

ONCE UPON A TIME: AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF FAIRY TALES

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"I guess you think you know this story.
You don't. The real one's much more gory.
The phoney one, the one you know
Was cooked up years and years ago,
And made to sound all soft and sappy
Just to keep the children happy."

- (Cinderella, Dahl 1)

"The gods of ancient mythology were changed into the demi-gods and heroes of ancient poetry, and these demi-gods again became, at a later age, the principal characters of our nursery tales."

- Max Muller

The uncertainties regarding the origin and history of fairy tales are numerous and have baffled scholars for centuries. Questions such as what are fairy tales and how, when and in which culture did they originate have led to a fact almost universally acknowledged by scholars that the precise origin of the fairy tale cannot be determined with certainty. In the famous words of Angela Carter "Asking where the fairy tale came from is like asking who invented the meatball" (Carter qtd. in Acocella 2)? However in order to trace an effectual history of the genre, it is necessary to shed light on its relationship with folktales.

Fairy tales as they are understood in the present times were actually just one type of the folk-tale tradition, namely the 'Zaubermarchen' or the magic tale, which has many subgenres. The French writers of the late seventeenth century called these tales 'contes de fees' (fairy tales) to distinguish them from other kinds of 'contes populaires' (popular tales). There prevail a large number of theories regarding the foundation of the folk and fairy tales. Of these, the one that seems most plausible and has been advocated by leading fairy tale authors and critics such as Brothers Grimm and Max Mueller is known as the 'Sun- Myth theory' or the 'Aryan theory'. This theory locates the basis of fairy tales around the primitive man and his relationship with nature. Fairy tales originated in an age when man was a mere extension of nature. In a manner similar to the archetypal criticism propagated by Northrop Frye and Carl Gustav Jung, the origin of myths and superstitions in fairy tales is seen as rooted in the psyche of primitive man. In an attempt to familiarize oneself with the inexplicable power of nature, men began to imagine nature in human forms with super human attributes. Therefore, all the happenings in the natural world for which human beings did not have a rational explanation were attributed to fairies. These tales were consciously created to expound upon natural occurrences and social behavior in an oral tradition that involved participation by the audience which sought clarification of social and natural processes.

It is interesting to note that today fairy tales are seen as a part of a genre adhering specifically to young children. The basic components found in almost all the fairy tales such as an unreal world, magical elements, the world of imagination, the simple language and plot, concluding with a moral are all seen as the essence of a fairy tale. A fairy tale cannot be imagined without the elements which mark it explicitly as children's literature. This has however not always been the case. Once fairy tale was an art shared by people of all ages and social classes. Traditional tales come from the oral tradition. In an absence of other virtual means of entertainment enjoyed by children and adults in our times, storytelling as an art was accorded a high merit. It served as regular household feature in the evenings, for families of all classes. Being an oral tradition it was an art mastered either by folks having ample amount of leisure hours i.e. the women of the family or the lower class peasants for whom storytelling served as a means of overcoming the ennui and monotony of their work. The folk tales were replete with violence and bawdy humor, were told mostly around peasant hearths or during long, monotonous tasks in the kitchen and barn. Their meanings were eminently clear to the original audiences. The symbols were significations, and only later did they become "secrets" which had to be unlocked. The stories evidently originated as true stories with some exaggerations, which were told around firesides by men and women long after the children were put to bed. These stories were then handed down to children by mothers, grandmothers and lower class nurses who taught and entertained children by telling them stories.

Women are still said to be the guardians of tradition, passing on to their children and grandchildren the stories of their culture. But, as folklorists like Linda Degh have shown, women are and were not the only, or even the primary, story tellers in most oral cultures (51).

Fairy tales appear in all cultures and times. The characters or places can change but the beliefs, dreams and fears projected in them remain universal. The words might not be the same, but the idea continues on as mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents or friends retell the stories that have been in the family for years and years. The tradition was based on an intimate relationship between the teller and the listener and each played an important part in carrying the art on. The oldest fairy tales were told and retold for generations before they were written down.

