1

An Introduction to Fairy Tales

Today, fairy tales, beloved by children and studied by adults, are a literary genre that provides models for short stories, novels, and films. In the Middle Ages princes and princesses, whose lives more often than not ended in isolation and suffering, populated long romances. Nonetheless, these medieval stories provided the framework for early modern and modern fairy tales with their princes and princesses thrust into a world of suffering and adventure, from which they emerged triumphant, magically achieving fortune and happiness by marrying royalty and being restored to a throne. These tales were joined by others in which a poor boy or girl followed the same course, also ending up married to royalty. In the modern world, the stereotypical fairy-tale heroine rises from dire poverty to privileged status when a handsome and wealthy man recognizes her goodness and virtue.

In the earliest fairy tales, fairies played a major role, and to this day a fairy or a fairy figure appears, helps a suffering hero or a languishing heroine to happiness, and then leaves. Most important of all, traditional fairy tales have happy endings. The medieval romances with happy endings concluded with a wedding that united a suffering and virtuous royal bride or bridegroom with another glamorous royal; in early modern fairy tales, happy endings similarly produced a wedding, but often brought together a risen ragtag with a royal spouse.

Fairyland fictions tell an altogether different kind of story. Their human and fairy characters move between the fairyland realm and the human world, two parallel universes. Well established in the Middle Ages,[1] fairyland fictions continued to flourish in the early modern period.[2] In fairyland fictions, fairies'

---

1. Maren Clausen-Stolzenburg (1995) and Laurence Harf-Lancner (1984) each devoted an entire study to fairyland fictions. See Maren Clausen-Stolzenburg, *Märchen und mittelalterliche Literaturtradition: Zur Entstehung der Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1995) and Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au moyen âge: Morgane et Mélusine: La naissance des fées* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1984).

2. See Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

passage back and forth between their two worlds is both safe and easy, but humans' visits to fairyland often turn into disaster when they leave. Mme d'Aulnoy's 1690 *L'Île de la félicité* (The Island of Happiness) provides an example par excellence. Its hero, the beloved companion of Princess Felicity, wished to leave her fairyland kingdom to visit his homeland, but instead he was overtaken by the earthly passage of time and died.[3]

The oldest fairyland fictions come from the medieval and early modern periods. Their cast of principal characters consists solely of royalty: human kings and queens, princes and princesses, and their equally royal fairy counterparts. Only in the modern post-1789 world did middle- and lower-class folk enter into fairyland fictions, crossing from one world into the other. The conventions of fairyland fictions were so strong that they provided a basis for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though fairyland fictions have a completely different history, they are more often than not lumped together with fairy tales.

The emergence of rise and restoration fairy tales in the 1550s sparked fairy tale–specific literary discussions that began to enter prefaces, dedications, addresses to readers, internal commentary, and closing remarks. In France in the mid-1690s, fairy-tale authors such as Charles Perrault and his niece Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier initiated a public discussion of fairy tales' function, nature, and history, which Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Henriette Julie de Murat expanded when they discussed fairy tales' aesthetic qualities. The fairy tales written by Mme d'Aulnoy and her sister fairy-tale authors evoked hostile opposition from the Abbé de Villiers, whose lacerating critique of these women's writings appears here in full.[4]

---

3. Distinctions between fairy tales and fairyland fictions have been worked out in a number of articles. See Bottigheimer (2009) as well as the following works by Ruth B. Bottigheimer: *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), "Fairy Tales and Fables," in *History of Childhood*, ed. Paula S. Fass, vol. 2. (New York: Macmillan, 2003), "The Ultimate Fairy Tale: Oral Transmission in a Literate World," in *The Companion to the Fairy Tale*, ed. Hilda Davidson, Anna Chaudhri, and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), "Folk and Fairy Tales," in *Europe 1450 to 1789: Encyclopaedia of the Early Modern World*, ed. Jonathan Dewald (New York: Scribner, 2004), and "Fairy Tales and Folk Tales," in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 2004). The most recent, from which this paragraph is adapted, appeared in "*Fairy Godfather*, Fairy-Tale History, and Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Response to Dan Ben-Amos, Jan M. Ziolkowski, and Francisco Vaz da Silva," *Journal of American Folklore* 123, no. 490 (2010): 447–496.

4. Long available only in brief excerpts, it also appears in Lewis Seifer and Domna C. Stanton, eds. and trans., *Enchanted Eloquence: Fairy Tales by Seventeenth-Century Women* (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2011), 294–310.

Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Fairy-Tale Paratexts

Publication of Straparola's tale collection ceased in the early 1600s; Basile's tales were published sporadically after their initial appearance in 1634–1636. The tales as they originally appeared with all the non-narrative material that constituted their paratexts—their prefaces, dedicatory letters, introductions, and internal commentary—fell from view. French-written fairy tales emerged in the 1690s, and early in the 1700s they, too, began to be reprinted without their prefaces, dedications, addresses to readers, internal commentary, and closing remarks. Presumably, paratexts were excised as impediments to narrative flow. However, their absence has deprived readers of essential information about the conditions within which fairy tales were created and about their subsequent history, and this remained the case through the 1800s (with the exception of W. G. Waters's translation of Straparola's tales) and into the twentieth century.

Jacques Barchilon's 1956 photomechanical reproduction of Perrault's 1695 manuscript collection and of Perrault's 1695 verse and 1697 prose tales in 1980 established a basis for assessing the tales' literary background. But by the mid-twentieth century, fairy-tale scholarship had developed within the province of *folk*lore, whose scholarly apparatus conditioned and shaped its literary, cultural, and historical parameters. With fairy-tale paratexts remaining largely untranslated and unknown, the continuing use of paratext-less editions of fairy tales reinforced folklore-based assumptions that fairy tales were folk creations. This belief became so powerful that evidence of other possible origins in the few available paratexts—Waters's Straparola translation and Barchilon's Perrault editions—long remained unexplored.

In the twenty-year period between 1990 and 2010 book-, print-, and publishing-related studies of fairy tales began to challenge prevailing views about folk authorship and dissemination. In this period, a number of fairy-tale scholars using original editions began rediscovering fairy-tale paratexts and pondering their implications. Mme de Murat, for instance, had acknowledged her and other writers' use of Straparola's plots to craft their own stories in the 1690s. What did this say about the book sources used by French fairy-tale authors? Might other book sources also come into question? How might this be understood?

Most fairy-tale paratexts are straightforwardly transparent and easily understood, but in some cases they appear to be coded messages. The simple fact that they were penned centuries ago means that their words were formulated within fundamentally differing cultural and literary circumstances, which can be opaque to contemporary readers. Hence, our introductions place each text within its cultural, literary, and historical context in an effort to

illuminate obscure passages, and annotations clarify references to events and people whom fairy-tale authors would have known, but who are unfamiliar to contemporary readers.

This book, the first to translate the majority of these pieces in their entirety and to provide access to a continuous but long-hidden dialogue about the fairy-tale genre, lays before readers fairy-tale authors' own reflections on the fairy tales they composed. Its purpose is to illuminate relevant historical, literary, and folkloristic issues. The individual texts as a group enable contemporary readers to discern the origins of discussions about fairy tales, to chart the genre's development and change over time, and to understand the modern evolution in thinking about fairy tales' origins and spread. This volume thus returns classic sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century fairy-tale authors' and editors' defining discussions to today's readers and scholars of fairy tales.

Orality and Verisimilitude in the
Creation and Transmission of Fairy Tales

Fairy tales have long been viewed as folk creations, composed by illiterate country people and transmitted from one person to another, in particular by old and illiterate women. The German scholar Rudolf Schenda suggested a different image, one in which mixed audiences of illiterates, aliterates, preliterates, and literates *listened* to *readings* from the *printed page*. Schenda called such a situation a *"semiliterate" process*. Schenda's redefinitions also embrace an oral component: he documented other situations in which illiterates, aliterates, preliterates, and literates *retold tales that they had previously heard read aloud*. He called this a *"semi-oral" process*.[5] Schenda's observations drew principally on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reports of storytelling situations.

Modern scholars have routinely assumed that seventeenth-century nursemaids and peasant informants told fairy tales to aristocratic infants in their care, but in fact no clearcut and unambiguous sources describe a situation in which an unlettered peasant nursemaid transmits what we understand as a fairy tale to a child in her care in the period covered by this volume. What *has* been reliably described are situations in which someone read a tale to one or more listeners, but upon further investigation, none of these instances has turned out to be a fairy tale as we define and discuss the genre here.[6] Fairy tales—with

---

5. See Rudolf Schenda, "Semiliterate and Semi-Oral Processes," trans. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Marvels and Tales* 21, no. 1 (2007).

