

FAIRY TALE AND MYTH

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“Once upon a time”: who doesn’t immediately know which world we’re heading into? Fairy tales are timeless and ubiquitous, from Walt Disney to Stephen Sondheim they permeate our popular culture. Venturing into the topic of fairy tale, though, is as scarily confusing as any story of children lost in the woods: there are countless pages of theory and interpretation by experts, from ethnologists to psychoanalysts and feminists, so I’m going to be simplifying wildly.

Fairy tales are not strictly myths, but they share the colloquial meaning of an unproven belief or a fantastical story, and also more positively a focus on profoundly important issues - albeit different ones. Myths as stories, to quote a book we had at school, are “tales of the gods and heroes”, dealing with fundamental questions like the origins of the physical world or its peoples, for instance, or the gulf between Man and the Divine. Heroic figures may be put to the test and show us the best and worst of humanity writ large, both challenged by and challenging the gods. Fairy tales on the other hand, says the writer Marina Warner, “evoke every kind of violence in order to declare it need not continue”. They do not give us outstanding heroes, but rather fantasy materials for the practical solution of problems. As another specialist, Maria Tatar, has put it: “Fairy tales register an effort...to develop maps for coping with personal anxieties, family conflicts, social fictions, and the myriad frustrations of everyday life.” Like myths, they may suspend natural laws – princes can turn into frogs – but their narrative arc leads to applicable lessons in the real social world, not encounters with gods.

Fairy tales are not Christian in origin, though may contain motifs also found in the Bible: this type of fantastical story probably came from both the Middle East and Classical Greece; the first consciously collected stories date to 16c. Italy and were aimed at adults. The earliest collection for children was Charles Perrault’s “Mother Goose stories” in 1697. The 18th century Enlightenment period then condemned such tales as foolish and irrational, but before the end of the century the German Romantics were celebrating them as the “authentic voice of the people”. The Brothers Grimm, who were serious historians and

philologists, began to collect them from multiple, often oral sources and published their first 86 tales in the very significant year of 1812, as a patriotic act and an assertion of vernacular culture at a time when there was no Germany. In a sense they were helping to create a still mythic homeland, not unlike the exiled Hebrews Simon spoke of two weeks ago, but that's another story. Why do we continue to read them even nowadays? I'm going to look at three examples.

The first is *Rapunzel*, not to be confused with its animated film version "Tangled". As I'm sure you all know, it is about the girl with a long golden plait who is imprisoned in a tower by a witch, but acquires a daring suitor/prince who climbs up by her hair. The witch discovers the secret visits and her innocent pregnancy. She cuts off her golden hair (de-sexualising her) and throws Rapunzel out into a wilderness to bear twins alone, until the prince, blinded after falling from the tower and wandering helplessly through a forest, finds her again and her tears restore his sight. One obvious focus of the tale is the danger of not teaching girls the facts of life! Of course feminist interpreters have also lambasted the prince, who may indeed offer a reprehensible example of male 'entitlement' – yet in the story he remains desolate until he finds his Rapunzel: he serves out his punishment. Both of them have to learn to cope with unexpected dangers and changes in life, to grow up relying solely on the resources of their own fallible bodies – and they do.

But there are lessons for adults too: the precursor to Rapunzel's birth is her pregnant mother's craving for the salad leaves called rapunzel (something like lamb's lettuce), which grow only in the witch's garden so she persuades her husband to go and steal some. He is caught, and the price of his release is the promise to hand over the newborn child to the witch, so the story is also about family strains and theft, about the truth that selfish and precipitate actions can have disproportionate consequences: one kind of stolen rapunzel leads directly to another. Yet the wicked witch is not destroyed as in so many fairy tales, for although she took and kept the child, she was seeking to hold on to what she had come to love. Her doorless tower is a symbol of her vain desire to halt time and over-protect, but change is unavoidable, we have to learn to let go. – So where does all this lead? Perhaps to the reassurance that human beings can not only be greedy but also learn to love and endure, just as Nature, in the form of the rapunzel plants and the forest, represents

danger but also nourishment and protection: which of the two poles we experience depends on our maturity in response to crises.

