FAIRY TALES *and the* ART *of* SUBVERSION

second edition

JACK ZIPES

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The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization

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Jack Zipes

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For the Feisty Subversives in My Life:
Carol, Hanna, Schoena

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Preface to the Second Edition

Originally published in 1983, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* has never gone out of print, I am pleased to say. But as time passed and I continued to do more work in the realms of folklore and fairy-tale studies, I realized that there were gaps in the book that needed to be filled. Fortunately, they were not enormous, and I am very grateful to Bill Germano and Routledge for granting me this opportunity to revise the entire book and to add two new chapters.

In the course of time, I have not changed my views about the historical development of the literary fairy tale, especially as it has been cultivated for children as part of the civilizing process, but many of my observations and interpretations have become more complex and more comprehensive thanks to changes in scholarly attitudes. In fact, before 1980, one could virtually argue that there was no such thing as fairy-tale studies proper. The literary fairy tale was a marginalized genre, and, if it was taken seriously, then it was by folklorists, who actually had a fraught relationship with what some considered to be a contaminated genre: either they studied and celebrated the fairy tale to show its roots in the oral tradition or they condemned it for defiling the "authentic" folktales. But ever since the 1980s, a more diverse and sophisticated appreciation and study of the literary fairy tale could be noticed, and scholars and educators became more aware of its significance as a genre that has wide ramifications for the civilizing of children and adults. I need only point to the enormous publication of books and essays on the fairy tale in North America and Western Europe, some included in my bibliography, not to mention the thousands of fairy tales and the appearance of such important journals such as *Marvels and Tales* and informative Web sites such as *Sur la Lune*. In short, the vast interest in the literary fairy tale has had a strong influence on my own work, and I have felt obliged to incorporate the findings of some of the research into the revised edition of this book along with stimulating ideas from such different thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Pierre Bourdieu, Marina Warner, and others even when I may not expressly cite them. My debt to Norbert Elias is clear.

The two chapters that I have added to the book concern the influence of the unique Italian writers Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattiste Basile on the French writers of the ancien régime and the extraordinary impact of Walt Disney on the fairy tale. I believe that these chapters provide indispensable information and theses that help explain why we must examine the fairy tale as part of the intricate civilizing process in the Western world. Moreover, I have updated, expanded, and changed all the previous chapters so that they

incorporate the more important recent research. About twenty years ago, a German scholar predicted that the fairy tale would lose its vital utopian significance in the twentieth century because the only writing, given the atrocities of the past century, that could be taken seriously had to be dystopian. There is a certain truth to this argument, but if one believes in civilization and in the virtues of civility, the fairy tale continues to play a role in the civilizing process not just as trivial amusement but, more important, as a subversive alternative to a process that has lost its touch with humanity.

Jack Zipes

1

Fairy-Tale Discourse: Toward a Social History of the Genre

> Language and style are blind forces. Writing is an act of historical solidarity. Language and style are objects. Writing is a function. It is the relation between creation and society. It is literary language transformed by its social destination. It is the form grasped in its human intention and thus tied to the great crises of history.
>
> —Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953)

Even though the fairy tale may be the most important cultural and social event in most children's lives, critics and scholars have failed to study its historical development as a genre. There are chapters on the fairy tale in histories of children's literature, essays and even books on the fairy tale for adults, in-depth psychological explorations of the fairy tale's effect on children, and structuralist and formalist studies of individual tales galore. But no history of the fairy tale for children, in particular, no social history. Just a gap.

Nonhistory is history. Or, the acceptance of the gap means that brief descriptive outlines and chronologies of the fairy tale pass for history. Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of the so-called historical studies of literary fairy tales for children is the sense one gains that these tales are ageless. The best fairy tales are supposedly universal. It does not matter when or why they were written. What matters is their enchantment as though their bedtime manner can always be put to use to soothe the anxieties of children or help them therapeutically to realize who they are. One should not dissect or study fairy tales in a sociopolitical context, for that might ruin their magic power.

Fairy tales for children are universal, ageless, therapeutic, miraculous, and beautiful. This is the way they have come down to us in history. Inscribed on our minds, as children and then later as adults, is the impression that it is not important to know about the mysterious past of fairy tales just as long as they are there and continue to be written. The past is mysterious. The history of the fairy tale for children is mystery.

Fredric Jameson claims that "history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual

form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious."[1] It follows, then, out of necessity that we write our own texts to gain a sense not simply of what has happened in reality but also of what has happened on psychological, economic, cultural, and other levels to free ourselves of the dictates of other sociohistorical texts that have prescribed and ordered our thinking and need to be disordered if we are to perceive for ourselves the processes that produce social structures, modes of production, and cultural artefacts. To write a historical text (or any text for that matter) implies that one has a worldview, an overall perspective of history, an ideology, whether conscious or unconscious, and that the writing of such a text will tend either to test this view or to legitimate it. Textual form depends on the method one chooses. We place a value on how and what we write.