6. See Lewis Seifert, Catherine Velay-Vallantin, and Ruth B. Bottigheimer, "Critical Exchange," *Marvels and Tales* 20, no. 2 (2006): 276–284.

beginnings, middles, and endings—are narratives of a classic sort, unlike an anecdote (such as how a cow kicked the maid who was milking it) or a report (such as a ghost scaring a neighbor late last night). Gossipy anecdotes and reports comprised the most common kinds of human communications in the past. Fairy tales, however, don't seem to have entered the oral repertoire of the common people until the eighteenth century in France or until the nineteenth century in Germany.[7] Modern scholars must therefore entertain the distinct possibility that unlettered fairy-tale tellers are less a reliable and verifiable fact than a surmise based on flawed modern interpretations of seventeenth-century literary attributions of a tale to a grandmother, a governess, or a nursemaid. Nonetheless, a general tendency "to believe that [fairy tales] have no real authors, that they have been orally transmitted," continues to occupy a dominating position in fairy-tale studies, as the comparatist Seth Lerer observes.[8]

Recent scholarship in early modern Italian and French literary and publishing studies has constructed a different model, one in which fairy tales first coalesced in the 1500s as a literary genre. Much evidence for this model can be found in prefaces, dedications, and addresses to readers by early fairy-tale authors and editors. As they originally appeared, these paratexts provided a forum in which fairy-tale authors and editors described, characterized, and commented, directly or indirectly, on the tales they accompanied.

A predilection for understanding fairy tales as oral productions passed by word of mouth from one generation to another has deeply colored understandings of the few fairy-tale paratexts currently available. A classic instance involves the frame tales created for Straparola's and Basile's tales. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers would have understood the frame tale as a literary and cultural trope, which would have communicated a quite different, sometimes contradictory or inverse, message from that which modern readers often carry away from a reading of the two frame tales, because early modern frame tales as a whole were subject to two reigning literary criteria: 1) the frame tale had to follow the Boccaccian model, in which a mixed company of noble and exemplary men and women gathered to tell stories; 2) the frame tale had to appear to represent reality, that is, to achieve verisimilitude.

To project a credible sense of place, Straparola situated a group of named and identifiable men and women together with a group of (superficially identified but historically unidentifiable) young women on the island of Murano near Venice, where they were amusing themselves during a specified calendar period (the winter pre-Lenten Carnival). Taken together the place,

---

7. See Rudolf Schenda, *Von Mund zu Ohr. Bausteine zu einer Kulturgeschichte volktümlichen Erzählens in Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 224–226.

8. Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 210.

the time, and the named personages satisfied the literary requirements for verisimilitude. But the documented deaths and the known absences from Venice of several members of the postulated group directly contradict the apparent truth of their presence there and incontrovertibly demonstrate that the meeting as Straparola pictured it was a fictive gathering, not a real one.

Understanding Straparola's frame tale storytellers as a literary trope would have been automatic for knowledgeable sixteenth-century readers; they would have recognized names and relationships among recent Sforza family members and would have caught the mistakes Straparola made about some of the people he put there. But twenty-first-century readers often miss those errors in the frame tale, as well as other ones that further undermine the verisimilitude he sought to create. (He has trees leaf out in January.) Thus, Straparola's preface has little or no historical truth value as a cameo portrait of a historic storytelling event.

The broad bias that favors the notion of oral origins and transmission for fairy tales diminishes incentives to investigate available evidence that suggests literary origins and print dissemination for fairy tales. For instance, despite the fact that W. G. Waters translated the dedications of Giovan Francesco Straparola's *Pleasant Nights* (1551, 1553) into English in the 1890s, and the fact that they have often been cited to prove the oral origins of Straparola's tales, there was no systematic analysis of them for one hundred years.[9] Waters also included Straparola's individual story introductions, which further hint at the tales' roots in literary creation, but in editing the tales for modern fairy-tale collections, editors have cut these introductions away. Such pivotal absences have shorn fairy tales of critical resources and have impeded fairy-tale research.

Cheap print for leisure reading existed in large amounts in the first century of print—in the later 1400s and early 1500s. Library and archive holdings all over western Europe show this. Cheap print (as opposed to the printings of Latin classics) consisted largely of translations into the spoken language of brief narratives from the Latin classics or from medieval ver-nacular compendia, such as *I Reali di Francia* (The Kings of France). Their low price, their brevity, and their emphasis on action differed fundamentally from high literature of the day, and as a whole, these literary and commercial characteristics suggest that they appealed to readers with limited time and little money. Typically the heroes in early cheap print were noble and their endings more often unhappy than happy. Put another way, cheap literature of the late 1400s and early 1500s offered little action that would lift the spirits of poor readers and few heroes or heroines with whom they could personally identify.

