

"Introduction" from Folk & Fairy Tales. ed. Martin Hallett & Barbara Karasek



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FAIRY TALE IS A TERM that is often used rather loosely. A dictionary will probably tell us that it is a story about fairies (which is often not the case) or else that it is an unbelievable or untrue story (which reflects the rationalistic criticism to which the fairy tale has been subjected). This vagueness of definition has made the term something of a catch-all: Lewis Carroll, for instance, described *Through the Looking-Glass* as a fairy tale, and Andrew Lang saw fit to include an abridged version of Book 1 of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in his *Blue Fairy Book*. So let us clarify the subject a little by introducing two more specific terms: "folk tale" and "literary tale." Once we have established the essential difference between these two terms, we will be in a better position to recognize the many permutations that have evolved over the years.

"Folk tale" means exactly what it says: it's a tale of the folk. If we resort again to our dictionary, we will learn that "folk" signifies the common people of a nation—and the important point to realize here is that the "common people" were, in the past, generally illiterate. Consequently, their tales were orally transmitted; in other words, they were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, until they were eventually recorded and published by such famous individuals as Charles Perrault and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Because we hear so often of "Perrault's Fairy Tales" or of "Grimms' Fairy Tales," it's natural to assume that these men actually made them up, but that isn't the case; while all three were highly accomplished literary men, none of them were fairy-tale writers. They wrote them *down*, thereby creating what we may term a literary folk tale.

Consider for a moment what happens when a tale is transposed from oral performance. Even if the collectors of earlier times had had modern recording devices at their disposal, they still could not have published the tales exactly as they had heard them, for the simple reason that the spoken language is very different from

the written. The judicious collector therefore had (and has) the task of making the tale "read" properly, which naturally involves the exercise of personal judgement and taste, thus imposing the "imprint" of this new intermediary. Moreover, the number of separate recorded versions of a single folk-tale type is sometimes quite amazing, reaching well into the hundreds. They come from all over the world, which presents us with some clues—and also some conundrums about the universal use of story to help people come to terms with the fears, the challenges, and the mysteries that are all part of life.

In most cases, we have no idea how old folk tales are. Once a tale has been told, it is gone; no trace of it remains except in the memories of the teller and the audience. And for the great majority of people today, memory is a fickle instrument—we only have to think back to that examination, or to the last time we lost the shopping-list, to realize how quickly (and how thoroughly) we forget. We are thus confronted with the realization that the only authentic version of the folk tale is an oral version—and since one telling will necessarily differ from the next, we must confer authenticity equally on all tellings, or—even more problematic—on the first telling alone, whenever and whenever that may have taken place.

The children's party game "Broken Telephone" provides us with an idea of just how a folk tale may have evolved as it was passed on from generation to generation. The first player begins by whispering a phrase or sentence to his or her neighbor, who must then pass it on to the next, and so on, until it reaches the last individual in the chain. Needless to say, in the progress from first to last, the words undergo some startling and often amusing changes, as they are variously misheard, misunderstood, or improved upon. On the simplest level, the game entertains by allowing us to play around with language and intention; on a more sophisticated level, we might see those changes as reflecting the preoccupations (conscious or otherwise) of the players. To put it another way, our moods, desires, and emotions will inevitably affect what is heard; we hear what we want (or expect) to hear. So it is with the folk tale; what we find there is—in part—a fragment of psychic history. An archaeologist unearths a piece of pottery and uses his professional experience and knowledge to determine its significance and function in the wider context. In the same way, we can use our growing familiarity with folk tales to identify some of the psychological elements (the "preoccupations") that give each tale much of its energy and color.

