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ONCE UPON A TIME



I came to fairy tales twice, first as a child and years later as an adult. Like mothers and fathers everywhere, my parents read *Hansel and Gretel*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and other popular tales to me. But my most vivid childhood memories of fairy tales came by way of Walt Disney. I remember sitting on the edge of my seat in a darkened movie theater watching *Snow White* and holding my breath as the gamekeeper prepared to cut out the heroine's heart. Like the children around me, I gasped with relief when he disobeyed the evil queen's edict and let Snow White escape. For weeks afterward, I chanted "Hi, ho, hi, ho, it's off to work we go." Today I may have trouble naming all the dwarfs, but the images of the evil queen, Snow White, and the seven dwarfs are forever emblazoned on my memory.

Many years passed before I came to fairy tales the second time. By then I was teaching at a university where I trained graduate students to do psychotherapy with children. As part of my duties I also taught undergraduate courses. One of my favorite courses, a seminar entitled "The Psychology of Fantasy and Folklore," grew out of my longstanding interest in the role that fantasy plays in

children's lives. The purpose of the seminar was to explore the meaning of fairy tales and discover how they affect a child's psychological development. Sitting in a circle on Monday afternoons, the students and I discussed the classical tales of the Grimm brothers as well as that most famous twentieth-century fairy tale, *The Wizard of Oz*.

I was struck by how impassioned students would become when we talked about the stories. The atmosphere was different from that of other courses in which students merely sat back and took notes. Everyone had a favorite fairy tale from childhood that struck an emotional chord. One young woman recalled her mother reading *Cinderella* at bedtime and insisting that her mother repeat the sequence with the fairy godmother before turning off the lights. There was something about the silver and gold gown and the jewels that was irresistible.

Why do fairy tales trigger such strong reactions years after they are first encountered? Do they change us in some way, and if so, how? What is behind their enduring appeal? In trying to answer these questions, I discovered a number of myths that surround fairy tales, many of which my students and I held in common.

MYTH 1: FAIRY TALES ARE CHILDREN'S STORIES

One thing I learned in studying fairy tales was that a substantial number never made their way into children's storybooks. On one level, this didn't come as a complete surprise. Some fairy-tale collections contain so many stories that they would become unwieldy if reproduced in their entirety. The Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales) contains well over two hundred fairy tales, of which only a dozen or so are ever included in children's books.

Yet the sheer volume of fairy tales is not the whole story. Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (Tales from Mother Goose) contains only twelve fairy tales, including *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, yet some of the stories in his collection are mysteriously missing from modern storybooks. These omissions are especially perplexing since the stories left out are as captivating as the ones left in. One of the missing tales is *Donkeyskin*. It begins like this:

Once upon a time there lived a king who was so beloved by his subjects that he thought himself the happiest monarch in the

world. He was rich beyond compare, and owned stables filled with the finest Arabian stallions. In one of the stables there lived a magic donkey. It was the king's most precious possession for it enjoyed a unique talent: it produced golden dung. When the king's servants arrived at the stable each morning, they found the animal's litter strewn with gold coins. Thus it was that the magic donkey provided the king with an endless source of riches.

After many years of prosperity, the king received the terrible news that his wife was dying. But before she died, the queen, who had always thought first of the king's happiness, gathered up all her strength, and said to him:

"I know for the good of your people, as well as for yourself, that you must marry again. But do not set about it in a hurry. Wait until you have found a woman more beautiful and better formed than myself."

Years go by, but the king's efforts come to naught. There is no one in the kingdom whose beauty surpasses that of the dead queen. One day he realizes there is indeed someone in the land more beautiful than his late wife. That person is none other than his daughter. The

princess has blossomed into a beautiful young maiden and now is of marriageable age. The king sets out to take her for his bride.

