Review: Defending Children against Fairy Tales
Author(s): Tess Lewis
Review by: Tess Lewis
Source: The Hudson Review, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 403-408
Published by: The Hudson Review, Inc
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3851702

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Defending Children Against Fairy Tales

Long ago, fairy and folk tales, replete with violence and bawdy humor, were told mostly around peasant hearths or during long, monotonous tasks in the kitchen and barn. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the French collector of tales, Charles Perrault, and the German Grimm brothers brought these stories into the parlor that they lost some of their violence and much of their explicit humor. Before Perrault turned “Little Red Riding Hood” into a moralizing tale about the dangers of talking to strangers, for example, a widespread version of the story recounted in great detail the heroine’s seductive striptease for the wolf and her escape by asking permission to go outside and relieve herself. Although it took the English several more decades than their Continental neighbors to adopt fairy tales for genteel purposes, they did so with astonishing enthusiasm and inventiveness.

Victorian writers are primarily responsible for bringing fairy tales into the nursery. Driven by their overriding concern for productive activity and proper behavior, Victorians found fairy tales to be ideal instruments of education and socialization and perfected the art of didactic fiction. The titles alone of many Victorian children’s books—Dangerous Sports, a Tale Addressed to Children Warning them against Wanton, Careless, or Mischievous Exposure to Situations from which Alarm- ing Injuries so often Proceed or Adventures of a Whipping-Top. Illustrated with Stories of Many Bad Boys, who themselves deserve whipping, and of some Good Boys, who deserve Plum-Cakes—are enough to inspire fear. Fairy tales and children’s fiction did not emerge from the stifling hold of didacticism until the revolutionary amorality of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books and his stories of Sylvie and Bruno.

In Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood, Maria Tatar, a professor of German at Harvard University, traces the history of fairy tales and examines the ways in which they were intended to socialize young, unformed listeners. Against this backdrop, she sets her argument that the canon of tales we offer our children is in dire need of a thorough reevaluation. Our fairy tale

1 OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood, by Maria Tatar. Princeton University Press. $24.95.
canon was formed for the most part by Perrault and the Grimms and reinforced by Walt Disney. Despite superficial rewriting, these versions date from very different social and historical contexts and, Tatar suggests, they may well be doing more harm than good to our children’s psyches. Because “fairy tales do not merely encode social arrangements from the past, but also participate in their creation for the future,” the misogyny, violence, and anti-Semitism in many of the tales can, despite our best intentions, perpetuate itself in the subconscious of younger generations.

“No fairy tale text is sacred,” Tatar announces, reminding us that the printed text of a tale is only a “variation on a theme” and often heavily edited. Fairy tales have been continuously rewritten to suit the needs of adults in particular social and historical contexts. Even contemporary children’s literature, according to Tatar, although written under the guise of taking the child’s side, actually helps indoctrinate them in “proper” behavior. In her eyes, Sendak’s nocturnal heroes Max (in Where the Wild Things Are) and Mickey (of Mickey in the Night Kitchen) are not the mischievous, free spirited role models they seem. Instead, by discharging their disobedient impulses and anger against their mothers in midnight fantasies, Max and Mickey are “less likely to be defiant” during the day. As long as children’s literature is written by adults, this sort of subliminal control is inevitable. However, if writers are careful and alert, Tatar asserts, they can rewrite canonical tales and create new ones that “interrogate and take the measure” of their attempts to socialize coercively. Only then can stories provide children with true heroes and heroines, and empower as well as entertain them.

Tatar’s call for revising children’s literature beneficially requires overthrowing the Freudian legacy embodied in our commonly told fairy tales. She finds “Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus story . . . so firmly inscribed on our consciousness as a model of male development that its plot begins to take on the role of a self-fulfilling prophecy.” Today’s most popular fairy tales subtly reinforce erroneous or limited views of women inherent in the Freudian outlook: Snow White and Cinderella win their princes through a combination of good looks, extraordinary housekeeping, and modesty; the punishment for Bluebeard’s wife’s curiosity—a symbolic sexual transgression—is death. Until we challenge these prototypes we are at worst offering harmful images to children in their formative years, or at best leaving young girls adrift, without strong role models.