The archaeologist's discoveries generally end up in a museum—and that, in a sense, is what happens to the folk tale as well. Why use a word like "museum"? Because a museum is a place where you store and exhibit interesting dead things—and that is exactly what a folk tale is, once it's between the covers of a book. Even though a tale's oral existence may of course continue (there are even instances of literary

tales becoming part of the oral tradition), the gradual spread of literacy has turned the oral tale into an endangered species; once the tale has been "frozen" in print, it can no longer evolve with telling and re-telling, since one reading will be exactly the same as any other.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to claim that the oral tale is entirely a thing of the past. Although the urban legend is much more localized and anecdotal than the folk tale and is characterized by sensationalism and black humor, it too has its origins in aspects of life that provoke anxiety or insecurity, such as our ambivalence toward technology or our suspicion that beneath the veneer of normalcy lurk chaos and madness. Like the folk tale, its "orality" is short-lived, but the intriguing question arises as to whether the Internet—often the favored means of transmission for urban legends—is itself part of the story, a kind of post-literate flux where the word is neither oral nor literate but shares qualities of both.

Today, the status and role of the storyteller are rather different; he or she is more often to be found in the rarefied atmosphere of library or classroom than in the lively informality of market-place or communal festivity. However, there is a difference between what we might term "formal" and "informal" entertainment. "Formal" entertainment is that which we consciously seek out for ourselves, generally at some expense, such as a visit to the cinema or theater. There is a clear and traditional separation between performer and audience, in which the latter plays a passive role as consumer, purchasing the professional services of the entertainer. If we look at "informal" entertainment, however, we find ourselves in surroundings much more congenial to storytelling, because the grouping (as opposed to audience) is likely to be spontaneous and transitory, such as at a cafeteria table or a party. This is not to suggest that there will be an exchange of folk tales in these more intimate settings, but there may well be some storytelling, albeit of a very local and personal nature. Nevertheless, the point can be made that that's probably the way in which many tales originated; the great majority died as quickly as they were born, a few managed a brief existence, and a tiny number contained that mysterious seed of delight, universality, or wisdom that allowed them to beat the odds and survive.

What is emerging, then, is the fact that the fairy tale must be seen as a continuum. At one extreme we find the oral folk tale, which by its very nature cannot be represented in this book. As we have already observed, the oral tale's transformation into literary form requires careful analysis not only of the tale itself, but also of the motives and values of those responsible for its metamorphosis. At the other extreme there is the literary tale, written by a specific person at a specific time, which allows us readily to place the tale in its original context, as we might do in examining any other literary work. In between these two poles, however, we have an almost

unlimited number of variations, as tradition blends with invention in the writer's mind. Given this wide range of possibilities, the more general term "fairy tale" is useful in its comprehensiveness.

The first two literary collections of fairy tales in the Western tradition are by Italians whose names are relatively unknown outside scholarly circles: Giovanni Francesco Straparola (c.1480-c.1557), who published *The Facetious Nights* (1550), and Giambattista Basile (1575-1632), the collector/writer of *The Pentamerone* (1634). Unfamiliar though these collections may be, they contain early versions of many tales that would later be made famous by Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers. Both these men clearly recognized the vitality and appeal of folk tales and brought them to the attention of a literate *adult* audience, adapting and embellishing them as contemporary literary style and social taste demanded. Another similarity shared by these fairy-tale collections is that they are both built around a frame story—a third and celebrated example of which would arrive in the shape of Antoine Galland's translation into French of the *Arabian Nights* (1704).

Even before Perrault published his now-famous collection, the popularity of the fairy tale was growing among the French upper classes, who often gathered in fashionable "salons" to discuss matters of cultural and artistic interest. One outcome of these discussions was an enthusiasm—especially among aristocratic women such as Madame la Comtesse D'Aulnoy and Madame la Comtesse de Murat—for writing highly stylized literary tales based upon folk-tale models. Like Perrault, these aristocratic ladies saw the folk tale as in need of "improvement," and consequently their tales tell us a good deal about eighteenth-century aristocratic manners as well as present a "feminist" perspective that gives the tales a distinctly contemporary edge.