Jameson talks about the necessity of developing a method of mediations that will enable us to grasp and evaluate history in the most comprehensive manner possible:

> This operation is understood as a process of *transcoding*: as the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite different structural levels of reality. Mediations are thus a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation and automization of the various regions of social life (the separation, in other words, of the ideological from the political, the religious from the economic, the gap between daily life and the practice of academic disciplines) is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a particular analysis.[2]

Jameson's method could be called interdisciplinary but that would be too simplistic, for he does not want to bring disciplines together in a traditional positivist way to study literature from different statistical and strategic angles. Rather he wants to invent an ideological code and method that will subsume different approaches so he can grasp the underlying forces that have caused gaps in history and prevented our understanding the essence of literary creation. He seeks to explore the political unconscious, and it is obvious that he wants to develop many of the notions first elaborated by Roland Barthes in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953) and *Mythologies* (1957). For Jameson the individual literary work is a *symbolic act*, "which is grasped as the imaginary resolution of real contradiction."[3] Such a definition is helpful in understanding the origins of the literary fairy tale for children and adults because it immediately perceives the process of writing as part of a social process, as a kind of intervention in a continuous discourse, debate, and conflict about power and social relations. Jameson sees ideology not as something "which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act itself is

ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable contradictions."[4]

Certainly one can speak about the single literary fairy tale for children as a *symbolic act* infused by the ideological viewpoint of the individual author—and here it is important to add that the fairy tale for children cannot be separated from the fairy tale for adults. The genre originated within an oral storytelling tradition and was created and cultivated by adults, and as the fairy tale became an acceptable literary genre first among adults, it was then disseminated in print in the eighteenth century to children. Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe[5] agree that educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time. By the eighteenth century, the writers of fairy tales for children such as Sarah Fielding and Madame Leprince de Beaumont *acted* ideologically by presenting their notions regarding social conditions and conflicts, and they *interacted* with each other and with past writers and storytellers of folklore in a public sphere.

This interaction had already begun in Italy during the sixteenth century and led to an institutionalized symbolic discourse on the civilizing process in France that served as the basis for the fairy-tale genre. For example, writing literary tales in France in the late seventeenth century, modeled on Italian tales, was predicated on their acceptance at Louis XIV's court and in prominent Parisian salons. The oral tale had flourished for a long time in villages and nurseries, part of a popular discourse, part of a discourse between governesses and children of the upper class. It had even seen literary light in the mass-marketed "blue books" distributed by peddlers for consummation by peasants and the lower classes.[6] However, it was disdained as a literary form by the aristocratic and bourgeois classes until it received courtly approval through Madame de Maintenon and Fénelon; that is, until it could be codified and used to reinforce an accepted discursive mode of social conventions advantageous to the interests of the intelligentsia and ancien régime,[7] which made a fashion out of exploiting the ideas and productivity of the bourgeoisie. There is an interesting parallel that one could draw with the institution of *conversation* at this time. A noncompulsive elegant mode of conversing was developed at the court and salons that paradoxically emanated from a compulsion to respect strict rules of decorum.[8] The speaker was compelled to be noncompulsive, and the audience was to be spontaneous in its reception of stories and exchange of remarks. The more folktales could be subjected to the rules of conversation, the more they were ornamented and accepted within the dominant discourse. This was the historical sociogenetic origination of the literary fairy tale for children. Writing fairy tales was a choice, an option

exercised within an institution, a manner of imposing one's conversation on the prescribed fairy-tale discourse.

Jameson is again instructive in his definition of genre:

> Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between writer and a specific public whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact. The speech acts of daily life are themselves marked with indications and signals (intonation, gesturality, contextual deities and pragmatics) which ensure their appropriate reception. In the mediated situations of a more complicated social life—and the emergence of writing has often been taken as paradigmatic of such situations—perceptual signals must be replaced by conventions if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting multiplicity of uses (as *meanings* must, according to Wittgenstein, be described). Still, as texts free themselves more and more from an immediate performance situation, it becomes ever more difficult to enforce a given generic rule on their readers. No small part of the art of writing, indeed, is absorbed by this (impossible) attempt to devise a foolproof mechanism for the automatic exclusion of undesirable response to a given literary utterance.[9]

In the case of the literary fairy tale for children as genre, it appears fruitless to me to begin a definition based on the morphological study of Vladimir Propp[10] or the semiotic practice of Algirdas-Julien Greimas,[11] as many critics have done. To be sure, Propp and Greimas are useful for comprehending textual structures and signs of the tales, but they provide no overall methodological framework for locating and grasping the essence of the genre, the substance of the symbolic act as it took form to intervene in the institutionalized literary discourse of society.

