice to speak, and by a possible psychological displacement, of the fear he harbors that the woman's body will reveal the foul ravishment by generating illegitimate offspring. This double recognition that both tongue and body may speak of his unspeakable act explains why Tereus must not only sever Philomela's tongue but imprison her in the woods as well, removed from society and unable to communicate her sorry fate in either way.

Second, Philomela turns in her agony to the mainstay of women's

domestic life, the spinning enjoined upon women both by ancient practice and by the later biblical portrait in Proverbs (31:10-31) of the virtuous woman. She who spins is the model of the good woman and wife and, presumably, in many cultures of the subservient woman who knows her duty—that is, to remain silent and betray no secrets. Philomela, tongueless though she may be, creates a tapestry that becomes her voice. Ironically, Philomela, the innocent woman who spins, becomes the avenging woman who breaks her enforced silence by simply speaking in another mode—through a craft presumed to be harmlessly domestic, as fairy tales would also be regarded in later centuries. What is significant, however, is that Philomela's tapestry becomes the first "telling," a *grammata* (woven picture/writing) that fulfills the verbal threat previously uttered, yet so cruelly foreshortened. It is the first remove from the actual rape as an event, done this time through a medium which "writes" (*graphein*) that truth in a style governed by the conventions of pictorial narration.

Third, the tapestry, woven strand by strand, becomes itself a metaphor for Ovid's patiently detailed rendering of the myth in words. Ovid, the skilled craftsman of Roman storytelling, in a sense semiotically resembles Philomela, whose distinctive female craft is weaving. Ovid further stylizes the tale in one further remove from the act when he attaches the transformation or metamorphosis of Philomela into a swallow and Procne into a nightingale. That metamorphosis presents us with another way of envisioning the relationship of Philomela's story to Ovid's. We might conclude that Ovid himself has heard the nightingale's singing (as the emperor would later do in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Nightingale") and has articulated it for us, as part of his sequence of tales which comprise the *Metamorphoses*. Nonetheless, the event and threatened telling, the tapestry that speaks, and the eternal song of lament that retells all originate with Philomela, though we know them only through the crafted version of Ovid's poetic art.

The paradigm that I envision is, therefore, twofold. First, Philomela as a woman who weaves tales and sings songs becomes the prototype for the female storytellers of later tradition, those *sages femmes* whose role is to transmit the secret truths of culture itself. It is critical to note, as I hinted earlier, that the conveyor of the tapestry is herself an old and trusted servant woman, who takes the tapestry through which the voiceless Philomela speaks to the sister, Procne, who reads and understands the depiction. Similarly, I might suggest that in the history of folktale and fairy tale, women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the tale. Second, Ovid, the male poet, by appropriating Philomela's story as the subject of his myth also metaphorically re-

inforces the connection between weaving and the art of storytelling. Through his appropriation, he lays claim to or attempts to imitate the semiotic activity of woman par excellence—weaving, by making his linguistic recounting an equivalent, or perhaps implicitly superior version of the original graphic tapestry. Like Zeus, as Ann Bergren details, who incorporates his wife, Metis, and gives birth to the virgin Athena, so too Ovid seeks to control the female power of transformative intelligence, that power which enabled Metis to shift and change shapes. Despite its primacy as a literary text, Ovid's account is nonetheless a retold version, having already been truthfully represented through the peculiarly female medium of weaving, and only imitatively represented to us through the creative, transformative power of poetic art—the weaving of a tale in a second sense. In Ovid's tale itself, Tereus more brutally attempts to usurp speech, not only by cutting out the female tongue with which Philomela threatens to “speak” of his crimes, but also by contriving a false story of her death in a duplicitous and ultimately fatal misrepresentation of reality. To appropriate the tongue/text and the fictive-making function, for both Tereus and Ovid, is fraught with triumph and terror, for both only approximate the truth and can do no more than render a twice-old tale.

When the French scholar Antoine Galland first translated *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* from Arabic into French (1704–17), he retitled them *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, no doubt heightening the appeal to the French court's sophisticated taste for exotic delights.⁹ When we conjure up *The Arabian Nights*, we are also likely to think first of discrete tales, primarily masculine adventures (“Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “Aladdin; or, The Wonderful Lamp,” or “Sinbad”), recalling neither the narrative framework nor the stated function which is not only to entertain but also to instruct. But who tells the tales? And for what reason? The frame story identifies Scheherazade as the tale-spinner and the purpose as a double deliverance, of virgins from slaughter and of an aggrieved king from his mania.