However, the most famous name among the French writer/collectors of fairy tales at the beginning of the eighteenth century was Charles Perrault (1628-1703). An influential government bureaucrat in Louis XIV's France, he was involved in a vigorous literary debate of the time known as the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, in which the "Ancients" were those who asserted the superiority of Classical literature and art, while the "Moderns" were of the view that contemporary works were pre-eminent, since they could draw on all the achievements of cultural and social progress. In publishing his collection of fairy tales, *Stories or Tales from Past Times, with Morals* (1697), Perrault made his Modernist credentials clear, since the tales were both French and very unclassical! Yet while this debate is now of interest only to literary historians, his introduction of these tales of the peasants into courtly society showed a little touch of genius. As the Opies observe, "The literary skill employed in the telling of the tales is universally acknowledged; yet it also appears that the tales were set down very largely as the writer heard them

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told."¹ At the same time, we should also assume that Perrault was familiar with the versions of these folk tales written by his predecessors Straparola and Basile—so that Perrault's particular achievement is one of synthesizing literary sophistication with oral simplicity. The daily lives of rural peasant and urban bourgeois (not to mention aristocrat) were literally worlds apart—and Perrault responded to that fact.

One hundred years later, the joint stimuli of nationalism and Romanticism were the driving forces behind the Grimm brothers' fascination with folk tales. At a time of great political and social upheaval, caused first by French occupation and then by the process of unification as the modern Germany was being forged out of a patchwork of tiny states and principalities, there was a growing need to answer a new question: what does it mean to be German? At the same time, they were responding to the contemporary Romantic creed that the true spirit of a people was to be found not in the palaces or even the cities, but in the countryside, far away from urban sophistication. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1785-1863; 1786-1859) might be described as archaeologists of a sort—although contrary to what was once believed, they were rarely if ever involved with any "digs" that first discovered these tales among the unlettered country folk. Such is the pre-eminence of the Grimms' collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (first published 1812-15; published later in English as *Tales for Young and Old*) that we tend to regard it as being almost as organic and timeless a phenomenon as the tales themselves. It is nevertheless a fact that in more recent times, controversy has swirled around the Grimms' methodology and motivation in assembling their collection. The image of the brothers roaming the German countryside, gathering the tales in remote villages and hamlets, is attractive but false; generally, they were contributed by literate, middle-class friends and relatives, who thus represent yet another intermediary stage between the genuine folk tale, on the one hand, and the literary tale on the other. Indeed, the claim made by the Grimms in the Preface to the Second Edition of their tales (1819)—"... we have not embellished any detail or feature of the story told itself, but rather rendered its content just as we received it"²—appears confusing, given ample evidence to the contrary. We should not forget, however, that the scholarly brothers were pioneers in revising these tales for an audience radically different from the illiterate country folk among whom they originated. Ralph Manheim, the translator of the Grimm tales in this anthology, asserts that the brothers' genius was in "mak[ing] us hear the voices of the individual storytellers ... In the German text the human voice takes on a wide variety of tones ... But everywhere—or almost—it is a natural human voice,

1. Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 21.

2. Joyce Crick, *Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm Selected Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005) 8. See also Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, 1986) 20-27.

speaking as someone might speak."¹ And once their popularity among children became apparent, Wilhelm in particular assumed the responsibility of ensuring that the tales were made suitable for the eyes of the child, according to contemporary notions about children's reading.

Even when we come to the tales of Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75), the link with folk tale remains strong. We perceive Andersen as a writer of original fairy tales rather than as a collector, and we assume, therefore, that his tales were exclusively of his own invention. What we need to consider is that Andersen came from a poor, working-class background in which the oral folk tale was common currency; consequently, his imagination was well primed before the world of literacy opened up new vistas of fancy to him. So it is hardly surprising to discover that several of Andersen's better-known tales (such as "The Tinderbox" and "The Princess and the Pea") either allude to, or are re-tellings of, traditional stories—some that he heard, and some that he later read. We should bear in mind that Andersen was barely a generation younger than the Grimm brothers and was well-acquainted with them; ironically, it appears that on at least one occasion, the folk tale owed a debt to Andersen: the *Opies* remind us that in 1843 the Grimms published a tale that closely resembled "The Princess and the Pea." However, Andersen's literary contribution to the fairy tale differs from that of the Grimms in the sense that while the latter were primarily concerned with presenting their tales in the most acceptable form to the German people, Andersen had a much more personal involvement with his tales. In his hands, a tale, whatever its source, became yet another opportunity for self-revelation. (It is no coincidence that he entitled one of his autobiographies *The Fairytale of My Life*.) As we have already seen, a knowledge of the historical context of the tales adds an extra dimension to our appreciation of them; in the case of Andersen and the other fairy-tale writers, that aspect becomes more specific, in the sense that we can now place the tales in a personal context as well as a social one.