Various studies by anthropologists have explored the origins of folk tales and traced the relationship between variants of the stories recounted by cultures around the world. According to some scholars, the first literary fairy tale originated as early as 200 A.D. from the myth of cupid and psyche, which was included by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses*. It is very similar in nature to the tale of *Beauty and the Beast*. The first known version of *Cinderella* is believed to be written in China in around 850 A.D. Other ancient fairy tales include tales from Asia like the *Panchtantra* and *The Arabian Nights*. In spite of these fascinating examples, fairy tales began to be recognized as a distinct literary genre only in the early seventeenth century when it resurfaced as a women's genre in the French salons. 'Preciosite' is the literary style that comes from 'les precieuses', the witty and educated intellectual ladies of Paris. The most prolific and influential of these women writers was Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy who published four volumes of fairy tales which were translated in English in 1699. The precieuses wrote these stories for adults but were also aware of the fact that the maids and servants would repeat these stories to children.

Later, as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the popularity of the genre as a literary form, Marina Warner gives credit to Charles Perrault, a distinguished French scholar, courtier and poet, for becoming the pioneer teller of fairy tales in the late seventeenth century, although he was outnumbered and even preceded by women enthusiasts. It cannot be denied that the European fairy tale canon has been formed for the most part by Charles Perrault, augmented by the Grimms and reinforced by Walt Disney.

According to common thought Perrault collected much of his material from traditional folk tales in order to preserve these tales. This statement is however only partially true. It cannot be denied that Perrault's efforts were influential in renewing the fading oral tales; however it can be contested that the motive behind his efforts were solely benevolent. France, in the seventeenth century was increasingly governed by the aristocracy in the matters of both political and cultural

power. Perrault's tales, written between 1694 and 1697 show an unmistakable reflection of the aristocratic influence. Aristocratic culture or 'preciosity' expressed a distinct lifestyle synonymous with brilliant conversation, spirit and elegance of language. The traditional tales with popular roots were completely reinvented with an elaborate style, refined language and a distinct moral by Perrault and other writers catering to the French salons in order to prevent them from being considered 'vulgar' or 'bourgeoisie'. The children of aristocratic families were the targeted audience which entailed Perrault to make several changes even in the content of the traditional tales. It was now that the traditional tales considered being vulgar, immoral and unfit for children lost much of their violence and explicit humor. Perrault's fairy tales were created at a point in history when composing for children as a separate entity was a major shift in social norms. Roger Sale, a professor of English Literature and an authority on fairy tales, explains that the stories were originally meant for adults:

"The crucial point about fairy tales is that they became children's literature but were nothing of the sort for most of their long years of existence. Indeed, fairy tales could not have been children's literature originally, because, at least in our sense, children and childhood did not exist until recent centuries" (Sale 26).

Perrault wrote these tales primarily to entertain and amuse high society, although his work also reflected publishing for children, as his intended audience, which he hoped, would lead to acceptance by high society. He was sincere in his intentions to improve the minds and manners of young. This is evident from the various changes he made to all the seven tales included in his first volume *Tales of Mother Goose*, published in 1697.

It would be interesting here to examine the alterations Perrault made to some of the tales included in this collection. The tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* for instance was not one invented by Perrault himself, but was a popular oral folktale with which he was familiar. The most widely accepted version of the oral tale, which according to Paul Delarue was the source version for Perrault, can be retold as follows:

There was a woman who had made some bread. She said to her daughter: 'Go carry this hot loaf and a bottle of milk to your granny.' So the little girl departed. At the crossway she met a wolf, the werewolf, who said to her: 'Where are you going?' 'I'm taking this hot loaf and a bottle of milk to my granny'. 'What path are you taking,' said the werewolf, 'the path of needles or the path of pins?' 'The path of needles,' the little girl said. 'All right, then I'll take the path of pins.' The little girl entertained herself by gathering needles. Meanwhile the werewolf arrived at the grandmother's house, killed her, put some of her meat in the cupboard and a bottle of her blood on the shelf. The little girl arrived and knocked at the door. 'Push the door' said the werewolf, 'it's barred by a

piece of wet straw.' 'Good day, granny. I've brought you a hot loaf of bread and a bottle of milk.' 'Put it in the cupboard, my child. Take some of the meat which is inside and the bottle of wine on the shelf.' After she had eaten, there was a little cat which said: 'Phooey! ... A slut is she who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her granny.' 'Undress yourself, my child,' the werewolf said, 'and come lie down beside me.' 'Where should I put my apron?' 'Throw it into the fire, my child, you won't be needing it anymore.' And each time she asked where she should put all her other clothes, the bodice, the dress, the petticoat, and the long stockings, the wolf responded: Throw them into the fire, my child, you won't be needing them anymore.' When she laid herself down in the bed, the little girl said: 'Oh, Granny, how hairy you are!' 'The better to keep myself warm, my child!' 'Oh, Granny, what big nails you have!' 'The better to scratch me with, my child!' 'Oh, Granny, what big shoulders you have!' 'The better to carry the firewood, my child!' 'Oh, Granny, what big ears you have!' 'The better to hear you with, my child!' 'Oh, Granny, what big nostrils you have!' 'The better to snuff my tobacco with, my child!' 'Oh, Granny, what a big mouth you have!' 'The better to eat you with, my child!' 'Oh, Granny, I've got to go badly. Let me go outside.' 'Do it in the bed, my child!' 'Oh, no, Granny, I want to go outside.' 'All right, but make it quick.' The werewolf attached a woolen rope to her foot and let her go outside. When the little girl was outside, she tied the end of the rope to a plum tree in the courtyard. The werewolf became impatient and said: 'Are you making a load out there? Are you making a load?' When he realized that nobody was answering him, he jumped out of bed and saw that the little girl had escaped. He followed her but arrived at her house just at the moment she entered.

(Delarue qtd. in Dundes 14).

As can be seen from the tale mentioned above, the original tale contains all the characteristics of an oral folktale. It fits into the traditional folk tale genre as it has not been bowdlerized, the language used is simple and puerile, the tale does not end with a warning or a moral or both, moreover the tale contains distinct overtones of bawdy and scatological humor which is considered one of the basic components of folklore. Another element crucial to the folk versions is that they very rarely if ever end with the death of the heroine. Majority of oral tales have happy endings, which is not just true for Little Red Riding Hood but other tales which inspired Perrault as well.

Historian Robert Darnton devotes most of his essay *The Meaning of Mother Goose* to demonstrating that the original tales of the Mother Goose genre reflect the ugly, dirty, and often brutal circumstances of seventeenth-century French peasant life. He believes that the tales, of which some ten thousand have been collected and categorized, reflect two chronic and urgent concerns, one with hunger and the other with the dangers of the tough world out there. In

essence, the central wishful fantasy of a full belly was the core of the tale, and it was typically surrounded by allusions to plague, violence, and similar evils about which the storytellers cautioned their audience. Another scholar Irving B. Harrison opposes or rather adds to Darnton's argument by introducing a psychoanalytic approach. He suggests that In fact, in addition to rampant sadism, accounts of anal perversion, incest, and rape abound. Harrison claims that "along with hunger and fear, sex was a fundamental component of the French folktale" (Harrison 3).

Perrault's tale diverges significantly from this oral version on many accounts. The protagonist becomes 'the prettiest creature that ever was seen' in his version who merely introduced as a 'young girl' in the original and the indication is that she belongs to the peasant class; however it is not overtly specified. In Perrault's version, the girl is given aristocratic attributes with consideration to his audience. The 'Red riding hood' of the title does not even find a mention in the oral tale which is simply known as 'The Grandmother's tale'. The French word 'chaperon' used by Perrault signifies a fashionable headgear worn by young aristocratic women of his times. The 'woman' of the oral tale becomes redefined as a doting mother which serves to reassure children that their parents are their well wishers.