The princess was horrified when she learned of her father's plans. She ran to her godmother, a wise and powerful fairy, who counseled her to put off her father by requesting wedding gifts which the king could not possibly deliver. Following her godmother's advice, the princess asked first for a dress that sparkled like the stars; the next morning she found a star-studded dress lying outside her door. She next asked for a dress made of moonbeams; once again her wish was fulfilled. Finally she insisted on a dress that shone as bright as the sun. The next morning she woke to discover a golden gown of unimaginable brilliance by her door. One by one, her father managed to fill all her requests.

In desperation, the princess returned to her fairy godmother to ask what to do. The old woman advised the frightened princess to demand the skin of the king's prized donkey. The child's godmother was positive the king would never kill the animal for the donkey was the source of all his wealth. "It is from that

donkey he obtains his vast riches," the fairy godmother told the royal princess, "and I am sure he will never grant your wish."

To the princess's dismay, the king killed the magic donkey and presented the hide to his daughter as a wedding gift. The godmother, sensing the hopelessness of the situation, told the child she must escape. She instructed her to smear her face and hands with soot, wrap herself in the donkey skin, and leave the palace under cover of darkness.

"Go as far as you can," she told her. "Your dresses and jewels will follow you underground, and if you strike the earth three times, you will immediately have anything you need."

The adventures of a beleaguered young girl who flees her father by adopting an animal disguise is a common theme in fairy tales. In an Italian fairy tale titled *L'Orsa* (The She Bear), the princess places a magic stick in her mouth that temporarily turns her into a bear so that she can escape the castle and her father. In *Allereiruh* (Many Furs), a German folk tale, a maiden demands that her father, the king, manufacture a dress made of the pelts of a thousand different animals. When he delivers the fur dress, thereby fulfilling her

"impossible" request, she disguises herself by putting it on and escapes into the countryside.

The frightened princess in *Donkeyskin* also flees into the countryside, where she comes across a prince's castle. She secures work as a washerwoman in the castle laundry and keeps to herself, hoping no one will recognize her. But she is ridiculed by her coworkers, who dub her "Donkeyskin" because of the foul-smelling animal hide she wears. The princess endures their taunts in silence, not wanting to reveal her identity.

One day, weary of her slovenly appearance, the princess strikes the ground and retrieves her dresses. She tries on the one made of moonbeams and for a few moments relives her former glory. The prince, who happens to be inspecting the inner courtyard of the castle at the time, spies her in her finery and is dazzled by her beauty. He instantly falls in love with the mysterious maiden but is too love-stricken to approach her. He retires to his chambers and falls into a royal funk.

Eventually, though, true love wins out. The prince gets his mother to invite the maiden to the palace and devises a clever ruse involving a ring that will fit only the finger of a princess.

Donkeyskin arrives at the great hall clad in the filthy donkey skin.

"Are you the girl who has a room in the furthest corner of the inner courtyard?" the prince asked.

"Yes, my lord, I am," answered she.

"Hold out your hand then," continued the prince, and, to the astonishment of everyone present, a little hand, white and delicate, emerged from beneath the black and dirty skin. The ring slipped on with the utmost ease, and, as it did, the skin fell to the ground, disclosing a figure of such beauty that the prince fell to his knees before her, while the king and queen rejoiced.

Donkeyskin concludes with the prince asking the princess for her hand in marriage, which she gladly gives. Her father—who by now has conveniently remarried and been cleansed of his unholy passion — is invited to the wedding and everyone lives happily ever after.

The reason *Donkeyskin* is deleted from children's storybooks has less to do with the donkey's unique talent—children delight in anything related to excretory functions—than with the king's unnatural longing. Incestuous desire is something one doesn't

expect to find in a fairy tale. In some versions of the story, the princess is changed to an adopted daughter to play down the story's incestuous theme. Still, a fairy tale that describes a father lusting after his daughter—adopted or otherwise—is not the kind of story most parents would choose to read to their children.

Then why does it appear in Perrault's collection? For the simple reason that fairy tales were never meant for children. Originally conceived of as adult entertainment, fairy tales were told at social gatherings, in spinning rooms, in the fields, and in other settings where adults congregated—not in the nursery.