The fact is that some rather unlikely minds have been drawn to express themselves through fairy tale, suggesting that the form retains a freedom and energy that has survived the transformation of audience from rural simplicity to urban sophistication. What attraction could the fairy tale possibly have had for such an apparently worldly individual as Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), for instance? Yet his tales show a great deal of craft and attention to detail, which suggests that they meant more to him than mere occasional pieces. Wilde, like other well-known nineteenth-century writers such as George MacDonald, John Ruskin, and even Charles Dickens, regarded the fairy tale as one of many literary forms to choose from, with its own particular advantages and limitations.

¹ Ralph Manheim, "Preface," *Grimms' Tales for Young and Old* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977) 1.

There is no question, however, that these writers (with the possible exception of Wilde) saw their primary audience as children—in several cases, their tales were composed with specific children in mind. Even Charles Perrault, at the end of the seventeenth century, had some awareness of the appeal of fairy tales for children, as is indicated by the frontispiece of the 1697 edition of his tales, with its inscription "Contes de ma Mère L'Oye" ("Tales of Mother Goose") and its depiction of an old woman spinning while she spins her yarn (!) to a group of children. The assumption is extended by his addition of explicit morals to the tales, thus making them overtly cautionary in nature. It is the narrator's ironic tone and occasional comment that betray his interest in appealing to an older, more sophisticated audience.

In England, the presence of the fairy tale in children's literature of the eighteenth century likewise depended on its ability to provide moral instruction. With its fantastic and sometimes violent and amoral content, the fairy tale was disapproved of by both the upholders of Puritan attitudes and the growing advocates of the more rational outlook exemplified in the philosophy and influential educational theories of John Locke. In their efforts to provide children with stories of virtue and piety, both the Rational Moralists and Sunday School Moralists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also looked upon this popular literature with a consternation verging on horror. In the periodical *The Guardian of Education*, its editor, the influential Sarah Trimmer, warned parents and governesses of the dangers of fairy tales: "A moment's consideration will surely be sufficient to convince people of the least reflection, of the danger, as well as the impropriety, of putting such books as these into the hands of little children, whose minds are susceptible to every impression; and who from the liveliness of their imaginations are apt to convert into realities whatever forcibly strikes their fancy."¹

Despite this persistent disapproval, however, the tales were made available to eighteenth-century children through a somewhat less "respectable" source of reading material—chapbooks. The purveyors of this popular literature would not have had the scruples of the more reputable publishers, such as John Newbery, who sought to uphold the current educational theories of Locke. Chapbook publishers recognized the attraction of tales of fantasy and imagination and sought to provide them cheaply—generally by means of travelling pedlars—to the folk, child and adult alike. Thus the folk tale had, in a sense, come full circle. In being written down, it had been taken from the illiterate folk; now, as literacy was spreading slowly through the population, the tale could be returned—at a price—from whence it came.