This becomes apparent when one reads the remarkably informative essay "Du Conte merveilleux comme genre" (On the Magic Folk Tale as Genre) by Marie-Louise Tenèze, who uses the works of Propp and Max Lüthi to grasp the kernel (*un noyau irréductible*) of what constitutes the magic of the folktale.[12] She begins with Propp's thesis that there are a limited number of functions in the magic folktale with an identical succession of events. The hero lacks something and goes in search of aid (intermediaries) to achieve happiness, most often marriage. The structure of every magic folktale conforms to this quest. Then she combines Propp's ideas with those of Lüthi, who sees the hero of a magic folktale as a wanderer charged with carrying out a task. Because the answer or solution to this task is known in advance, there is no such thing as chance or coincidence in a folktale. This accounts for the precise, concrete style of all the tales, and their composition is a detailing of the ways in which the hero takes steps to survive and complete his mission. According to Tenèze,

the rich variety of folktales stems from the freedom given to each narrator to alter the functions and tasks within the fixed schema. Her synthesis of Propp and Lüthi leads her to the following formulation:

> The magic folk tale reveals itself in its very core to be like the narration of the situation of the hero between the "response" and the "question," that is between the means obtained and the means employed. In other words, it is the relation between the hero—who is explicitly or implicitly but always assured of *aid in advance*, guaranteed—and the difficult situation in which he finds himself during the course of action that I propose as the constitutive criterion of the genre.[13]

By combining Propp's thesis with Lüthi's, Tenèze endeavors to elaborate a structural approach that stresses the dynamics and changeability of the tale, avoiding the pitfalls of the static models of Propp and Lüthi. She draws an interesting parallel to the primitive North American Indian ritual of puberty described by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*,[14] where adolescents were placed in the wilderness and left alone to survive and develop a sense of power while they also were expected to become aware of the absurdity and desperation one would experience by leaving the social order. Tenèze believes that

> like the real hero of this custom, the hero of the magic folk tale ventures, alone and far from his familiar surroundings, to the perilous fringe of an exceptional experience capable of supplying him with a "personal provision of power," his insertion into the world—and thus, there is a magic solution to the absurd and desperate endeavor to leave the social order which is played out in the universe of fiction. Isn't the folk tale a response to the oppressive interrogation of reality?[15]

Like Propp and Lüthi, Tenèze favors the structural approach to explain the essence of the magic folktale. In other words, it is through the structure or composition of the tale that we can gain an understanding of its meaning or enunciation, what it is trying to communicate. The difficulty with this approach, as Tenèze realizes, is that, if all folktales have essentially the same "morphology" (even though the functions may be varied), they all express the same thing, some kind of universal statement about the plight of humanity. The form itself is its meaning, and the historicity of the individual creator (or creators) and society disappears. Such formalist approaches to folk and fairy tales account in great part for the reason why we tend to see the tales as universal, ageless, and eternal. The tendency here is to homogenize creative efforts so that the differences of human and social acts become blurred.

Tenèze is much too aware of the failing of the structural approach to be satisfied with it, for the second half of her essay on the genre explores other

aspects that may help us define its essence such as its relation to myth and legend and to the narrator and community. In her survey of criticism dealing with reception aesthetics, she stresses the significance of specific narrators and their audiences, their norms and values, all of which must be taken into account if we are to grasp the core of the genre, especially the significance of its development. This leads Tenèze to conclude,

> When we envisage it in its concrete cultural formations, in spite of the character of the world which we recognize in it, the magic folk tale needs to be inscribed in the functional totality of the system of expression of the community in question. Even more than this, it needs to be situated in the life of this community itself. This is the research which must now be carried out in studies of the European folk tale.[16]

Whereas it is extremely difficult to study the historical origins and social significance of a folktale (the relationship between narrator and audience) because we lack a great deal of information about storytelling in primitive tribes and societies, it is not so difficult to define the historical rise of the literary fairy tale for children. It seems to me that any definition of this genre must begin with the premise that the individual tale was indeed a *symbolic act* intended to transform a specific oral folktale (and sometimes a well-known literary tale) and designed to rearrange the motifs, characters, themes, functions, and configurations in such a way that they would address the concerns of the educated and ruling classes of late feudal and early capitalist societies. What Tenèze amply discusses as the dynamic structure of the folktale is what August Nitschke[17] has evaluated in terms of autodynamics, heterodynamics, and metamorphosis of primitive tribes and modern societies. Nitschke maintains that every community and society in history can be characterized by the way human beings arrange themselves and perceive time, and this gives rise to a dominant activity (also called a line of motion). The perspectives and positions assumed by members of society toward the dominant activity amount to a configuration. The configuration designates the character of a social order because the temporal–corporeal arrangement is designed around a dominant activity that shapes the attitudes of people toward work, education, social development, and death. Hence, the configuration of society is the pattern of arrangement and rearrangement of social behavior related to a socialized mode of perception. In the folktale the temporal–corporeal arrangement reflects whether there are perceived to be new possibilities for participation in the social order or whether there must be a confrontation when possibilities for change do not exist. This is why, in each new stage of civilization, in each new historical epoch, the symbols and configurations of the tales were endowed with new meaning, transformed, or eliminated in reaction to the needs and conflicts of the people within the social order. The aesthetic

arrangement and structure of the tales were derived from the way the narrator or narrators perceived the possibility for resolution of social conflicts and contradictions or felt change was necessary.