This is why many early fairy tales include exhibitionism, rape, and voyeurism. One version of *Little Red Riding Hood* has the heroine do a striptease for the wolf before jumping into bed with him. In an early rendering of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the prince ravages the princess in her sleep and then departs, leaving her pregnant. And in *The Princess Who Couldn't Laugh*, the heroine is doomed to a life of spinsterhood because she inadvertently views the private parts of a witch. As late as the eighteenth century, fairy tales were dramatized in exclusive Parisian salons where they were considered *divertissements* for the culturally elite.

It was not until the nineteenth century that fairy tales came into their own as children's literature. This happened, in part, through the activities of itinerant peddlers, known as "chapmen," who traveled from village to village selling household wares, sheet music, and affordable little volumes called chapbooks. Costing only a few pennies, chapbooks, or "cheap books," contained drastically edited folktales, legends, and fairy tales that had been simplified to appeal to less literate audiences. Though poorly written and crudely illustrated, they caught the fancy of young readers, who, in their quest for magic and adventure, took them to their hearts.

MYTH 2: FAIRY TALES WERE WRITTEN BY THE BROTHERS

GRIMM

In the early 1800s, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm published their famous two-volume collection of fairy tales, *Children's and Household Tales*. Their intent was to create a definitive sourcebook of existing German stories and legends that would reflect the folk origins of the German *volk*. The result was an anthology that many consider the most comprehensive fairy-tale collection of all time.

But Wilhelm and Jacob never actually wrote any of the tales

included in their volumes. They merely compiled them, relying on friends and relatives to supply them with stories that had been circulating throughout central Europe for centuries. A number of tales in their collection were contributed by Dorothea Wild, Wilhelm's mother-in-law, and others came from Jeannette and Amalie Hassenphlug, two sisters who later married into the Grimm family. Never mind that most of the stories had French and Italian origins; the Grimms considered them uniquely German and included them in their collection.

Thus, the Grimm brothers' *Aschenputtel* (Cinder Maid) turns out to be a close relative of Charles Perrault's *Cinderella*. In both stories, a mean stepmother and her selfish daughters collude to make the heroine's life miserable, denying her the simplest pleasures and making sure she doesn't come to the attention of the prince. But the Grimm version contains neither a fairy godmother nor a glass slipper; instead, it features a zealous stepmother who mutilates her daughters' oversized feet so that they will fit into a slipper made of embroidered silk.

Similarly, *Little Red Cap*, the Grimms' story of a little girl who dallies in the woods on the way to visit her grandmother, is a more

elaborate version of Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*. The Grimm version features not one wolf but two and ends with one of the wolves drowned. And *Briar Rose*, the story of a slumbering princess, is a drastically revised version of Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods*.

Although the Grimm brothers did not, technically speaking, write any of the tales, they altered them to make them more suitable for young readers. Their alterations were prompted, in part, by Wilhelm's puritanical leanings. But commercial concerns also played a role. The children's market for fairy tales, fueled by a growing recognition that children had their own unique interests, was growing tremendously, and publishers were more willing to invest money in books that parents found acceptable.

Many of the tales "written" by the Grimms continued to be altered as they underwent translation. The preface to an English-language edition of their work published in the nineteenth century contains the following statement by the translators.

We have omitted about a dozen short pieces to which English mothers might object, and for good and

satisfactory reasons have altered, in a slight way, four other stories. The mixture of sacred subjects with profane, though frequent in Germany, would not meet with favor in an English book.

Tales saturated with blatant sexual references thus yielded to stories that catered more to childhood sensibilities. And in the process, people assumed the versions they were reading were authored by the Grimms.

MYTH 3: FAIRY TALES TEACH LESSONS

The third common misconception has to do with the didactic value of fairy tales. Some folklorists believe that fairy tales offer "lessons" on correct behavior, advising young readers on how to succeed in life. *Little Red Riding Hood*, it is thought, exhorts children to listen to their mothers and to refrain from talking to strangers, especially while strolling through the woods. *Sleeping Beauty* allegedly cautions children not to venture into places where they don't belong; the heroine learns this lesson all too well when she wanders into a forbidden room and pricks her finger on a poison spindle.

