**Citing in a Digital Age:**

**An Example of 21st Century Scholarship in a Popular Forum**

**Overview**: Below I’ve highlighted the sources Byatt cites, focusing on her secondary sources. You’ll notice that there is no works cited page here, no links to her original sources, and only seldom does she tell readers what work she is referring to or quoting from. Consider why she makes these choices, based on her target audience and forum. Do you think the version of this that was later published as the introduction to a book is the same, or is it more formally cited? As a reader, which would you prefer?

**Happy ever after**

By [AS Byatt](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/asbyatt) Saturday 3 January 2004 18.53 EST

***Stories of sleeping princesses, ice palaces and witches in woods may be supplanted by storytelling, real and fantastic, on the web. But, argues AS Byatt, the lure of the fairy tale is as strong as ever.***

I acquired a hunger for fairy tales in the dark days of blackout and blitz in the second world war. I read early and voraciously and indiscriminately - Andrew Lang's coloured fairy books, Hans Christian Andersen, King Arthur, Robin Hood and my very favourite book, Asgard and the Gods, a German scholarly text, with engravings, about Norse mythology, which my mother had used as a crib in her studies of ancient Norse. I never really liked stories about children doing what children do - quarrelling and cooking and camping. I liked magic, the unreal, the more than real. I learned from the Asgard book that even the gods can be defeated by evil. I knew nothing about the Wagnerian Nordic pageantry of the Third Reich.

I don't think I had a book at that stage that was specifically the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm. But I did learn early to distinguish between them and the authored tales of Hans Christian Andersen (and Walter de la Mare and William Thackeray). From very early I had an unthinking category in my mind of the "real"(authentic) fairy tale which centred on the brothers Grimm, and some of the Nordic stories collected by Asbjørnsen. It included some of Perrault and some English tales - "Jack and the Beanstalk", for instance. These tales might be funny or horrible or weird or abrupt, but were never disturbing, they never twisted your spirit with sick terror as Andersen so easily did. They had a discrete, salutary flatness.

It is interesting how impossible it is to remember a time when my head was not full of these unreal people, things and events. When I ask friends and colleagues what is their first precise memory of a fairy tale they almost all come up with some shock administered by that psychological terrorist, Andersen - the little mermaid walking on knives, Hans in the icy palace of the Snow Queen. But these shocks happen to people and children who already need and inhabit the other world which gets into our heads and becomes necessary - a world of suns and moons and forests, of princesses and goose girls, of old men and women, benign and malign, of talking birds and flying horses, magic roses and magic puddings, turnips and pigs, impenetrable castles and petrification, glass mountains and glass coffins, poisonous apples and blinding thorns, ogres and imps, spindles and spun gold, tasks and prohibitions, danger and comfort (for the good people) after it. It is very odd - when you come to think of it - that human beings in all sorts of societies, ancient and modern, have needed these untrue stories. It is much odder than the need for religious stories (myths) or semi-historical stories (legends) or history, national or personal. Even as a little girl I perceived its oddity. These "flat" stories appear to be there because stories are a pervasive and perpetual human characteristic, like language, like play.

What are fairy stories for? **Freud** gave an answer - they were related to daydreams and wish-fulfilment fantasies, in which the questing self meets helpers and enemies, and in which the ending is always happy. He wondered if myths were the "secular dreams of youthful humanity" but distinguished myths from fairy tales by claiming that myth is "related to disaster". It can also be argued that myth is related to the human need to know what was before, and what will be after the individual life, the living society. Myths are concerned with origins, the fear of death, and the hope for the overcoming of death in another world. The universe of Asgard and Valhalla, of Olympus and Hades, is not the fairy-tale unreal world with its visiting suns and moons, castles and undifferentiated forests. We don't put it together in our imaginations in the same way. There is neither explanation nor teaching in the true wonder tale.