If we examine the vast group of European folktales of the feudal and early capitalist periods, those tales with which we are most familiar and that were recorded very early, that which is our legacy, we must bear in mind that their configurations and symbols were already marked by a sociopolitical perception and had entered into a specific institutionalized discourse before they were transformed into literary tales for children of the European upper classes. For instance, Heide Göttner-Abendroth has demonstrated convincingly in *Die Göttin und ihr Heros*[18] that the matriarchal worldview and motifs of the original folktales underwent successive stages of "patriarchalization." That is, by the time the oral folktales, originally stamped somewhat by matriarchal mythology, circulated in the Middle Ages, they had been transformed in different ways: the goddess became a witch, an evil fairy, or a stepmother; the active, young princess was changed into an active hero; matrilineal marriage and family ties became patrilineal; the essence of the symbols, based on matriarchal rites, was depleted and made benign; and the pattern of action that concerned maturation and integration was gradually recast to stress domination and wealth.

As a pagan or non-Christian art form, one that was variable depending on the natural condition or social situation that was its reference, the folktale developed a partiality for everything metallic and mineral and conceived of a world that was solid and imperishable. Such a set and highly structured world can be linked to notions of medieval patriarchalism, monarchy, and absolutism in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The world of the folktale is inhabited largely by kings, queens, princes, princesses, soldiers, peasants, animals, and supernatural creatures (witches, fairies, elves, dwarfs, goblins, giants)—rarely by members of the bourgeoisie or the church—and there are no machines, signs of industrialization, or elaborate descriptions of commerce and town life. In other words, the main characters and concerns of a monarchistic, patriarchal, and feudal society are presented, and the focus is on class struggle and competition for power among the aristocrats themselves and between the peasantry and aristocracy. Hence, the central theme of all the folktales of this particular precapitalist period: "might makes right."[19] *He* who has power can exercise *his* will, right wrongs, become ennobled, amass money and land, and win women as prizes and social prestige. Tenèze was correct when she placed her finger on power and oppression as the key concerns of the folktales, and this is why the people, largely peasants, were predominantly attracted to the tale and became its prime carriers: the oral folktales were those symbolic acts in which they enunciated their aspirations and projected the magic possibility in an assortment of imaginative ways so that anyone could become a knight in shining armor or a lovely princess. They also presented the

stark realities of power politics without disguising the violence and brutality of everyday life. Starvation and abandonment of children, rape, corporeal punishment, ruthless exploitation—these are some of the conditions that are at the root of the folktale, conditions that were so overwhelming that they demanded symbolic abstraction.[20]

As Lüthi has shown,[21] the folktale's manner of portrayal is direct, clear, paratactical, and one-dimensional in its narrative perspective, and this narrative position reflects the limitations of feudal life where alternatives to one's situation were extremely limited. So it is in the folktale. Despite magical transformation, there is no mention of another world. Only one side of the characters and living conditions is described. *Everything is confined to a realm without morals*, where class and power determine power relations. Hence, the magic and miraculous serve to rupture the feudal confines and represent metaphorically the conscious and unconscious desires of the lower classes to seize power. In the process, power takes on a moral quality. The fact that the people as carriers of the tales do not *explicitly* seek a total revolution of social relations does not minimize the utopian aspect in the *imaginative* portrayal of class conflict. Whatever the outcomes of the tales are—and for the most part, they are happy ends and "exemplary" in that they affirm a more just feudal order with democratizing elements—the impulse and critique of the "magic" are rooted in a historically explicable desire to overcome oppression and change society.

In the seventeenth century, children of all classes listened to these tales. The peasants did not exclude children when stories were told around the hearth, and lower-class wet nurses and governesses related the same tales to children of the upper classes. Moreover, people of all classes told all types of tales and absorbed them. "Folk" must be understood as "inclusive" not exclusive. The folktale was the staple of what was to become the literary fairy tale for children. Before this could occur, however, it was necessary to prescribe the form and manner in which the tales would be adapted and used to entertain and instruct children. The adaptation of folk material, an act of symbolic appropriation, was a recodification of the material to make it suitable for the discursive requirements of French court society and bourgeois salons. The first writers of fairy tales had to demonstrate the social value of the genre before literary fairy tales could be printed—for adults and children alike. The morality and ethics of a male-dominated Christian civil order had to become part and parcel of the literary fairy tale. This was a given, and it was with this rule in mind, whether one agreed with it or not, that the early French writers of fairy tales began writing—and acted symbolically.