The belief that fairy tales teach lessons can be traced, in part, to Perrault, whose stories came equipped with quaint morals, many of them delivered in rhyme. *Little Red Riding Hood* ends with the following caution:

*Little girls, this seems to say
Never stop upon your way.
Never trust a stranger-friend;
No one knows where it will end.*

Reasonable advice, except that *Little Red Riding Hood* has more to do with food and cannibalism than with avoiding strangers in the woods. It is doubtful that young women in New York refrain from chatting with strange men in Central Park because they read *Little Red Riding Hood* as children.

Some of Perrault's so-called lessons contain questionable advice and incline toward cynicism. Consider the caution he includes at the end of *Cinderella*:

Godmothers are useful things

*Even when without the wings,
Wisdom may be yours and wit,
Courage, industry, and grit—
What's the use of these at all,
If you lack a friend at call.*

Perrault seems to be preaching that intelligence, hard work, and courage count for little unless one has acquaintances in high places. It's not who you are but who you know; forget about native strengths and abilities if you don't have connections. Useful advice perhaps for someone entering politics, but not a laudable lesson for children barely out of the nursery.

If one wants to instill lessons in the young, it is better to look to Aesop's fables or other children's stories specifically meant to provide useful advice. *The Hare and the Tortoise* teaches children that slow and steady wins the race, that frivolous pursuits are to be avoided if one hopes to succeed. *The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* teaches that you may end up paying a heavy price for pretending to be someone you're not. And *The Little Engine That Could*—a testimony to perseverance—argues for the need to have faith in

one's abilities ("I think I can, I think . I can . . ."). Fairy tales have many appealing qualities, but teaching lessons is not one of them.

THE MEANING OF FAIRY TALES

So what is it about fairy tales that makes them so captivating? Why do *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella* have such enormous appeal? The most obvious explanation is that fairy tales are an unparalleled source of adventure. Few children's stories contain death-defying chase sequences such as one finds in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. There is nothing that focuses one's attention as much as a cannibalistic ogre breathing down one's neck. And then there is *Hansel and Gretel*. How many tales from childhood can boast a sequence in which an innocent child is rescued from certain death at the very last moment? Stories like *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little Engine That Could*, though delightful in their own right, do not provide the hair-raising thrills that fairy tales do.

But fairy tales are more than suspense-filled adventures that excite the imagination, more than mere entertainment. Beyond the chase scenes and last-minute rescues are serious dramas that reflect events taking place in the child's inner world. Whereas the initial

attraction of a fairy tale may lie in its ability to enchant and entertain, its lasting value lies in its power to help children deal with the internal conflicts they face in the course of growing up.

This is why fairy tales endure. It is the reason anniversary editions of Disney classics sell out year after year and movies such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin* break box office records. How else can one explain the appeal of a story like *Hansel and Gretel* in which innocent children are sent into the woods to die of starvation? How can one justify a story like *The Little Mermaid*, in which the heroine's tongue is cut from her mouth merely to seal a bargain? Fairy tales, in addition to being magical adventures, help children deal with struggles that are a part of their day-to-day lives.

The Psychoanalytic View: Cinderella Meets Oedipus

What precisely is the nature of these struggles? Followers of Sigmund Freud contend that they are sexual by and large, rooted, as it were, in oedipal concerns. Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst and author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, maintained that the hidden text in fairy tales revolves about such matters as penis envy, castration anxiety, and unconscious incestuous longings. According to Bettelheim, hidden psychosexual conflicts are the driving force in

a whole host of fairy tales ranging from *Little Red Riding Hood* to *Rumpelstiltskin*.

The Freudian emphasis on sexuality leads to a number of fanciful, if somewhat far-fetched interpretations. The struggle between Snow White and her stepmother, for example, supposedly derives from Snow White's oedipal longing for her father. The older woman embarks on her murderous quest because she believes that the seven-year-old poses a sexual threat. Her incessant query, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" literally reflects her fear that the king will find Snow White more appealing than her. It thus is the implicit sexual struggle between the young girl and the queen, rather than the queen's preoccupation with her looks, that fuels the plot.