Other things which are not essentially part of true fairy tales are character, psychological causation, and real morality. Princesses are virtually interchangeable - they are either kind and modest and housewifely, or vain and stupid and inconsiderate. They are called "princesses" but peasants and merchants' daughters have the same limited and recognisable natures. Simpletons and gallant princes have the same chance of solving riddles, obtaining magic feathers, or keys, the same insect or fishy helpers. Lazy girls are caught out by boasts that they can spin flax into gold, and are helped by strange brownies, or dwarves, or other creatures. The best single description I know of the world of the fairy tale is that of **Max Lüthi** who describes it as an abstract world, full of discrete, interchangeable people, objects and incidents, all of which are isolated and are nevertheless interconnected, in a kind of web or network of two-dimensional meaning. Everything in the tales appears to happen entirely by chance - and this has the strange effect of making it appear that nothing happens by chance, that everything is fated.

**Lüthi** even points out that folk tales have certain colours - red, white, black and the metallic colours of gold and silver and steel. The fairy tale world is called up for me by the half-abstract patternings of Paul Klee, or the mosaic definition of Kandinsky's early, "Russian" paintings of horses and forests. Lüthi makes the point that green, the colour of nature, is almost never specifically mentioned in folk tales. It is interesting in that context that the Grimms' preface to volume two of the first edition of the Children's Stories and Household Tales, praising their "genuinely Hessian" Low German narrator, Viehmann, and the precision of her oral narrative, remarks that: "The epic basis of folk poetry resembles the colour green as one finds it throughout nature in various shades: each satisfies and soothes without becoming too tiresome."

This is an image derived from Romantic nature poetry, and is called up in support of the Grimms' claims for the Germanness of the tales. German perception of German folklore is bound up with the Germanic sense of the all-importance of the surrounding "Wald", the forest. As a child, and now, I respond instinctively more powerfully to this mysterious wood than to the courtly manners and ladylike godmothers of French writers like Madame d'Aulnoy. But I think it can be argued that the Grimms, however they romanticised and fantasised the oral and Germanic purity of their sources, understood, as tellers, the peculiarly flat, unadorned nature of the true tale.

An all-important part of our response to the world of the tales is our instinctive sense that they have rules. There are things that can and can't happen, will and won't happen - a prohibition is there to be broken, two of three brothers or sisters are there to fail, the incestuous king will almost always dance at his daughter's marriage to the prince in whose court she has found refuge as a kitchen slave, or a goose girl. **Lüthi** brilliantly compares the glittering mosaic of fairy tales to Hermann Hesse's The Glass Bead Game. As a little girl I compared it in my mind to the pleasures of Ludo and Snakes and Ladders and Solitaire played with cards, in which only certain moves are possible and the restrictions are part of the pleasure. As an adult writer I think that my infant synapses grew like a maze of bramble-shoots into a grammar of narrative - part of the form of my neuronal web as linguistic grammars are - and mathematical forms. **Vladimir Propp's** analysis of the structural forms of the folk tale is exciting because it makes precise and complex something we had already intuited - that the people and events are both finite and infinitely variable. Another thing Lüthi finely says is that these are forms of hope. We fill our heads with improbable happy endings, and are able to live - in daydreams - in a world in which they are not only possible but inevitable.

**Italo Calvino, in his lecture "Cybernetics and Ghosts",** makes the inevitable connection between storytelling and myth. He describes the storyteller of the tribe telling about the younger son getting lost in the forest: "He sees a light in the distance, he walks and walks; the fable unwinds from sentence to sentence, and where is it leading?" To a new apprehension which "suddenly appears and tears us to pieces, like the fangs of a man- eating witch. Through the forest of fairy tale the vibrancy of myth passes like a shudder of wind." Calvino himself knew a great deal about the workings of the stopped-off, rule-constructed tale, but he also knew that it is haunted by the unmanageable, the vast and the dangerous. The Grimms too were interested in the borders between Germanic myths and folk tales. They like to draw connections between fairy tale trees and the World-Ash, between Briar Rose in her thorn-surrounded sleep, and Brunhilde in her wall of fire. They include Christian legends at the edge of their world - the Virgin Mary finds strawberries in the snow of the forest.