During the early years of the nineteenth century, the Romantics would counter

¹ Sarah Trimmer, "Nursery Tales," *The Guardian of Education* 4 (1805) 74-75, as quoted in *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Virginia Haviland (Glenview, IL: Scott and Foresman, 1973) 7.

the prevailing criticism of fairy tales and, in their turn denounce the moralizing and utilitarian books that were being produced for children. In his affirmation of the value of fantasy in his early reading, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge reacted against the common disapproval of such literature: "Should children be permitted to read Romances, and Relations of Giants and Magicians and Genii?—I know all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative—I know no other way of giving the mind a love of 'the great' and 'the Whole.'"¹

Although resistance to the fairy tale continued throughout the nineteenth century, when Grimms' fairy tales appeared in England in 1823, they were immediately popular. In the preface to his translation of the tales, Edgar Taylor criticized, in Romantic fashion, the prevailing educational goals and defended the value of fairy stories: "philosophy is made the companion of the nursery; we have lisping chemists and leading-string mathematicians ... Our imagination is surely as susceptible of improvement by exercise as our judgement and our memory."² His one stricture on imaginative stories was that they not interfere with moral education. Despite the acceptance of the Grimm brothers' work, it would be another twenty years before the fairy tale was fully accepted as literature for children. During the 1840s, the translation into English of Andersen's literary tales gave rise to the publication of a number of fairy-tale collections, which reached its apogee almost fifty years later in Andrew Lang's "color" series, beginning with the *Blue Fairy Book* (1889). After the success of the Grimms' tales, the arrival of Andersen's work represented an important next step in the restitution of the fairy tale, although disapproving voices could still be heard. As Jack Zipes observes, "[Andersen's] unusual tales, which combined fantasy with a moral impulse in line with traditional Christian standards, guaranteed the legitimacy of the literary fairy tale for middle-class audiences."³ Thus, after centuries of criticism and banishment to the trade of the chapman, fairy tales and fantasy finally achieved the status they have never since lost—that of "approved" literature for children.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the period that is often referred to as the Golden Age of children's literature. It may also have been the time when the lines became blurred as to just what constituted a fairy tale, since many of the works published for children were fantasies, beginning with Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)—and as we have already noted, Carroll himself referred to its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) as a fairy tale. Be that as it may,

1 Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1795-1800*. Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) 354.

2 Edgar Taylor, ed., *German Popular Stories* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1869) 90.

3 Jack Zipes, "Introduction," *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* (New York: Methuen, 1987) xviii.

the fairy tale evolved in several ways: it grew longer (as in the work of writers such as George MacDonald and Andrew Lang), more didactic (Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* [1863] and the stories of Mary Louisa Molesworth are examples), and more focused upon social issues (see the section "A Less Than Perfect World"). Indeed, this last point raises an interesting paradox in the literary tale's evolution from the folk tale. Despite the collective nature of the folk tale's composition, its concerns are generally those of the individual, such as growing up, establishing a relationship, and so on. When we turn to the literary tale, it is attributable to a single writer but now tends to deal with social (i.e., collective) subjects.

However, in the process of becoming so closely associated with children, fairy tales have all too often been dismissed as literature not worthy of serious attention on the part of adult readers. In his pioneering essay "On Fairy Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the fantasy works *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, was among the first to point out that this association of fairy stories with children is a historical accident and that children "neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do; and no more than they like other things."¹ Tolkien saw fairy stories as a natural branch of literature sharing the same qualities as may be found in many other genres.

It certainly can be argued that the fairy tale has regained an adult audience in recent times, as the modern tales and poems in this anthology demonstrate. The surprise is in the fact that these tales have been out of favor for so long among older readers, since, as Max Lüthi observes, fairy tales present us with both adult and child triumphing over their (and our) deepest fears and desires. Perhaps we have been the victims of our own rationalistic preconceptions of what a fairy tale actually is and what it has to say to us. Bruno Bettelheim's observation that at each stage of our lives, fairy tales take on new significance and speak "simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult" (see p. 326) was hardly a revelation in itself, but the impact that his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* made when it was published in 1976 suggested that the time was ripe for a reappraisal—a project that has produced a substantial body of scholarship.