Snow White's relationship to the seven dwarfs inspires a similarly inventive interpretation. Referring to the dwarfs as "stunted penises," Bettelheim writes, "These 'little men' with their stunted bodies and their mining occupation—they skillfully penetrate into dark holes— all suggest phallic connotations." It is because of their diminished sexual capacities that the dwarfs pose no threat to the pubescent Snow White. Since they are unable to perform, they

provide the child with a safe haven at a time in life when she is sexually vulnerable.

Even *Cinderella* does not escape the swath of the psychoanalytic brush. In the Grimm brothers' version, the stepmother's wish to have the prince take one of her daughters as his bride is so intense that she orders them to cut off their heels and toes so their feet will fit into the slipper. When the prince notices blood flowing from the shoe, he naturally becomes distraught. But his distress, according to psychoanalytic doctrine, is prompted not so much by the stepmother's wanton brutality—or her efforts to deceive him—but by the castration anxiety aroused by the sight of the blood. In one fairy tale after another, sexuality is heralded as the propelling force behind anything and everything in the plot.

Is it reasonable to expect young children to respond to the sexual undertones in the narrative even if they do indeed exist? Folklorist and fairy-tale scholar Maria Tatar thinks not. She charges that using fairy tales to warn children about the dangers of sexuality stretches matters. Commenting on Bettelheim's psychosexual interpretation of *The Sleeping Beauty*, she writes: "It may be that parents will have sex on their minds when they read about a

princess who pricks her finger on a spindle, then falls into a deep sleep, but children are unlikely to free-associate from the blood on the princess's finger to intercourse and menstruation, as Bettelheim believes they will." By the same token, it requires an imaginative leap to get from the parting of the thorny hedge that surrounds the castle to a symbolic opening of the vagina.

While no one will deny that children are sexual beings, and that some fairy tales may tap sexual longings, sex is far from the most pressing concern in the lives of the very young. Children worry more about pleasing their parents, making and keeping friends, and doing well in school than they do about sex. Children worry about their standing in the family, and about whether they are loved as much as their siblings. They wonder whether there is anything they might say or do that could lead to their being abandoned. Many of the concerns that occupy the minds of the very young have less to do with sex than with thoughts and impulses that affect their relationships with significant figures in their lives.

The Self Perspective: Pursuing Goodness

A psychological perspective that provides a powerful alternative to

the psychoanalytic point of view focuses on the child's burgeoning sense of self. Instead of emphasizing sexual matters, self theory focuses on aspects of the personality that threaten to undermine a child's intimate connection to others, particularly parents and peers. Much of what takes place in a fairy tale, accordingly, mirrors the struggles that children wage against forces in the self that hamper their ability to establish and sustain meaningful relationships.

Within this perspective, *Hansel and Gretel*, for instance, is thought to address age-old issues having to do with *gluttony*. Even after Hansel and his sister descend on the witch's house and eat their fill, they continue to devour greedily what's left of the cottage: "Hansel, who liked the taste of the roof, tore down a great piece of it, and Gretel pushed out the whole of a sugar window pane." One of the great challenges of childhood is knowing when enough is enough.

Consider *Snow White*, the ultimate paean to *vanity*. The story graphically demonstrates what happens when concerns over appearances interfere with more important matters. Not only is the evil queen preoccupied with her looks, but Snow White almost loses

her life when she lusts after the pretty laces offered to her by her disguised stepmother. And *Cinderella*, when one looks beyond the pretty gown and the prince, is essentially a story about *envy*.

Every major fairy tale is unique in that it addresses a specific failing or unhealthy predisposition in the self. As soon as we move beyond "Once upon a time," we discover that fairy tales are about vanity, gluttony, envy, lust, deceit, greed, or sloth—the "seven deadly sins of childhood." Though a particular fairy tale may address more than one "sin," one typically occupies center stage.