The opposite experience, perhaps, from coming across the whiff of real danger, terror or mystery that is myth, is the precise experience of meeting real individuated characters in a tale, people one begins to imagine in three dimensions. Looking back on my own experience, it seems to me that I inhabited the stories with characters in a way I never inhabited the true fairy tales. I fell in love with Sir Lancelot, and held long conversations with Robin Hood and his men. I went on new quests with them, rescued them and was rescued. I even ventured into the Asgard tales - I brought water secretly to the disguised Odin suspended between two fires, I fell in love with the ironic Loki. But I never loved or was loved in the context of a fairy tale. Charles Dickens claimed that he wanted to marry Little Red Riding Hood, which to me is a category error. Either he had seen a pretty actress in a red hood in a pantomime, or his hugely animating imagination could even insinuate itself into the closed box of finite gestures. Character feels wrong in folk tales.

In this context **Lüthi** gives a fine example of how the Grimms' narrative style moves from the impersonal oral to the "authored" story with psychology. In his version of "Rapunzel", **Wilhelm Grimm said:** "The prince became overwhelmed with grief and in despair he jumped from the tower". Whereas in oral tellings derived from Grimm, **a schoolchild from Danzig said:** "When the witch saw that it was a prince there, she threw him down," and a Swabian narrator said "She gouged out his eyes and threw him down" - in both cases replacing psychological suffering by a physical blow.

The point is clear, but it is a long step from there to Andersen telling us about the suffering of his mermaid, or Hoffmann frightening us with the Sandman. As **Maria Tatar observes in her new annotated edition of the Grimms' tales**, the Grimms' revisions of the "Frog Prince" simply make it more flowing - they may take away the stark flatness of the oral "and then ... and then ..." but they preserve more of the flat quality of the tales than the French courtly ladies, who exclaim and moralise in every paragraph.

Anyone who has looked at the **345 variants of the Cinderella stories collected by the redoubtable Marian Roalfe Cox in 1893** will know how the mosaic pieces slip, slide, and recombine.

What use do we make of fairy tales? **The Grimms thought**, among other things, that they were recovering a German mythology and a German attitude to life. They saw themselves as asserting what was German against the French occupying forces of the Napoleonic empire. The allied occupying forces in Germany after the second world war briefly tried to ban the Grimms because it was felt that their bloodthirstiness, gleeful violence, heartlessness and brutality had helped to form the violent nature of the Third Reich. Some of the tales are unpleasant - very unpleasant - and it is good that Maria Tatar has collected one or two of the more heartless ones, including one that is certainly cheerfully anti-Semitic. There are places where a collection of folk tales shades off into those other narrative forms, gossip and communal scapegoating anecdotes. But it is important to distinguish between the effects of tales of bludgeoned outsiders or gleefully tormented Jews and the folk-tale machinery of swallowed and regurgitated children, severed limbs miraculously restored, and even the dreadful punishments of the wicked stepmother or sisters, in barrels of nails or red-hot iron shoes. A modern child or adult reader needs both to remember the more brutal world of public hangings and public burnings of earlier times, and to understand that much of this suffering and restoration - not all - is the same as the endless hammering, drowning, flaying, flattening, stretching, snipping and boiling of Tom by Jerry in the cartoons. There are moods in which - as child and woman - I could not bear to see these cartoons. And moods in which I laugh cheerfully. In a real fairy tale the eyes will usually be restored, the hands will grow on to the stumps, the sleeper will awaken.

The most terrifying tale I have ever read in **the Grimms is a one-paragraph tale about the obstinate child, in German "das eigensinnige Kind",** which means literally the child with its own mind. In German a child is neuter in gender. All we are told about this one is that it would not do what its mother wanted, that God had therefore no goodwill towards it, and it died. When it was buried, it kept pushing its arm up through the earth. Until its mother came and knocked its arm down with a stick. After that it was for the first time peaceful under the earth. The real terror of that is implicit in its bleak little form and the complete absence of character (we do not know if the child was a boy or a girl). It doesn't feel like a warning to naughty infants. It feels like a glimpse of the dreadful side of the nature of things.