Throughout the Middle Ages children were gradually regarded as a separate age group with a special set of characteristics, and it was considered most important to advance the cause of *civilité* with explicit and implicit rules of pedagogization so that the manners and mores of the young would reflect the

social power, prestige, and hierarchy of the ruling classes. Thus it became vital to bring about socialization through fairy tales and the internalization of specific values and notions of gender. We must remember that the fairy tale for children originated in a period of absolutism when French culture was setting standards of *civilité* for the rest of Europe. Exquisite care was thus taken to cultivate a discourse on the civilization process through the fairy tale for the benefit of well-raised children. In this regard fairy tales for children were no different from the rest of the literature (fables, primers, picture books, sermons, didactic stories, etc.) that conveyed a model of the exemplary child that was to be borne in mind while reading. Fairy tales and children's literature were written with the purpose of socializing children to meet definite normative expectations at home and in the public sphere. The behavioral standards were expressly codified in books on manners and civility. This means that the individual symbolic act of writing the literary fairy tale expressed a certain level of social consciousness and conscience that was related to the standard mode of socialization at that time.

In her discussion of the origins of the literary fairy tale for children in Europe, Denise Escarpit has made it clear that the purpose of the tale from the beginning was to instruct and amuse; that is, to make moral lessons and social strictures palatable. "It was a utilitarian moralism that taught how to 'act in a proper way'; that is, to insert oneself into society docilely but astutely, without disrupting society and also without creating trouble for oneself. One thing is quite clear: there was a threefold manipulation by the author—a manipulation that served a cultural and personal politics, a manipulation of a social kind that presented a certain image of society, and a moralistic manipulation that adhered to the code of bourgeois moralism at the end of the seventeenth century. It was this possibility of multiple manipulation that constituted the power of the tale. According to how the tale was cloaked, it could assume very diverse forms that were functions of social and cultural imperatives at the time. And, in the same way, according to social and cultural imperatives, the tale experienced periods of favor and disfavor. This is the reason why it was transformed into an erotic tale, a philosophical one, or a pedagogical moral tale. It was the latter that directed itself to children."[22]

There is obviously a danger in seeing the fairy tale written for children too much in terms of manipulation. If this were its central role or function, one would have to speak about the genre as a conspiracy. As I have endeavored to demonstrate, however, the literary fairy tale for children, as it began to constitute itself as genre, became more an institutionalized discourse with manipulation as one of its components. This *discourse* had and continues to have many levels to it: the writers of fairy tales for children entered into a dialogue on values and manners with the folktale, with contemporary writers of fairy tales, with the prevailing social code, with implicit adult and young readers, and with unimplied audiences. The shape of the fairy-tale discourse, of the

configurations within the tales, was molded and bound by the European civilizing process that was undergoing profound changes in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The profundity of the literary fairy tale for children, its magic, and its appeal are marked by these changes, for it is one of the cornerstones of our bourgeois heritage. As such, it revolutionized the institution of literature at that time while abiding by its rules. Perrault saw it as modern, as making history, history in the making through innovative symbolic acts.

To write a social history of the literary fairy tale for children in relation to the Western civilizing process is an immense task—and it is not the project of this book. However, I do want to try to provide a framework for such a social history by investigating the contours of the fairy-tale discourse on civilization. My focus in the initial chapters is on the major *classical* writers in Europe and America from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, mainly on Giovan Francesco Straparola, Giambattiste Basile, Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde, and L. Frank Baum. These writers—and it is noteworthy that they are mainly male—are significant because they helped evolve, expand, and reform the discourse and have thus been rewarded with "classical" status in our cultural heritage. The reasons for their "classicity" vary, for their symbolic acts were made either to legitimize or to criticize the course of the Western civilizing process. Some even converted the fairy-tale discourse to subvert it. The subversion through symbolical innovation and involution is amply demonstrated in the last three chapters, which deal with the struggle for domination over the fairy-tale discourse during the Weimar and Nazi periods in Germany, the postwar attempts in the West at large to create liberating tales for children, and the effects that Disney's films have had on the fairy-tale discourse.

My concern is largely with the fairy-tale discourse as a dynamic part of the historical civilizing process, with each symbolic act viewed as an intervention in socialization in the public sphere. To have a fairy tale published is like a symbolic public announcement, an intercession on behalf of oneself, of children, of civilization. It is a historical statement. History is conceived of here not as chronology but rather as absence and rupture—in need of a text. The symbolic act of writing a fairy tale or producing a fairy tale as play or film is problematized by the asking of questions that link the fairy tale to society and our political unconscious. How and why did certain authors try to influence children or adult images of children through the fairy tale? How did these authors react to the prescribed fairy-tale discourse and intervene to alter it according to their needs and social tendencies? My own critical text is obviously an endeavor to make the *absent cause* of history speak for itself, and I avowedly seek a political understanding of our notion of classicism and classical fairy tales, the process of selection, elimination, and

reward. The fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves, and they are not the best therapy in the world for children. They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them.