This recognition of the ability of the fairy tale to appeal to both child and adult has resulted in a recent resurgence of publications that address both audiences. A quick survey of any bookstore will reveal a number of shelves in the children's section devoted to fairy tales. They will doubtless include classic tales by Perrault, the Grimms, and Andersen, most likely in the form of lavishly illustrated individual works. Also available will be versions that reflect a particular motivation in

1 J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," *Tree and Leaf* 2nd ed (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975) 38.

their tellers—feminist, psychological, or environmental, for instance—whose approach ranges from parody to realism. Nearby the browser will come across shelves devoted to novel-length retellings intended for the young-adult reader (female in particular) by authors such as Jane Yolen, Robin McKinley, and Donna Jo Napoli, whose work—not surprisingly—tends to focus upon those tales that deal with the challenges of growing up. The fairy tale has made inroads into adult fiction as well; several well-known novelists (Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, and Gregory Maguire among them) have acknowledged the deep and abiding influence that fairy tales have had on their own writing. And for those who remain unconvinced about how deeply embedded the fairy tale is in our collective unconscious, we note that on more specialized shelves in our hypothetical bookstore may be found such titles as *From Cinderella to CEO: How to Master the 10 Lessons of Fairy Tales to Transform Your Work Life* (2005), *Teaching Thinking Skills with Fairy Tales and Fantasy* (2005)—or even *Erotic Fairy Tales: A Romp Through the Classics* (2001). What emerges is that the fairy tale remains as relevant, democratic, and adaptable as it has ever been in its long history.

Without a doubt, however, the most significant development for the fairy tale (and for culture in general) in the twentieth century came from the film medium. The screening of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937 initiated the phenomenal influence that the Walt Disney studios have exerted upon our experience of the fairy tale. Seventy years and numerous films later, the animated Disney fairy tale is the first, and often only, version with which North Americans are familiar. For better or for worse—like all storytellers, collectors, and re-writers—Walt Disney has put his own imprint upon the tales. However, unlike his predecessors, he chose to combine the power of the film medium with the Disney entertainment empire (Disney World, Disney Land, and Euro-Disney, where we can meet and dine with Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty), to both disseminate and consolidate his vision to an unprecedented degree. Although Disney's influence has provoked fierce criticism (see Betsy Hearne's article), it is only recently—through the medium of film of course—that Disney's twentieth-century hegemony over the fairy tale has been challenged. Replacing Disney's royal romances are the sophisticated fractured fairy tales such as the *Shrek* series (2001, 2004, 2007) and *Hoodwinked* (2005) (see James Poniewozik's article). Disney's apparently unassailable pairing of fairy tale and animation has now been broadened to include "realistic" fairy-tale films such as *Ever After* (1998) or *Enchanted* (2007) and fantasy television shows such as *The Tenth Kingdom* (2000). Not surprisingly, the wide range of approaches to be found in contemporary books is paralleled in the medium of film. Yet, as the example of Disney's influence so clearly demonstrates, film and television have emerged as the current media of popular culture. In so doing (criticism of Disney notwithstanding), they have made the fairy

tale very much a part of mass culture, just as it once was a part of folk culture; in this respect, the folk tale has come full circle.

One essential feature that has hopefully been established in this introduction, and that will be confirmed in the sections that follow, is that fairy tales can come in a bewildering number of versions. It begins with the infinite variability of the oral folk tale, continues with the differing assumptions or agendas of collectors, translators, and editors as the tale takes on literary form, and then undergoes constant transformation as generations of writers and illustrators are drawn to this mother-lode of story. Exploring the world of fairy tale, therefore, becomes rather a different kind of challenge than reading a nineteenth-century novel, for instance. While we may choose to read other works by the same author or historical texts to understand the context of the novel, the fact remains that we are dealing with just one novel. That is rarely the case with the fairy tale—and so to base a theory on the evidence of one version alone may well be to build a house of cards, for who is to say that this version is more authentic than any other? In some cases it may be possible to demonstrate that a particular version is the oldest of known variants—but is age the only criterion? Is it even possible to think of one specific version of a folk tale as definitive? Thus, any theory that we may devise applies in the first instance only to one version of a particular tale; the challenge then is to see if it retains its validity on being applied to other versions and even other tales.¹



¹ See Alan Dundes's fuller discussion of this issue in his article "Fairy Tales from a Folkloristic Perspective," in the Criticism section, p. 335.