The frame plot of *The Arabian Nights* may thus seem straightforward. King Shahryar of India surprises his adulterous wife as she torridly copulates with a blackamoor slave. He executes his wife and swears “himself by a binding oath that whatever wife he married he would abate her maidenhead at night and slay her next morning to make sure of his honour; ‘For,’ said he, ‘there never was nor is there one chaste woman upon the face of the earth.’” (p. 14). Scheherazade, the “wise and witty” daughter of the King's Wazir, steps in to break this cycle of silent sacrifice by offering herself as a “ransom for the virgin daughters of Moslems [sic] and the cause of their deliverance” (p. 15). Her

counterplot requires, however, the complicity of her sister. Admitted to the bedchamber, Dunyazad, foreshadowing each evening's formulaic plea, appeals, “Allah upon thee, O my sister, recite to us some new story, delightful and delectable, wherewith to while away the waking hours of our latter night,” so that Scheherazade in turn might “‘tell thee a tale which shall be our deliverance, if so Allah please, and which shall turn the King from his blood-thirsty custom’” (p. 24). Tale after tale, Scheherazade ceases just before “the dawn of day . . . to say her permitted say,” thereby cannily suspending each tale mid-way and luring the King into a three-year reprieve—or a thousand and one Arabian nights (p. 29).

Historia interrupta may be sufficient to stave off execution, but it is clearly not to be recommended as a contraceptive, for within three years' time Scheherazade has “borne the King three boy children” (p. 508). Craving release “from the doom of death, as a dole to these infants,” Scheherazade elicits repentant tears from the king, who readily responds: “I had pardoned thee before the coming of these children, for that I found thee chaste, pure, ingenuous and pious!” (p. 508). Sexuality and marital fidelity are here intimately linked with the act of tale-telling, strikingly resembling the same motifs in the story of Procne and Philomela. Whereas in Ovid's myth, the tapestry becomes a medium for communicating Tereus' adulterous rape and instigating a proper vengeance, in *The Arabian Nights* the two sisters conspire together to cure King Shahryar by telling admonitory stories of past times and by demonstrating Scheherazade's chaste fidelity. Scheherazade's purity, signified by the legitimate product of her womb, converts the king from his “blood-thirsty custom.” But it is likewise Scheherazade's wise telling of tales that instructs the king in precisely how to interpret his good fortune: “‘Thou marvelledst at that which befell thee on the part of women,’” Scheherazade allows, “‘and indeed I have set forth unto thee that which happened to Caliphs and Kings and others with their women . . . and in this is all-sufficient warning for the man of wits and admonishment for the wise’” (pp. 508–9). Like an analyst upon whom the patient projects his murderous jealousy, so Scheherazade's stories function for King Shahryar, who with reasoning powers restored and heart cleansed returns from mania to sanity.

Scheherazade's power to instruct derives from three kinds of special knowledge attributed to women: the knowledge of sexual passion, the knowledge of healing, and the wisdom to spin tales. More a model of the intellectual and literate storyteller than, like Philomela, of the domestic spinner and singer, Scheherazade, it is written, “had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and

9. *Tales from the Arabian Nights Selected from “The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night,”* trans. Richard F. Burton, ed. David Shumaker (New York: Avenel Books, 1978). See David Shumaker's “Introduction” for comments on the presumed authorship that follow.

knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred" (p. 15). The description might apply as well to those later "learned Ladies" of the French court, Madame d'Aulnoy and Mlle. L'Héritier, or to well-bred English governesses (Madame de Beaumont, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre).¹ And one stands amazed at the immense repertoire of Scheherazade's stories, sufficient we might imagine for another one thousand and one nights of delectation and delight. Scheherazade paradigmatically reinforces our concept of female storytellers as transmitters of ancient tales, told and remolded in such a way as to meet the special needs of the listener—in this case, King Shahryar and all men who harbor deep fears of the sexual woman and the dual power of her body and voice. As readers of *The Arabian Nights*, we participate as eavesdroppers in the bedchamber, together with the King and Dunyazad, whom Scheherazade initiates into the mysterious truths of sexuality and folklore. Similar to Procne, who unrolled the tapestry and understood its *grammata*, Dunyazad comes to signify the community of all women to whom the female narrator tells tales.