2
The Origins of the Fairy Tale in Italy: Straparola and Basile

Although the French writers of the 1690s such as Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, Catherine Bernard, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier, Henriette Julie de Murat, Charlotte-Rose de la Force, Jean de Mailly, Eustache Le Noble, and others were chiefly responsible for the establishment of the fairy tale as a literary genre in Europe, they were not as original as one would think, nor were they the innovators of the genre. In fact, the Italian writers Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile played a highly significant role in the rise of the literary fairy tale in Europe, and their tales had a profound influence on the French. This is one of the best kept secrets in the history of the fairy tale, and it is a secret that is well worth unlocking because it reveals just how closely tied the literary fairy tale as genre is to the spread of the civilizing process throughout Europe.

The rise of the literary fairy tale as a short narrative form stemmed from the literary activity that flourished in Florence during the fourteenth century and led to the production of various collections of *novelle* in Italian and Latin under the influence of Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. The *novella*, also called *conto*, was a short tale that adhered to principles of unity of time and action and clear narrative plot. The focus was on surprising events of *everyday* life, and the tales (influenced by oral wonder tales, fairy tales, *fabliaux*, chivalric romances, epic poetry, and fables) were intended for the amusement and instruction of the readers. Before Boccaccio had turned his hand to writing his tales, the most famous collection had been the *Novellino* written by an anonymous Tuscan author in the thirteenth century. But it was Boccaccio who set a model for all future writers of this genre with his frame narrative and subtle and sophisticated style. It was Boccaccio who expanded the range of topics of the novella and created unforgettable characters that led to numerous imitations by writers such as Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, Giovanni Sercambi, Franco Sachetti, Piovano Arlotto, and Matteo Bandello, to name but a few.

It was undoubtedly because of Boccaccio's example, the growth of literacy and publishing in Venice, and the great interest in the novella that Straparola came to publish his collection *Le piacevoli notti* (1550 and 1553) in

two volumes. Straparola is a fascinating figure because he was the first European writer to adapt many tales from the oral tradition, and he created approximately fourteen literary fairy tales in his collection of seventy-four novelle. He is also a mysterious figure because we know next to nothing about him. Straparola was born probably about 1480 in Carvaggio, but there are no records that confirm anything about his life, and even his surname "Straparola," which means the loquacious one, may have been a pseudonym. We have information only from the first volume of *Le piacevoli notti* that he was born in Carvaggio and that he was the author of another work, *Opera nova de Zoan Francesco Straparola da Caravazo* (1508), a collection of sonnets and poems, published in Venice. Also, we are not certain of his death in 1557. Most likely he had moved to Venice as a young man, and it is clear from his collection of novelle, which he called *favole*, that he was very well educated and that he must have lived in Venice for some time. He knew Latin and various Italian dialects, and his references to other literary works and understanding of literary forms indicate that he was well versed in the humanities. Whoever Straparola may have been, his *Le piacevoli notti* had great success: it was reprinted twenty-five times from 1553–1613 and translated into French in 1560 and 1580 and into German in 1791. It was also at one time banned by the pope.

The allure of his work can be attributed to several factors: his use of erotic and obscene riddles, his mastery of polite Italian used by the narrators in the frame narrative, his introduction of plain earthy language into the stories, the critical view of the power struggles in Italian society and lack of moralistic preaching, his inclusion of fourteen unusual fairy tales into the collection, and his interest in magic, unpredictable events, duplicity, and the supernatural. Similar to Boccaccio, Straparola exhibited an irreverence for authorities, and the frame narrative reveals a political tension and somewhat ironic if not pessimistic outlook on the possibilities of living a harmonious happy ever after life.

In the opening of the book that sets the frame for all the *favole*, Straparola depicts how Ottoviano Maria Sforza, the bishop-elect of Lodi (most likely the real Sforza, who died in 1540), was forced to leave Milan because of political plots against him. He takes his daughter, Signora Lucretia, a widow, with him, and because her husband had died in 1523, it can be assumed that the setting for *Le piacevoli notti* is approximately some time between 1523 and 1540. The bishop and his daughter flee first to Lodi, then to Venice, and finally settle on the island of Murano. They gather a small group of congenial people around them: ten gracious ladies, two matronly women, and four educated and distinguished gentlemen. Since it is the time of Carnival, Lucretia proposes that the company take turns telling stories during the two weeks before Lent, and consequently, there are thirteen nights in which stories are told, amounting to seventy-four tales in all.