The tale is deliberately made longer, elaborate and more sophisticated in terms of structure and language. The changes made in Perrault's version affect the characterization, content, style and even the plot significantly reflecting various forces at play. The resultant tale is a product of the interaction of diverse triggers such as the state of society in seventeenth century France whose literary tastes were dominated by royalty, Perrault's desire to please his audience, the children of the aristocratic families and the emerging notion of childhood as a separate stage which emerged during Perrault's time.

As can be observed, the most poignant moments of the original tale are completely left out from the written tale, such as the instances related to cannibalism, abjection and sexuality. It has been observed that cannibalism has been seen as a part of various other folk tales of the oral tradition and has been indulged in even by 'good' characters. According to some scholars this has been the case because many of these tales have roots in cultures where cannibalism was not a farfetched occurrence. Other scholars like Jack Zipes believe that cannibalism in the tale signifies the young girl replacing the grandmother by taking her place. The removal of the scene of cannibalism and the mention of defecation from Perrault's version has been seen as an attempt to expurgate the tale of its 'shocking' and 'offensive' content, which do not serve as a part of the plot but were merely included in the original version to satisfy the vulgar taste of the peasantry. Similar arguments have been given to explain the removal of the 'strip tease' episode. The original tale has a detailed description of the young girl stripping before getting into bed with the wolf with provocative dialogue accompanying the girl's act of suggestively burning each article of her clothing in the fire. The wolf in turn has exaggerated 'masculine' attributes such as a hairy

body, broad shoulders etc. Along with other rites of passage, this episode unmistakably hints at the sexual awakening of the little girl. Her initiation into womanhood and natural curiosity of children regarding sexuality finds an uninhibited and frank expression here. The written version in contrast omits the strip tease, mellows down the wolf's masculinity and covers up the sexual overtones by reducing the entire episode to "come get into bed with me" (Perrault 102).

The traditional tale is one which emphasizes the themes of growing up, maturing, learning from one's mistakes and self reliance. The tale presents a protagonist who is quick witted and intelligent enough to deceive the wolf and save her life. The experience through the woods and an encounter with the wolf can in that sense be understood as a necessary part of growing up, a threshold which has to be crossed by a child to emerge as a self sufficient confident member of the society. Along with changes in the plot, the overall message produced by the written tale gets transformed. Perrault's tale becomes a cautionary tale warning young women to adhere to the well defined path of virtue where any kind of experimentation or curiosity would inevitably lead to death or other unpleasant circumstances. This is surprising keeping in mind the fact that Perrault's tales were meant to 'entertain' children and not to 'educate' them. In spite of not having a conscious didactic purpose, his tales demonstrate the 'correct' behavior for women and children.

Before proceeding to the Victorian era for a discussion of the Grimms' version, there is another remarkable aspect of Perrault's version which cannot be overlooked. Apart from the tale itself, Perrault's version has an additional moral attached to the tale which has been adapted by Perrault to address the fashionable society of his age. The moral in Perrault's words:

"Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say "wolf," but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all" (Perrault 103).

At the surface level, the moral appears to support his moralistic stance where he warns young women to avoid stray wolves. However, the moral is written in a highly ironic style and serves as a tongue in cheek comment to satirize the contemporary society. The moral was meant not for children but for the educated and sophisticated adults who could understand the sexually explicit message contained in it. Critics like Bruno Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment*, have criticized Perrault for "leaving little to the imagination" (48) as the moral forms a part of a number of children's editions as well.

After Perrault's version, the next version of the tale which commands our attention is the one written by the German brothers, Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm in their *Children's and*

Household Tales published in 1812. Their version has since then been considered the ‘standard’ one due to its immense popularity amongst a worldwide audience.