My second story is the very familiar *Hansel and Gretel*; the title itself claims representative status (like 'Johnnie and Maggie') and the family's poverty is a recognisable stress situation leading to the children's deliberate abandonment. They are desperately hungry when they fall upon the gingerbread house, though psychoanalysts have seen their failure to resist its sweet temptation as 'oral fixation', an immature stage of development that has to be overcome by the use of anticipatory intelligence. Both children do learn to apply this in outwitting the witch, and finding 'jewels' to take home is both a literal and symbolic reward: they have found their best selves. Nature had seemed against them, when birds ate the crumbs that first marked their way home, as they should have anticipated; yet when the children try to find their way home again they can summon help to cross water from a white duck - nature favours those who learn to read and trust it intelligently. So this is a story about homecoming, in more than just a family sense: it is about learning to be fully at home in yourself and the natural world.

My third text may be less familiar, "Der Machandelbaum" (The Juniper Tree) and shows just how brutal these folk tales can be. Here the family dynamics derive from jealousy in a patchwork family: a stepmother hates the child of her predecessor, wanting her own daughter to inherit. She kills the boy by slamming down the lid of a heavy apple storage chest as he looks into it, then props him up with head on top and gets her daughter to touch him, so the head falls off and she thinks she's killed him. The vindictive stepmother then serves him up to the father in a stew, but her little daughter has pity and saves his bones to bury under a juniper tree where his mother's remains already lie. The tree begins to shake, as if clapping hands, and out of smoke and flame a bird arises like a Phoenix, flying off to perch on rooftops and sing sweetly of betrayal and beg for gifts, including a millstone - which it then drops on the wicked stepmother, killing her. The bird transforms into the dead boy - and the reunited family lives happily ever after.

What is the point of this culturally mixed and gruesome tale, with its Biblical motifs: apples, millstone, and the pivotal tree? Sexual politics aside - no blame seems to attach to the father who eats his son! - I

would suggest that it is universally applicable, about the enduring power of love to help us survive, even in a viciously cruel, unpredictable world. A kind of resurrection is possible: where love and humanity refuse to submit to greed, cruelty and the kind of hatred that wants to eradicate all trace of a life - even there balance can be restored. Maybe this is THE fairy-tale for our own age.

So fairy-tales deal in varied guises with the strains and perturbations of everyday life, of growing up and living together: in simple form they ask us to realize – in both senses (become aware/make real) - who we truly are. Maria Tatar writes of their ‘ignition power’, their ability to kindle (no pun intended!) our powers of imagination and to give children access to dimensions of experience – fear, pleasure, dread, desire – that they will need to cope with later in life, and the courage to believe they can. The story contours seem clear and reassuring.

But for adults this is surely less true: all fairy stories work on two levels – offering encouragement for children, but also revealing adult cruelty and fallibility. Modern variants have exploited that duality and raised darker existential issues more characteristic of myth. Kafka’s tale *Die Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis), for instance, takes up the fairy tale commonplace of a human punished by transformation into animal form, but without the expected reversal: Gregor’s ‘sin’ seems inseparable from his very existence. Feminists like Angela Carter, on the other hand, have satirically deconstructed fairy-tales, questioning their cultural assumptions on alterity (who are the real predators, the wolves or the princes, witches or parents?) – Yet even in radically altered form the story shapes persist: fairy tales are enduring cultural memes. Like the children relying on nature to help find the way home, we seem to keep returning to fairy tale, not for some ultimate “truth”, but perhaps for the questions we need to ask about our own readiness to cope with life’s dilemmas. Indeed – to come full circle back to myth - the philosopher Walter Benjamin argues, in his essay *The Storyteller*, that traditional fairy-tale has a liberating magic, precisely because it “helps mankind shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest” and shows us that “the things we are afraid of can be seen through.” But do they really show us the way to that “happy ever after” which might be an answer to the ‘myth of progress’? I’m inclined rather to feel their real message is that as adults we may know more, but we often fail to act, or

act well. Like myths, these stories last because the problems of adult behaviour do: they are a kind of elegy for the eternal loss of innocence.