Tatar’s bête noire in Off with Their Heads! is Bruno Bettelheim. Indeed, she sees his interpretation of fairy tales as “deeply symptomatic of our own culture’s thinking about children,” and instrumental in perpetuating our uncritical acceptance of the inappropriate subliminal messages in traditional tales. In his 1976 classic study, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, Bettelheim shows how fairy tales fulfill children’s deepest inner needs and help
them cope with the psychological difficulties of growing up by dramatizing unconscious conflicts in imaginative form. Tatar does formulate several important and insightful objections to Bettelheim's analyses. She points out how Bettelheim's Freudian blinders lead him instinctively to ascribe guilt to child characters even when the adults' behavior is obviously egregious. In Bettelheim's hands, Hansel and Gretel are abandoned because of their uncontrollable oral greed, not out of parental negligence. Bettelheim is also unwilling to recognize parental incestuous drives. Instead, the drives he discusses are strictly within the typical Oedipal construct of a child's excessive attachment to the parent of the opposite sex. Nonetheless, Bettelheim explicitly states that his interpretation is one of many possible interpretations. And, however biased his readings, he can hardly be held primarily responsible for the perpetuation of the Freudian cultural legacy in children's literature.

Tatar's eagerness to demonize Bettelheim seriously mars her otherwise convincing, if at times ponderous, book. She not only distorts Bettelheim's study of fairy tales as a therapeutic tool, but indulges in amateur psychologizing, claiming to find in the book's conclusion "a great deal about Bettelheim's own real-life fantasies" and a motivation for his suicide fourteen years after he had written it. Tatar implicitly justifies jettisoning Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation by evoking charges of abuse made against Bettelheim after his death in 1990. Though limiting mention of these charges to a footnote, she provides them with no context. These accusations are certainly serious. Yet they have not been fully substantiated and are surrounded with controversy. It is significant, for example, that a reporter at a major national magazine admitted to one of Bettelheim's colleagues that these charges were not brought against him until after his death because estates cannot sue for libel.

There are several subtle but important distortions in Tatar's rejection of The Uses of Enchantment. Tatar claims that Bettelheim warns against discussing fairy tales with children, thus leaving them at the mercy of biased, dangerous texts, unable to sort out threatening material. But in fact Bettelheim advises against adults giving a child their particular interpretation of the child's psychological understanding of a story. "It is always intrusive to interpret a person's unconscious thoughts," he writes. Far more than a question of semantics, this difference is indicative of Tatar's willful misreading of Bettelheim to suit the needs of her argument.

Further misreading results from Tatar's omission of the first half of The Uses of Enchantment, in which Bettelheim examines the relevance of fairy tales to general, and not strictly Oedipal, unconscious conflicts in both children and adults. Contrary to Tatar's reasoning that "if we read myths and fairy tales through the lens of the oedipal drama, we will necessarily see the child as the sole target of therapeutic intervention," Bettelheim repeatedly stresses that adults can also benefit
from reading fairy tales. It is often very difficult for adults to acknowledge consciously their unconscious anxieties, such as a fear of abandonment. Whereas children lack the intellectual capacity for the complex abstract thought necessary to understand their inner anxieties, adults build up formidable psychological defenses. Accordingly, a reader of any age can unconsciously identify with Hansel and Gretel, left in the wood to fend for themselves, as an embodiment of a fear of abandonment and thus defuse this fear without becoming consciously aware of it.

The vehemence of Tatar’s attack on Bettelheim is especially unfortunate because it is unnecessary to the exposition of her own argument. There is no doubt that her evaluation of many fairy tales in the Grimm and Perrault collections as excessively violent, male chauvinist, and terrifying for children is correct. It is also clear that many tales with strong heroines have been sorely neglected. To be sure, there is much of interest in Off with Their Heads! that does not need to be supported with an ad hominem attack.

Tatar’s chapter on the use of bedtime stories, particularly in the nineteenth century, to develop “a pedagogy of fear,” with which parents could control young children by instilling them with terror at the thought of disobedience or stubbornness is chilling. In another fascinating chapter Tatar looks at the symbolic links between cannibalism, fantasies of oral greed, and incest. Finally, Tatar’s analysis of how stories in which maternal elements were demonized became increasingly popular while stories of paternal incestual desire fell into neglect does far more to open the reader’s eyes to the baleful subtext in many fairy tales than her summoning of Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities or Michel Foucault’s theories of disciplinary systems. The wicked stepmothers in “Sleeping Beauty,” “Cinderella,” and “The Juniper Tree,” as well as the witch in “Rapunzel” are familiar figures while the king in Perrault’s “Donkey-skin,” who tries to force his daughter to marry him, is known to few who are not avid fairy tale readers.

Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepflmacher, professors of English at the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton University respectively, have compiled an anthology that is guided by many of the principles presented in Off with Their Heads!. In Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers, the editors have gathered stories in which women writers have sought to refashion or subvert the traditional genre to suit their own needs and those of nineteenth-century children.2

In Victorian England, women were equated, socially, legally, and intellectually with children. It is not surprising then, that many

women turned to children’s literature as an imaginative release for their anger and frustration, as well as their utopian ideals. Although the most famous works of Victorian children’s literature were written by men—Lewis Carroll’s Alice books, George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, and James Barrie’s *Peter Pan*—the vast majority was written by, and subconsciously for, women.

Though Auerbach and Knoepflmacher have selected some captivating fiction, they have allowed their socio-political agenda to skew their readings of the novella and the ten stories they selected, leaving a gap between the editors’ introductory material and the stories themselves. Several of the stories they would have us believe represent major imaginative subversions of Victorian mores are actually quite conventional in plot and social attitudes. Many of the tales are moralistic or reward the female self-deprecation against which the editors claim these writers were reacting.

Anne Thackeray Ritchie posits upper-middle-class girls as the heroines of her reworkings of “Beauty and the Beast” and “Sleeping Beauty.” While Ritchie does level some oblique social criticism in both these tales, her heroines do exactly what is expected of them and their subservience and sense of duty is rewarded with marriage. (The beast in question is a gruff and shaggy, but extremely sensitive gentleman.) Although the editors praise Christina Rossetti’s courage in portraying childhood unsanitized of violence, disappointment, and misery, in her “antifantasies” “Speaking Likenesses,” the view Rossetti offers is nonetheless very constricted. A similar constraint, though somewhat relieved by humorous asides, underlies Juliana Horatia Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs.” An inconsiderate, unruly, obnoxious child, Amelia is kidnapped by dwarves who put her to work cooking, repairing her torn dresses, and gathering up all the loose threads of the conversations she interrupted. Amelia escapes only after she has learned her lesson in docility and reserve.

Edith Nesbit’s two stories are the most colorful and openly critical in this collection. Nesbit herself was a daring woman. Flaunting social convention she adopted a Bohemian lifestyle, bobbed her hair, and smoked in public. She was also a founding member of the socialist Fabian Society, and wrote many of the group’s manifestos. Nesbit’s socialist bent is most evident in “Fortunatus Rex & Co.,” in which King Fortunatus starts a speculative building company in order to distract himself from grief, as his daughter has been kidnapped from the “Select Boarding Establishment for the Daughters of Respectable Monarchs” despite the school’s “very best references.” While King Fortunatus makes a fortune out of his ugly yellow brick housing developments, seven princes set out to rescue the seven princesses kidnapped from the boarding school. The princes are at first stymied when they find the magician who had spirited the princesses away trapped inside a globe in one of the classrooms. Trained neither as explorers nor engineers, the princes are reluctant to comply with the
magician’s requests for them to “open up Africa,” “cut through the Isthmus of Panama,” or “cut up China.” However, for the sake of the princesses, they do eventually cut up Africa, releasing the magician. In “Melisande, or Long and Short Division,” a delightful fairy tale about a princess whose hair grows so quickly it takes over the palace, Nesbit satirizes the import/export trade and mathematical rationality.

The longest selection in Forbidden Journeys is Jean Ingelow’s novella “Mopsa the Fairy,” a saccharine story of a little boy’s travels in Fairyland. Even though the countries in Fairyland are ruled by queens, this is hardly a refashioning or subversion of the genre. More stories by Edith Nesbit and Juliana Ewing, or even the more conventional Frances Hodgson Burnett, author of The Secret Garden, would have better supported the editors’ agenda for this anthology.

Both Forbidden Journeys and Off with Their Heads! amply show how malleable and ambiguous, if not treacherous, a medium fairy tales can be. But more importantly, these books stress how fairy tales can inspire, comfort, and guide readers of all ages. The enchantment of fairy tales plays an essential role in the foundation of a child’s moral imagination. It is no less essential for adults to be aware of where their own moral imagination is grounded and to nourish it by turning again and again to literature of enchantment.