For an effective understanding of the Grimms version of the concerned fairytale, it needs to be analyzed on the basis of the same parameters as applied to the earlier version, namely: the notion of childhood prevalent in the pre-Victorian era, the existing state of society, their targeted audience and the dominant literary styles.

During the Victorian period in Europe, the fairytale regained popularity. Around the time of the Grimm publication of the tales, there was a developing concern that the fairy tale as a literature had to be constructed for the (moral and spiritual) education of children, an idea that was previously unheard of. This idea gained momentum during the one hundred year span between the Perrault version and the Grimm conception of the same story. These tales were different from the traditional fairytales because they attempted to deal with the social problems of the times. Written to entertain both adults and children, they nevertheless had a strong moral and didactic purpose. The protagonist in each tale was expected to follow the strict Victorian Evangelical code of hard work and self denial before they were considered worthy of rewards.

Scholar and critic Zohar Shavit expounds the notion of childhood as a defining feature of fairytales and children’s literature. In his study of the various versions of *Little Red Riding Hood*, he minutely observes the changes occurring, primarily in the tone and ending of the two versions, i.e. by Perrault and Grimms. According to him, the major change in the two versions is in the tone of the story. Perrault’s tale is ironic in tone, keeping in mind the fact that his tale addressed a dual audience, i.e. the children who miss the ironic tone and the aristocratic adults for whom the irony and sexual references in the moral were intended. The Grimms’ story on the other hand is told in a naïve tone, in an attempt to recreate the effect of the oral tale as well as to reinforce the ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’ of a child. The tone then strengthens the claim that children need to be protected and kept away from anything unpleasant or ‘deviant’.

Another major difference lies in the ending of the two versions. While the original oral version foregrounds the quick wit and intelligence of the girl, Perrault’s and Grimms versions foreground a ‘warning’ to the audience. While Perrault’s protagonist dies at the end, Grimms protagonist is saved by a passing hunter. This end is in keeping with both the ‘happy ending’ considered essential for folk tales and keeping children veiled from the ‘unpleasantness’ signified by death. The Victorian emphasis on education and morality entailed a child to learn a lesson from every event, story or experience. According to Shavit, the educational point of view was seen as proof that the text was suitable for children.

The ‘bed scene’ is accordingly completely erased from the Grimms version and instead of the erotic; stress is now laid on the familial love. The Grandmother’s and mother’s profound love for the little is repeatedly mentioned, unlike Perrault’s version where they are barely referred to. Victorian era regarded adults as responsible for a child’s education and well being.

That the Grimm brothers support the belief is evident from the detailed instructions given by the mother before the girl proceeds for her journey. These instructions clearly warn her against the dangers of straying from the path and of the wolves lurking in the forest. The contrast between the two versions however is nowhere more evident than in their respective morals. Perrault's moral is ironical in tone and emphasizes the 'wolves' i.e. the gentlemen of the city who try to lure young maidens away from the well defined path of morality. The irony is directed not only towards the wolves but also the society for creating false moral standards. This notion gets completely reversed in the Grimms version. Their tale is directed not toward aristocracy but the emerging middle classes with newly acquired literacy and taste for folk and fairy tales. At the end of the story, upon being saved, Little Red Riding Hood declares "Never again will I leave the path and run off into the wood when my mother tells me not to" (Grimm and Grimm 26). The emphasis is now on the importance of listening and being obedient to one's parents. This version moreover provides an opportunity to learn a lesson for the future. In Perrault's version, the protagonist learns the hard way and does not gain any moral or practical lesson which would lead to a better conduct of life.

While In general, as the story gained popularity, it became more socialized and questions of morality more refined. To make the story more appropriate for young children until the Victorian era, many elements found in the oral traditions and earlier written forms have been changed. The general trend has been to make the story less violent, to give it a happy ending, and to make all the scenes socially and politically acceptable.

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