So even though *Hansel and Gretel* contains elements of deceit, it is primarily a story about food and overeating. It is true that the parents lie to the children, telling them that they will return to fetch them after leaving them in the woods, but food and sustenance are the themes that drive the plot. The children are abandoned because the family is out of food; they devour the candy cottage because they are hungry; and the witch fattens Hansel in order to turn him into a more savory meal.

The "sinful" underpinnings of fairy tales help explain why children respond to them with such emotional fervor, and why certain fairy tales become personal favorites. A story like *Snow*

White can have special meaning for a child dealing with issues of looks and desirability, matters about which children are intimately concerned. The evil stepmother's obsessive preoccupation with her appearance literally mirrors this concern. In a similar vein, children in families where there is intense sibling rivalry are apt to be drawn to stories like *Cinderella* in which envy is an ongoing preoccupation.

The deeper significance of the so-called deadly sins is that they arouse what is perhaps the most dreaded fear of childhood: abandonment. To be abandoned, to be left on your own when you cannot fend for yourself, is a terrifying prospect for the very young. And it can affect adults as well. This was brought home some years ago in an episode involving a friend of mine named Virginia.

Ginnie and her husband were spending the afternoon with my wife and me at an outdoor antique fair on Cape Cod when she became separated from the group. The four of us had been wandering through the stalls, each engrossed in items of personal interest, but also keeping an eye out for each other. At some point, we realized we had lost Ginnie. We searched for her without success—the crowd was too large—so we continued meandering through

the stalls, assuming that we would all meet up at some later time.

We eventually did, but when we found Ginnie, she was sitting on a stool near a security station sobbing like a child. The incident had rekindled memories of the time when her mother, lacking the means to care for her, had placed her in an orphanage. Though Ginnie had over the years become intellectually reconciled to her mother's decision, and though her mother eventually reclaimed her, she could not stem the tide of feelings that welled up within her when she found herself stranded once again.

Parents often unwittingly—and sometimes even intentionally—play on children's fears of abandonment to force them to behave. We all have witnessed a parent threatening a dawdling child with, "If you don't come this very minute, I'm going to leave you right here," or, "I'm going now and I'm not coming back." Very young children also worry that their parents will sell them or give them away if they are bad.

The fantasy of abandonment—or other dire consequence—as punishment for acting out "sinful" tendencies is a constant threat. But it is hard being good, and youngsters often find themselves at the mercy of tendencies they cannot fully control or understand.

This is why reading fairy tales to children is reassuring. Not only does the parent's presence help the child manage scary passages, but it communicates that untoward thoughts and impulses will not bring about rejection.

A parent's sensitivity to the sin featured in a particular fairy tale can help enrich these stories for children. Youngsters invariably ask questions when they listen to a fairy tale: Why does Jack steal the harp? Why does Snow White let the old woman in the house? Why does the witch die? By subtly calling the child's attention to the underlying sin in the story, parents—and teachers—can make listening to a fairy tale a richer, more meaningful experience.

This doesn't mean that one should try to explain fairy tales to children; the meaning of these stories is best come upon intuitively. But knowledge of a story's featured "sin" can, in the context of children's natural curiosity, help make the answers to their questions more meaningful. When conducted in a context of playful exploration rather than explanation, feedback of this sort can enhance a fairy tale's psychological mission: resolving struggles between positive and negative forces in the self.

BALCONIES OF THE MIND

The way fairy tales resolve these struggles is by offering children a stage upon which they can play out inner conflicts. Children, in listening to a fairy tale, unconsciously project parts of themselves into various characters in the story, using them as psychological repositories for competing elements in the self. The evil queen in *Snow White*, for example, embodies narcissism, and the young princess, with whom readers identify, embodies parts of the child struggling to overcome this tendency. Vanquishing the queen represents a triumph of positive forces in the self over vain impulses. By couching struggles between different parts of the self as struggles between the characters in the story, fairy tales give children a way of resolving tensions that affect the way they feel about themselves.