The voice to tell "marvellous stories and wondrous histories," the wisdom to shape them rightly, the procreative and imaginative generativity belong to Scheherazade. But in *The Arabian Nights* we find another instance of male appropriation (p. 515). No doubt a remarkably quick student, King Shahryar retells "what he had heard from" Scheherazade during three years' time to his brother Shah Zaman, who is afflicted with the same jealous mania (p. 510). He is also miraculously redeemed and conveniently wed to Dunyazad. Having usurped the storytelling and curative power originally possessed by Scheherazade, the King further summons "chroniclers and copyists and bade them write all that had betided him with his wife, first and last; so they wrote this and named it *The Stories of the Thousand Nights and a Night*" (p. 515). A succeeding, equally "wise ruler," who "keen-witted and accomplished . . . loved tales and legends, especially those which chronicle the doings of Sovrans and Sultans," promptly "bade the folk copy them and dispread them over all lands and climes; wherefore their report was bruited abroad" (pp. 515–16). As the basis for a theory of the origin and dissemination of *The Arabian Nights*, this account may be as fictional as the frame story of Scheherazade; nevertheless, it usefully suggests the manner in which tales told by a woman found their way into royal circles, then were dispersed to the "folk," where pre-

1. Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1650–1705) and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier (1664–1734): French authors who specialized in fairy tales; Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–80): French author of many fairy tales, including "Beauty and the Beast," who worked in England as a governess; Charlotte Brontë (1816–55): English author, who worked as a governess, as did her fictional character Jane Eyre [Editor].

sumably oral recountings insured their descent to the present day. Even the narrator hesitates to push this theory too hard, disclaiming that "this is all that hath come down to us of the origin of this book, and Allah is All-knowing" (p. 516).

Beyond this intratextual story that establishes Scheherazade as the frame tale-teller, the question of authorial identity becomes yet murkier. Scholars have suggested that Scheherazade's story appeared in the tenth-century *Hezar Afsane*, attributed to the Persian Princess Homai, daughter of Artaxerxes I, whose female authorship I would like to believe. But the alternative of a fifteenth-century Arabian collection, compiled by a professional storyteller in Cairo, sex unspecified, leaves us with no firm indication. We do know that in later centuries *The Arabian Nights* have come down to us (the folk) through French and English translations by savants, such as Galland, Henry Torrens (1838), E. W. Lane, John Payne (1882–84), and Richard Burton (1885–88), whose sixteen-volume English edition has been praised for its "exceptional accuracy, masculine vitality, and literary discernment" (emphasis added). Reinforcing the paradigm set by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Scheherazade's story and *The Arabian Nights* exemplify further the appropriation of text by a double narration in which a presumably male author or collector attributes to a female the original power of articulating silent matter. But having attributed this transformative artistic intelligence and voice to a woman, the narrator then reclaims for himself (much as Tereus and the King assert dominion over body and voice within the tales) the controlling power of retelling, of literary recasting, and of dissemination to the folk—a folk that includes the female community of tale-tellers from which the stories would seem to have originated.

Subsequent European collections of folk and fairy tales often assert a similarly double control over voice and text, whether as a mere literary convention or as a reflection of the actual informants and contexts of tale-telling. *The Book of the Seven Wise Masters*, or *Seven Sages*, probably of ninth-century Persian origin, but known in Europe, practically inverts the frame story of *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*.² Not a wazir's daughter, but instead a king's son, under notice of death, is saved from execution by the tales of seven philosophers, who tell stories of female deceptions, while a woman vehemently defends her sex from these slanders. Gianfrancesco Straparola (c. 1480–c. 1557), in his sixteenth-century Italian collection, *Le piacevoli Notti* or *The Delightful Nights* (1550–53), excuses the crude jests and earthy telling of tales by claiming (perhaps falsely?) to have heard them "from the lips of ten young girls." And Giambattista Basile's (1575–1632) famous *Lo Cunto*

2. Peter Opie and Iona Opie, "Introduction," *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 20–21.

de li Cunti (1634–36) or the *Pentamerone* (1674) contains a frame story attributing the fifty tales to common townswomen. Charles Perrault, borrowing perhaps from *les contes de vieilles* told by his son's nurse or repeated by his son Pierre, creates in *Histoires ou Contes du tems passé: Avec des Moralitez* (1697) the style of restrained simplicity that set the literary standard for subsequent fairy tale collections and *Kunstmärchen*.³