---

9. Bottigheimer (2002: 107–108).

This situation changed abruptly when Straparola incorporated a new plot into the brief narratives of *The Pleasant Nights* in 1551. Straparola's new plot featured a poor boy or girl who had magic assistance in overcoming the kinds of tasks and trials that had traditionally been set for royal heroes on a quest. But Straparola's stories regularly ended happily with a royal marriage that brought wealth to its suffering protagonist. At a stroke, Straparola addressed the aspirations of the urban poor, both in Venice and beyond, and by incorporating several such stories into his tale collection, he effectively enlarged its potential readership and buyership.

The argument that poor people would, or could, have read Straparola's tales assumes a broad-based literacy among poor factory workers and artisans in Renaissance Venice. This assumption differs radically from views that have long dominated fairy-tale scholarship, it is a fact that is intimately and inextricably related to modern fairy-tale scholarship. Readers will not be required to simply accept this. Credible reasons and documentable evidence appear in the next section.

Early Modern Schooling and Fairy Tales

Let us consider literacy, schooling, and social class in northern Italy in the historical period in which the first rise fairy tales appeared in print, with their impoverished protagonists who magically married royalty and lived happily ever after. The proportion of northern Italy's population that could read is an important, and often inadequately understood, contributor to the emergence of the new genre of fairy tales. The Italian peninsula had well-developed urban economies, and the shops and counting houses of its towns and cities required numerate clerks. Its great merchant houses hired secretaries skilled in Italian as well as in Latin business phraseology to draw up contracts, and they also needed literate and numerate clerks for tasks such as checking contracts against bills of lading. In Venice the owners of large manufactories employed literate and numerate overseers to fill orders for customers and other employees to interpret patterns and plans for workers, while individual and group investors required literate deputies to carry out their business orders. A high concentration of literate workers—typesetters, proofreaders, editors, book assemblers, and binders—were in the printing industry, which provided the merchandise for scores of international wholesale and local retail booksellers in Venice and abroad. Literacy even extended into the ranks of the enormous servant class, for if we are to believe one of Straparola's tales, household servants worked according to annual written contracts that they read and understood.

The geography of schooling in Italy corresponded largely to the vigor of local economies.[10] Thus large cities such as Venice, Florence, and Rome had reliably high levels of literacy, levels sometimes claimed by their citizens to have been so high that moderns find the assertions hard to believe. For instance, Giovanni Villani, who lived in 1300s Florence, "wrote that 9,550 to 11,800 Florentine boys and girls attended formal schools in Florence in 1338," a figure that results in a male schooling rate, and presumably a corresponding literacy rate, of somewhere between 67 percent and 83 percent,[11] two to three times higher than the literacy rate posited for Venice 250 years later.[12] As Paul F. Grendler indicates, the figure is far higher than expected, but to date, although doubted, it has not been disproved.

It was not only Italian *cities* that had high literacy rates among its inhabitants; so did northern Italian *towns* such as Caravaggio (the birthplace of Giovan Francesco Straparola) and Sansepulcro (where Piero della Francesca was born). The history of Italian schooling and literacy was studied intensively by Grendler, who published *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300–1600* (1989), the principal points of which are summed up in his article "What Piero Learned in School: Fifteenth-Century Vernacular Education" (1995). The following discussion draws principally on these two works.

The great majority of Italian schoolchildren followed a curriculum that prepared them for pursuing an artisanal, a shopkeeping, or a mercantile livelihood.[13] They learned to keep accounts and to calculate by *abbaco* (commercial math). Because Latin legal phrases formed part of commercial agreements and since church liturgy was in Latin, many vernacular schools for children of working families also taught the rudiments of Latin grammar and vocabulary.

Instruction in reading in the vernacular schools began with letters and syllables at the age of six or seven.[14] A core of prescribed exemplary readings about pious saints and by virtuous philosophers provided practice for young

10. Agricultural work required neither literacy nor anything more than rudimentary numeracy, and so it is not surprising that few schools have been documented in small farming communities.

11. Paul F. Grendler, "What Piero Learned in School: Fifteenth-Century Vernacular Education," in *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy*, ed. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England), 171n6.

12. Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 87–110.

13. Only a relatively small number of Italian children, generally from the ranks of the noble and the wealthy, followed a humanistic curriculum of the Latin classics of literature and rhetoric. They did so in preparation for the life of republican, noble, or royal governance and informed leisure reading.