In this way, fairy tales are akin to psychodrama, a therapeutic technique that blends theatrical concepts with psychotherapeutic principles. Introduced in Vienna in the late 1920s as *Stehgreiftheater* (the Theater of Spontaneity), psychodrama was later imported into the United States by Jacob Moreno. A

pioneering psychiatrist in the field of group therapy, Moreno believed that dramatic reenactments were invaluable in exploring hidden psychological conflicts.

I was originally exposed to psychodrama as a psychology student in college. The professor of my abnormal psychology course took our class on a field trip to a small auditorium in Manhattan to see a demonstration of the technique by the master himself. After some introductory remarks, Moreno asked for a volunteer from the audience to participate in the presentation. A student in the class, Jack, climbed onto the stage and responded to some brief questions of Moreno's by telling him a little about his family, including the fact that he had a younger brother. Another student in the audience was recruited to play the brother, and Moreno and his wife took the parts of Jack's mother and father.

Moreno then asked Jack to recall an incident that characterized the kind of things that went on between him and his younger sibling. The incident Jack recounted started off innocently enough. He described how his mother made him and his brother take baths after they came in from play, and how he faithfully cleaned the bathtub to ready it for his brother once he had finished. His

brother, he complained, never reciprocated, always leaving a dirty tub when he was the first to bathe. The "quarrel" that ensued drew laughter from the audience as well as from the participants onstage, centering as it did on the seemingly trivial matters of wet washcloths and bathtub rings.

But then the mood turned dark. Jack began to protest more vehemently to his "mother" and "father" about his brother's insensitivity. Neither Moreno nor his wife was very sympathetic, and both suggested that the brothers work things out between themselves. The ensuing interchanges became increasingly heated as Jack, fighting to hold back tears, insisted that his "parents" hardly ever took his side. At one point, he blurted out that they loved his brother more than him. The audience became hushed as Jack's long-standing resentment toward his brother—and anger toward his parents—filled the air. What started off as seemingly innocuous play-acting had turned into a heart-rending family drama.

Fairy tales are the psychodramas of childhood. Beneath the surface of these fanciful excursions into fantasy are real-life dramas that mirror real-life struggles. The rivalry between Cinderella and

her sisters is not that far removed from the rivalry between Jack and his brother. This is why fairy tales are so captivating. Not only do they entertain, they tap into powerful feelings that might otherwise remain hidden. Although the characters in these miniature dramas—like Jack's brother and parents—are not "real," the intensity of their interchanges creates an emotional reality as powerful as anything in a child's life.

A major player in these dramas is the witch. Whether she's a black-hearted queen, an evil sorceress, or a vindictive stepmother, she is easily identified by the lethal threat she poses to the hero or heroine. The witch in *Hansel and Gretel* is not satisfied merely to scold Hansel for nibbling on her house—she plans to make a meal of him. The evil queen in *Snow White* will not rest until she sees Snow White dead. And the Wicked Witch of the West has one goal in mind: destroying Dorothy and her three companions.

At the same time that the witch poses an external threat to the hero or heroine, she magnifies inner flaws and frailties in the reader. The witch in *Hansel and Gretel* takes gluttony to its extreme: she is not only insatiable but a cannibal. The Sea Witch in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* is overtly lustful: she tells Ariel that

the only way to get a man is to seduce him. In one fairy tale after another, the witch embodies unwholesome aspects of the self that all children struggle against.

Very often the witch in these stories takes the form of a malevolent stepmother. The Grimm brothers' *Children's and Household Tales* contains over a dozen stories, *Snow White* and *Cinderella* being two notable examples, in which a stepmother makes the heroine's life miserable by taunting her, withholding food from her, or forcing her to perform impossible tasks. The witchlike nature of the stepmother is compounded by her use of magic to perform her evil deeds. In one English fairy tale, the stepmother changes her stepdaughter into an enormous worm; in an Irish tale, she transforms her stepchildren into wolves.