To a certain extent, the fictional company on the island of Murano can be regarded as an ideal representation of how people can relate to one another and comment in pleasing and instructive ways about all types of experience. The stories created by Straparola are literary fairy tales, revised oral tales, anecdotes, erotic stories, buffo tales of popular Italian life, didactic anecdotes, fables, and tales based on the works of writers who preceded him, such as Boccaccio, Franco Sacchetti, Ser Giovanni Forentino, Giovanni Sercambi, and others. In the fairy tales, as well as in most of the other narratives, Straparola focuses on power and fortune. Without luck (magic, fairies, miracles) the hero cannot succeed in his mission, and without knowing how to use the power of magic or taking advantage of a fortuitous event or gift, the hero cannot succeed. Though wicked people are punished, it is clear that standards of civility are set only by the people in power. Actually, most civil standards and proper norms are rarely upheld. Thus, in "Galeotto," a tale imitated by Mme d'Aulnoy in "Le Prince Marcassin" and Mme de Murat in "Le Roy Porc," the animal prince can kill his brides at will, and in "Tebaldo," which may have influenced Perrault's "Peau d'Ane," a father can seek to sleep with his daughter at will. The majority of the tales centers on active male protagonists who are "heroic" mainly because they know how to exploit opportunities that bring them wealth, power, and money. Straparola begins most of his tales in small towns or cities in Italy and sends his protagonists off to other countries and realms and, of course, into woods or onto the sea. His protagonists are adventurers, and there is a sense that the fairy tales have been gathered from far and wide and not just from the region of Venice.

If Straparola did indeed spend most of his life in Venice—and we cannot be certain about this—it would not be by chance that the tales that he read and heard came to this port city from other regions in Europe and other countries. Venice was a thriving and wealthy city in the sixteenth century, and Straparola would have had contact with foreigners from all over Italy, Europe, and the Orient. Or he would have had news about them. This real news formed the basis of the *fiabe* (fairy tales) in his collection, and it is a collection that also was fairly well disseminated in Europe. But its significance for the development of the literary fairy tale in Europe has generally been neglected. Of course, he alone did not trigger the development, but there are clear signs that his tales circulated throughout Europe and had a considerable influence among educated writers: Basile, who later spent some time in Venice, was apparently familiar with his book, and it is obvious that Mme d'Aulnoy, Mme de Murat, Charles Perrault, Eustache Le Noble, and Jean de Mailly knew his tales in some version, and through them the tales spread to Germany and eventually influenced the Brothers Grimm, who wrote about Straparola and Basile.[1] In short, Straparola helped initiate the genre of the literary fairy tale in Europe, and though it would be misleading to talk about a diachronic history of the literary fairy tale with a chain reaction that begins with Straparola, leads to Basile and

then to the French writers of the 1690s, and culminates in the work of the Brothers Grimm, I want to suggest that they do form a historical frame in which the parameters of the early literary fairy tale were set, and within that frame there was an institutionalization of what we now call fairy-tale characters, topoi, motifs, metaphors, and plots. Their conventionalization enabled numerous writers (and storytellers in the oral tradition) to experiment and produce highly original fairy tales at the same time. In Italy, Straparola's work was particularly innovative because the oral folktale had rarely been adapted as a literary fairy tale in the vernacular. Straparola was writing at a time when Latin was still the dominant print language, and he was using Tuscan Italian and some dialect to appeal to a growing audience of middle-class readers. Also his perspective with regard to the corruption and immorality of the times reflects his concern in bringing about a change in morals, manners, and customs. There was no standard civilizing process in Italy during his times, although there were numerous books about courtly manners and the proper education of the aristocracy, some with references to specific principalities in Italy, others that concerned European society. The French were the progenitors of a more general and effective civilizing process in the sixteenth century. But literacy in Italy, that is, the significance of becoming literate, was part of the process, and the publication, distribution, and reading of Straparola's fairy tales were part of the nascent civilizing process in Italy. In particular, he demonstrated how both oral and literary fairy tales could be shaped in metaphorical form to address delicate issues pertaining to the power of tyrannical princes, justice, and proper comportment. Given the reading practices of his day, many of his tales must have been read aloud, and he himself (with his strange name associated with loquacity) may have been a storyteller of some kind. Writers were also tellers in the sixteenth century, for the split between oral and literary narrators was never as great as we imagine it to be, and their familiarity with the folklore of their respective societies played a role in their literary representations in the fairy tale. Basile's work is a case in point.

We know a great deal about Basile, in contrast to the little we know about Straparola. Born in a small village near Naples about 1575, he came from a middle-class family, and in 1603 he left Naples and traveled north, eventually settling in Venice, where he earned his living as a soldier and began writing poetry. By 1608 he returned to the region of Naples and held various positions as administrator and governor in different principalities and courts while pursuing a career as poet and writer until his death in 1632. Though he became well-known for his poems, odes, eclogues, and dramas, written in Italian, and he helped organize court spectacles, his fame today is a result of his astounding collection of fifty fairy tales written in Neapolitan dialect, *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*The Tale of Tales*, 1634–36), also known as the *Pentamerone* (*The Pentameron*), published posthumously thanks to the efforts of his sister Adriana, a famous opera singer.

