

STUDENTS TEXTS

The origins of Fairy Tales

Cláudia Morais
FLUP – LLM

Handed down endlessly throughout time from generations to generations, from parents or grandparents to their children, fairy tales belong thus to oral traditions within a certain culture or civilization. Therefore, one of the most important identifying features of fairy tales is their cultural background, where old traditions, myths and folklore are embedded, mingling together in the history of peoples and countries both fantasy and reality. Fairy tales are imaginative insights into the most genuine realms of human experience.

Universal as they normally tend to be, the typical characters of a fairy tale are as a rule one-dimensional as they stand out as exemplary stereotypes of ordinary people (e.g., the evil man or the wise man, the poor boy who strives to succeed and the rich idle boy who loses everything, 'Cinderella' and the

jealous stepsisters or the hideous stepmother, etc.), although many of them are an exquisite combination of reality and fantasy, as in the case of fairies and witches, wizards, goblins, gnomes, dwarfs and elves, talking animals, monsters, princes and princesses from distant neverlands, among thousands of others. As in the epic narrative model the hero or heroine have to go through an extremely hard period of their lives where they have to face and overtake innumerable obstacles and dangers before they finally triumph over evil. These obstacles, all death-risking perils these heroic characters have to surpass, have always an allegorical meaning as they usually reflect, in figurative language, the kind of necessary initiation life demands from us, as a “journey” the hero has to undertake in order to grow up (as is evident in *The Hobbit* or in *The Treasure Island*). Themes in fairy tales are therefore universal and timeless, as the classical beginning of “Once upon a time...” clearly shows, identifying a universal appeal and resonance in listeners of all ages, all times and places. A fairy tale is certainly “a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite creatures and is filled with the marvellous”- which is an idea clearly illustrated in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Thompson 1977: PG).

The fairy tale, originally orally transmitted, as part of ancient mythical and folk traditions, emerges in its written form with no definite fixed form. Furthermore, regardless of literary influences, storytellers constantly altered traditional texts for their own purposes. The history of fairy tales, however, is difficult to characterize and can only rely on the evidence of those literary works which survived through the ages and centuries, although not always recognized as a genre. The genre itself was first determined by writers of the Renaissance and became stabilized through the work of many writers, most particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, like for example in the works of the Grimm Brothers.

According to Jack Zipes in his study on *The Origins of the Fairy Tale for Children* (Zippes Data: 119), many authors contributed to the creation of the literary fairy tale as “a social institution”, for it was directly connected to the social practice of aristocratic women in the middle of the eighteenth century, who had the habit of telling fairy tales to a select audience in their cultural salons, as a type of game. Being themselves a source of amusement, these games aimed mostly at representing the aristocratic world within the frame structure of fantasy and allegory.

Even though we currently associate literary fairy tales to men authors like the Grimm Brothers or Charles Perrault, the fact is that throughout history they have been dominantly stories told and/or written by women, transmitted orally by mothers, grandmothers and children’s nurses. So that when the tales began to constitute a literary form, the number of female authors vastly surpassed that of males, and names like the Countess d’Aulnoy (who invented the term “*contes de fée*” or fairy tale), the Countess de Murat, amongst many others, had a wide-spread reputation. Nevertheless, there are general distinctive features to take into account in fairy tales told either by male or female authors. Men authors, like for example the Grimm Brothers, tend to compose their works upon a more realistic basis as most suited to appeal to their audiences, as they related the common experiences of peasant lives with their fantasies and dreams. Perrault’s work reveals that same endeavour to reach the public taste and consent as it consists basically of a retelling of old tales. Female authors,

on the contrary, without excluding familiar elements from people's routines and habits, tend to invest more on the fantastic surreal side of their plots, leaving a freer space to their listener's or reader's imaginations while creating an aura of mystery and charm in the worlds and characters they represented. Moreover, in times of political and social censorship, when the role of women in society as well as within the family was largely put at stake, with hardly any rights, fairy tales were somehow like masks – in the sense old masquerades used to be regarded – and appeared to be an effective way to let their own views and opinions known. These tales also illustrate the authors' ideas about what is right and wrong, about justice and injustice, about love, friendship, treason and hate, addressing a wide audience of adults and children alike, because it was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that fairy tales or similar texts were actually meant for children or youths. The institutionalisation of the literary tale in the eighteenth century took place, therefore, within the context of all existing literature for adults, emerging as a result of women's need to impose themselves and their values in a society dominated mainly by men's rules. The fairy tale was normally written in a sophisticated style and soon became a literary mode well accepted within aristocratic and bourgeois circles. Furthermore, as it developed as a type of literature for children, the fairy tale was intended to address children from the upper and more cultivated classes, who usually received their education at home with a private tutor, thus excluding those who could not read and remained dependent on an oral transmission for much longer.

Emerging out of a complex cross-cultural transmission, fairy tales are to be found all over the world throughout the centuries, referring to their own specific cultural roots and often showing similar plots, characters, and motifs: "What storytelling reminds us of is that there is no dissociation between innerness and outside world, between life and meaning: that is precisely the *moral of the story*." (Savater 1982: 15). Many researchers think this phenomenon occurs because people repeat tales they have heard in foreign lands, although the oral nature of the text makes it impossible to define the origin of the text. Fairy tales or similar works are still written today and will be endlessly written in the future, like a never-ending story, as eternal memories of our innermost realms of fantasy and imagination.

Works cited

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