Madame d'Aulnoy (c. 1650–1705) may be the female exception that proves the rule of male appropriation, for as the author of eleven volumes she becomes notable for her elegantly ornamented fairy tales, designed to delight the adult aristocratic tastes of Louis XIV's court. As Dorothy R. Thelander establishes in "Mother Goose and Her Goslings: The France of Louis XIV as Seen through the Fairy Tale," these "fairy tales formed a distinct socioliterary genre," whose "roots lay in stories that peasant nursemaids and servants told children left in their charge, yet they were shaped for an adult and relatively sophisticated audience," that "shared the ideals of the Paris salons, particularly those which cultivated the refinement of language and manners associated with the précieux."⁴ It is perhaps a sign of how removed Madame d'Aulnoy is from *les vieilles* as hearth-side tale-tellers that in one volume of her *contes de fées*, she imagines them to be narrated by some women during a short carriage trip. I do not intend to dispute the issues of the Ancien Régime and salon tales, or of Perrault's authorship, or of his style. My argument underscores, however, the observation of how regularly the tales are assumed and asserted to have their origins in a province definably female, and how the literary *contes de fées* become geared to an increasingly large circle of women readers—aristocratic ladies, mothers and nursemaids, governesses, young girls, and ironically the folk.

What surfaces during the period of the seventeenth century in which fairy tales become part of Western Europe's literary as well as oral tradition are "tell-tale" signs of a twofold legacy. First, we have noted already how insistently literary raconteurs, both male and female, validated the authenticity of their folk stories by claiming to have heard them from young girls, nurses, gossips, townswomen, old crones, and wise women. The female frame narrator is a particularly significant indicator, because it converts into literary convention the belief in women as truth-sayers, those gifted with memory and voice to transmit the culture's wisdom—the silent matter of life itself. Consider, for example, the term *conte de fées*. The terms *fées* and *faerie* derive originally from the Latin *Fatum*, the thing spoken, and *Fata*, the Fates who speak

it. According to Andrew Lang, in his "Introduction" to *Perrault's Popular Fairy Tales* (1888), "the *Fées* answered, as in *Sleeping Beauty*, to Greek *Moirai* or Egyptian *Hathors*. They nursed women in labour: they foretold the fate of children."⁵ And Katherine Briggs, in *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*, cites the derivation from "the Italian *fatae*, the fairy ladies who visited the household of births and pronounced on the future of the baby."⁶ These Italian, French, and English derivatives from the Greek and Latin, compel us to see the origin of fairy as closely related to female acts of birthing, nursing, prophesying, and spinning—as ancient myth makes plain. Recall the three Fates: *Klōthō*, the spinner, spins the thread of life; *Lachēsīs*, draws it out, thereby apportioning one's lifespan and destiny; and the dread *Atropos*, she who cannot be kept from turning the spindle, is "the blind *Fury* with th'abhorred shears," who "slits the thin-spun life."⁷ *Contes de fées* are, therefore, not simply tales told about fairies; implicitly they are tales told by women, descendants of those ancestral Fates, who link once again the craft of spinning with the art of telling fated truths. In these women's hands, literally and metaphorically, rests the power of birthing, dying, and tale-spinning.

Second, it is not just the nature of the female raconteur, but also the context within which she tells tales in France, Germany, and England that reinforces associations between the literal and metaphorical spinning of yarns. Edward Shorter, among other historians of French popular culture, documents how in the *veillées*, those weekly gatherings of farm families, the women would "gather closely about the light of the nut-oil lamp," not only to "spin, knit, or darn to keep their own family's clothes in shape," but also to "tell stories and recite the old tales. Or maybe, as one disgusted observer reported of the late-nineteenth century, they just 'gossip.'"⁸ The *veillée* in some parts of France became sex segregated, often a gathering exclusively of women with their marriageable daughters, in which both generations carded wool, spun, knitted, or stitched, thus enacting the age-old female rituals. As Abel Hugo, one of Shorter's nineteenth-century antiquarians, portrays it, "the women, because of the inferiority of their sex, are not admitted at all to conversation with their lords and masters. But after the men have

5. Andrew Lang, ed., *Perrault's Popular Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888; repr. New York: Arno, 1977).

6. Katherine Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. xi, as quoted in Thelander, "Mother Goose," p. 487.

7. Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," p. 87, n. 5, suggests this provocative emphasis on Atropos, who otherwise might be translated "she who does not turn." Bergren cites Thompson as the source of "she who cannot be kept from turning" the spindle itself.

8. Edward Shorter, "The 'Veillée' and the Great Transformation," in *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand, and Edward T. Gargan (Saratoga, California: Anna Libri, 1977), pp. 127–40. The first long quotation is taken from p. 129.

3. *Lo Cunto de li Cunti: The Tale of Tales*; *Kunstmärchen*: literary fairy tale in German [Editor].
4. Dorothy R. Thelander, "Mother Goose and Her Goslings: The France of Louis XIV as Seen Through the Fairy Tale," *The Journal of Modern History* 54 (1982): 467–96. [Précieux: literati (Editor).]

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 reperceived 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 'son-drie 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 *fée*, 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.