I am not sure how much good is done by moralising about fairy tales. This can be unsubtle - telling children that virtue will be rewarded, when in fact it is mostly simply the fact of being the central character that ensures a favourable outcome. Fairy tales are not, on the whole, parables. The king's three sons, in "The Three Feathers", have nothing in common with Christ's succinct parable of the talents, where both psychology and morals are precise about what the three servants do with what they are given.

**Psychoanalysts have revealed** some of the ways in which the tales represent our secret fears and preoccupations - from being devoured to having a mother or stepmother who either starves you or stuffs you with food in order to eat you up. But all too easily psychoanalytic criticism can become overdetermined, constraining and limiting. **Bruno Bettelheim** turns the tales into dream-imagery and paradigms of what he sees as essential sexual development. I remember being very excited by the idea that "Sleeping Beauty" represents the teenage laziness of the latency period, as also by the idea that the pricked finger represents either menstrual bleeding or a symbolic defloration. It is possible for a good modern writer to use those images in those contexts. But it somehow diminishes the compact, satisfactory nature of the tale itself to gloss it in this way. It takes away, not deepens, its mystery. In the same way many modern feminist defences of the witch against the docile daughter (in "Snow White", for instance) take apart the form of the tale and leave us with not very much. It is interesting, **as Maria Tatar suggests**, how little attention has been paid to resourceful heroines, or suffering heroes, in revisionist criticism. We are over-influenced by Disney - the great witch in "Snow White", the saccharine heroine-doll. And I at least feel manipulated when modern films too obviously try to make contrary energetic heroines. **Keats** deprecated poetry that had a design on you. One of the true qualities of the real fairy tale is that it does not.

Writers have always used the forms of the fairy tale - if my idea that they form, or until recently formed, the narrative grammar of our minds is correct, then writers must have done. The happy endings of fairy tales underpin the comedies of Shakespeare - we have the comfortable sense that tribulations will result in safety and reconciliation. The absence of those things is part of the horror of King Lear , which could have ended differently. There is a layer of most 19th-century novels that is pulling with, or against, the fairy-tale paradigm. Mansfield Park is "Cinderella". Middlemarch contrasts the diligent and lazy daughters, the white and red of warmth and cold, and pulls against the paradigm with gritty moral realism. Witches and dwarves, ogres and wolves, lurk in Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Elizabeth Gaskell reunited the fairy-tale characters in a fantasy French chateau, in a tale of her own, and also played realist narrative games with stepmother and daughters in Wives and Daughters. Both Günter Grass and Virginia Woolf use the tale of the magic flounder. In Woolf's case, particularly, one of the novelist's purposes is to show that there is more than one way of telling the world, of imagining ambition and danger and safety.

In recent times **Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie both claimed** that there was more energy in the old tales than in the recent social realism. Carter made a glittering fantasy world of her own in which wolves and woodcutters, beauties and beasts, Bluebeard and his butchered wives, made new-old patterns. **When she came to edit the Virago Book of Fairy Tales** she had become suspicious of the popular culture and the social forms that underlay the old stories. **She said that** even in Perrault's day there was a sense that popular culture belonged to the past, "even perhaps, that it ought to belong to the past, where it posed no threat, and I am saddened to discover that I subscribe to this feeling too; but this time it might just be true".

**Terry Pratchett** too - a fantasist who both invents other worlds and observes their limitations from outside them - writes the old stories into his plots in order to criticise their unthinking narrative constrictions. Godmothers and witches and princesses and frogs and woodcutters can and should be free to behave differently. We should beware of what stories can do to the way we put the world together. We live in a world very far from woods, castles, and gibbets. We live in a world of urban myths - alligators in sewers, grandmothers on car-roofs, and a burgeoning virtual world of gossip and storytelling, real and fantastic, on the web.

© Antonia Byatt 2004 A longer version of this article will appear as an introduction to The Annotated Brothers Grimm by Maria Tatar, to be published in the US in June by WW Norton. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jan/03/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.fiction>