There is no clear proof that Basile knew Straparola's tales, but it is more than likely he was acquainted with them in some form, especially since he had spent about three years in Venice, where Straparola's tales had been published and had been popular. However important Straparola might have been for Basile's conception of his fairy tales, he was a pale light in comparison with the fiery imaginative Basile. Not only did the Neapolitan author draw on an abundance of literary and historical sources to create his uproarious ironic tales but he also was acquainted with the folklore of a vast region around Naples and was familiar with Oriental tales, as was Straparola. His command of the Neopolitan dialect is extraordinary, for he managed to combine an elevated Baroque form of the dialect with vulgar expressions, metaphors, idioms, and brilliant proverbs, many of which he created himself. The frame narrative (following Boccaccio, of course) is fascinating in and of itself. His "tale of tales" sets the stage for forty-nine marvelous stories. In this frame tale, Zoza, the daughter of the King of Vallepelosa, cannot laugh, and her father is so concerned about her happiness that he invites people from all over to try to make her laugh. Yet nobody can succeed, until an old woman, who attempts to sop up oil in front of the palace, has her jug broken by a mischievous court page. The ensuing argument between the old woman and the page, each hurling coarse and vulgar epithets at one another, is so delightful that Zoza bursts into laughter. However, this laughter does not make the old woman happy, and she curses Zoza by exclaiming, "Begone, and may you never find even the shadow of a husband unless you take the Prince of Camporotondo!"[2] To her dismay, Zoza learns that this prince named Tadeo is under the spell of a wicked fairy and is in a tomb. He can be wakened and liberated only by a woman who fills a pitcher hanging on a nearby wall with her tears.

In need of help, Zoza visits three different fairies and receives a walnut, a chestnut, and a hazelnut as gifts. Then she goes to Tadeo's tomb and weeps into the pitcher for two days. When the pitcher is almost full, she falls asleep because she is tired from all the crying. While she is sleeping, however, a slave girl steals the pitcher, fills it, wakes Tadeo, and takes the credit for bringing him back to life. Consequently, Tadeo marries her, and she becomes pregnant.

But Zoza, whose happiness depends on Tadeo, is not about to concede the prince to a slave girl. She rents a house across from Tadeo's palace and manages to attract the attention of Tadeo. In response, the slave girl threatens to beat the baby if Tadeo spends any time with Zoza, who now uses another tactic to gain entrance into Tadeo's palace. On three different occasions she opens the nuts. One contains a little dwarf, who sings; the next contains twelve chickens made of gold; and the third contains a doll that spins gold. The slave girl demands these fascinating objects, and Tadeo sends for them, offering Zoza whatever she wants. To his surprise, Zoza gives the objects as gifts. Yet the final one, the doll, stirs an uncontrollable passion in the slave girl to hear stories during her pregnancy, and she threatens Tadeo again: unless women

come to tell her tales, she will kill their unborn baby. So, Tadeo invites ten women from the rabble known for their storytelling. The women spend the day chattering and gossiping, and after the evening meal, one tale is told by each one of the ten for five nights. Finally, on the last day, Zoza is invited to tell the last tale, and she recounts what happened to her. The slave girl tries to stop her, but Tadeo insists that Zoza be allowed to tell the tale to the end. When he realizes that Zoza's tale is true, Tadeo has the pregnant slave girl buried alive, and he marries Zoza to bring the tale of tales to a "happy" conclusion.

Unlike the narratives by Boccaccio and Straparola, Basile's tales, which are told during banquets with music, games, and dance, are entirely fairy tales, revised apparently from the oral tradition and told by lower-class figures. There are constant local references to Naples and the surrounding area and to social customs, political intrigues, and family conflicts. Basile was an astute social commentator, who despaired of the corruption in the courts that he served, and he was obviously taken with the country folk, their surprising antics, and their need and drive for change and the acquisition of better living conditions.

Similar to Straparola, Basile shared a concern with power, civility, and transformation and was fascinated by the wheel of fortune and how Lady Fortuna, often in the form of a mysterious *fata* (fairy, linked to fate), intervened in people's lives to provide them with the opportunity to advance in society or to gain some measure of happiness. Of course, he also depicted how Lady Fortuna could devastate people and cause destruction. Again, like Straparola, he was not overly optimistic about establishing social equality and harmonious communities. Conflict reigns in his tales in which a usually demure Cinderella chops off the head of her stepmother and a discreet princess virtually liquidates a seducer in a battle of the sexes. Nevertheless, his tales exude mirth because of the manner in which he turns language inside out and creates a carnalevesque atmosphere.[3] Just as the frame tale leads to the exposure of the stealthy slave girl to her deadly detriment, all the narratives seek to reveal the contradictory nature in which all members of society pretend to comport themselves according to lofty standards but will stoop as low as they must to achieve wealth and happiness. Basile takes great delight in minimizing the differences between coarse peasants and high aristocrats, and certainly if his tales had been written and published in Italian, they would have found their way to the Church's Index of Prohibited Books.

Remarkable as it may seem, Basile's tales were, in fact, reprinted several times in the seventeenth century, despite the difficulty people might have had reading the Neapolitan dialect, and, through translations into Italian and then into French, they became fairly well known in Italy and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is apparent that Mlle Lhéritier was very familiar with his tales, and three of hers, "L'Adroite Princesse" ("The Discreet Princess"), "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence" ("The Enchantments of