14. Grendler (1995), 163.

readers and imparted socially desirable messages,[15] but it was chivalric romances that riveted pupils' attention. Consequently, chivalric romances, which had existed in northern Italy since the 1100s, were also a staple of vernacular school readings. With "'Orlando,' 'Tristano,' and 'Jason' [being sung] in the piazzas of northern and north-central cities . . . at set hours and in regular places" from 1250 onward,[16] pupils came to their school readings already familiar with their content. Andrea da Barberino (1370–c. 1432) added immeasurably to this supply when he compiled *The Kings of France*, Book 4 of which recounted the adventures of the knight errant Buovo d'Antono. The *Morgante* of Luigi Pulci (1432–1484) followed, as did *Orlando Inamorato* by Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441–1494) and *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto (1473–1513). When Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was allegorized in 1532, it became sufficiently exemplary to be used as school reading material.[17] It is therefore not just a theoretical projection that sixteenth-century schoolchildren read works of chivalric literature; those works are prominent on a 1587 list of school readings in Venetian schools.[18]

The precise who, where, and when of vernacular instruction can be pursued in detail in Grendler's books and articles. Suffice it to say here that schooling took place in a variety of locations and was subject to a variety of conditions that depended on the needs and interests of local governments. We are fortunate to have a great deal of information about schooling in Caravaggio, the town near Milan in which Giovan Francesco Straparola grew up. In the years of his childhood and youth Caravaggio had three vernacular schools and one humanistic one,[19] a number that served Caravaggio's children well. We even know the name of its schoolmaster, Giovita Ravizza.

A large city like Venice had a broader variety of schooling settings that ranged from in-house tutoring for the wealthiest families' children through communal schools, independent schools, and training in convents for upper-class girls to do-it-yourself home teaching in reading, writing, and bookkeeping from manuals of instruction for poor children.[20] Later in

---

15. Grendler (1989), 275; Grendler (1995), 167.

16. Grendler (1989), 291.

17. Grendler (1989), 294–298.

18. Grendler (1989), 298.

19. Tullio Santagiuliana, *Caravaggio: Profilo storico* (Treviglio: Signorelli, 1981), 100.

20. Two authors of such often-reprinted textbooks were Giovanni Antonio Tagliente and Domenico Manzoni, each of whom wrote slightly shorter manuals that supported home-based instruction: Tagliente's forty-page *Libro maistrevole* (Teaching book, 1524) was directed at grownups, children, and women who didn't know how to read at all, as well as to all those who had a beginning knowledge of reading, as the title page specified, while Manzoni's even briefer thirty-two-page *Vera et principal ricchezza de' giovani* (The true and principal riches of youth, 1550) offered reading, writing, *abbaco*, and the fundamentals of Christian doctrine.

the sixteenth century, catechism schools and schools of Christian Doctrine extended rudimentary literacy to children of the most impoverished families.

Early sixteenth-century educational theories, such as that of the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives's *De institutione feminae christianae* (1524), assumed that upper-class girls would be literate and advocated literacy for middle- and lower-class girls.[21] Twenty years later the Italian Ludovico Dolce (1508–1568) published *Dialogo della institutione delle donne* (1545), which also warmly recommended teaching girls and women to read.[22] Lower- and middle-class boys could also be schooled by their parents at home, thanks to large numbers of early-1500s books of instruction for aspiring clerks which taught reading, double-entry bookkeeping, and drafting correspondence.

Boccaccio and Fairy Tales?

Everyone knows that Giovanni Boccaccio wrote novellas, not fairy tales. And yet, two centuries later the first fairy tales appeared within a tale collection consisting principally of novellas. In the rich and varied Italian literary tradition within which European fairy tales initially emerged, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* established an enduring model for tale collections as a whole. Even more importantly, his writings about magic tales and storytelling deeply influenced subsequent authors. Thus, even though Boccaccio himself wrote no fairy tales as we understand them in the modern world, the Venetian writer Giovan Francesco Straparola (c.1485–c.1557) took Boccaccio as his structural and stylistic model, when he began to compose the first rise and restoration fairy tales. Thus he not only patterned his *Pleasant Nights* (*Piacevoli notti*, 1551, 1553) on Boccaccio's *Decameron*; he also lifted phrases from its exemplary prose and inserted them into his own writing. Boccaccio was equally central in establishing the overall stylistic parameters for tale collections: dominating their subsequent production in normative terms, his literary *dicta* are manifest in the history and composition of Europe's first fairy tales as a real literary reference point, as an implied presence, and as a consciously undermined standard. Hence, this volume opens with an introduction to and a translation of sections of Boccaccio's 1355 *The Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* that speak to the issue of magic tales, their content, and their audience.

---

21. Published in Antwerp, Louvain, and Cologne in 1524, Vives's work became influential throughout Europe.

22. Reprinted in 1547, Dolce's book claimed a third imprint in 1553 and a fourth in 1559.