Modern critics claim that negative portrayal of the stepmother is part of a misogynistic streak in fairy tales. There is a grain of truth to the notion that fairy tales often depict some women as cruel and malicious, but there is danger in attributing too much significance to this notion since it implies that fairy tales are faithful representations of reality; they are not. Though there certainly are historical instances in which stepmothers favored their own

children and may have been mean to their stepchildren, there is no evidence that stepmothers are as cruel as they are made out to be in fairy tales. Indeed, the word *step* in *stepmother* derives from the Middle English *steif*, which means "bereaved," a term used to describe an orphaned child. Rather than being cruel, stepmothers historically were mother surrogates who provided comfort for orphaned children.

We consequently must not take the figure of the witch too literally. She is less an actual person than a representation of psychological forces operating in the child's psyche. Author Linda Gray Sexton, daughter of poet Anne Sexton, underscores this in her memoir describing her early relationship with her mother. In recounting the role of fairy tales in her childhood, she writes, "I see just how the stepmother operates in my mind—perhaps in every reader's mind—as a surrogate for my own mother's undesirable aspects."

THE STEPPING-STONES OF CHILDHOOD

Fairy tales are a part of not only children's lives but our adult lives as well. Images and themes from fairy tales regularly insinuate

themselves into our thoughts and conversations, functioning as metaphors for our most fervent desires and deepest hopes. We long for a prince—or princess—to come into our lives and make us complete ("someday my prince will come"). We hope that our business ventures and other important endeavors will have a "fairy tale ending." We wonder whether it is possible in the face of environmental threats and global conflicts to "live happily ever after."

But fairy tales are more than convenient metaphors for describing adult aspirations. They can, under certain circumstances, address pragmatic concerns. An acquaintance of mine, the president of a management consulting firm, uses fairy tales to help troubled corporations increase productivity and improve the corporate culture. One of her interventions takes the form of early morning meetings with CEOs and middle managers in which a fairy tale is recounted, after which participants are asked to apply themes in the story to company dynamics. Because fairy tales include many of the same dynamics found in the workplace—power, control, envy—they offer a meaningful way of providing fresh insights into company conflicts. She tells me these early morning

sessions are among the most effective interventions in the firm's consulting repertoire; rarely does anyone miss such a meeting or arrive late.

Fairy tales, finally, help illuminate what goes on in psychotherapy, especially as it relates to patients' efforts to reconcile childhood feelings—and failings. On more than one occasion, I have drawn on fairy tales to help a patient gain insight into conflicts that derive from envy, greed, vanity, or other childhood "sins." People take these stories very seriously and apply them to their lives. One of my patients who was mean to her sister reconsidered her behavior after we contrasted the Grimm brothers' version of *Cinderella* with the Perrault version. In the Grimm brothers' story, the heroine's emissaries, two white pigeons, peck out the eyes of the sisters at the end. The Perrault version ends with the sisters embraced by the heroine and invited to live in the palace with her and the prince.

Just as the queen in *Snow White* is obsessed with her looks, so we too get overly caught up at times with appearances. We may not kill to guarantee our status as the fairest in the land, but we certainly spend enough time and money making sure we don't go unnoticed.

And who among us has not coveted the possessions—or position—of someone else? Only rarely does an individual usurp another person's identity—as does the evil servant woman in *The Goose Girl*—but that doesn't mean we don't occasionally entertain fantasies about taking another person's place.

Ultimately, the impact that fairy tales have on us as adults stems from the influence they had on us when we were young, for it is in childhood that the seeds of virtue are sown. In the pages that follow, we revisit many of the familiar tales of childhood—as well as some that are less well known—to illustrate how fairy tales help children combat sloth, envy, greed, and other troublesome tendencies. We'll learn why mothers in fairy tales die prematurely, and why fathers are so often depicted as weak and ineffectual. Why, for example, is Cinderella's father never around when she needs him? We will accompany Dorothy on her journey to the Emerald City to discover how modern fairy tales like *The Wizard of Oz* address sins in the twentieth century. And we'll consider the most fundamental question of all: Must the witch *always* die? The answer to this last question has far-reaching implications, for the witch lives not only in the pages of a fairy tale but in the deepest reaches of our minds.