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PERRAULT, THE BROTHERS GRIMM,
AND THE OWNERSHIP OF FAIRY TALES

Donald Haase

The Revered Place of Folklore

In 1944 W.H. Auden decreed that Grimms' fairy tales are "among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western culture can be founded. . . . [I]t is hardly too much to say that these tales rank next to the Bible in importance" (1).

Auden was in one sense right. Like the Bible, fairy tales—especially the classic tales of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm—hold a revered if not sacred place in modern Western culture. Often thought to reach back like sacred works to "times past," to some ancient, pristine age in which their original tellers spoke mythic words of revelation, folk and fairy tales are endowed by many readers with unassailable moral and even spiritual authenticity.

Because they had their genesis in an oral tradition, we are tempted to imagine their original tellers as simple folk endowed with infallible wisdom and, in some cases, divine inspiration. As a consequence of that belief, tampering with the classic texts of Perrault or the Brothers Grimm is considered by some to be tantamount to sacrilege, similar to revising the text of Holy Scriptures. As one of my undergraduate students remarked in a journal he kept while studying fairy tales in the winter term of 1990: "I am not a deeply religious person. However, I have a vague feeling that questioning the origin of fairy tales is somehow sacrilegious." Some traditionalists even go so far as to argue that the common practice of replacing *Sneewittchen*, Grimms' original German spelling of Snow White, with the more

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modern orthographical form *Schneewittchen* constitutes “monument desecration” (Bausinger 46).

When classic stories are changed unacceptably, the blame is often placed on the culture industry—publishers, advertisers, merchandisers, and even pedagogues who have capitalized on the mass appeal of the traditional tales and emptied them of their original vigor and truth. Disney’s Americanized and romanticized fairy-tale movies, for example, have been severely criticized for trivializing and betraying the original themes, thus enfeebling an important cultural possession (Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* 210). As the civilized entrepreneur and creator of the fairy tale as consumer romance (Haase, “Gold Into Straw”), Disney is the absolute antithesis of the mythic peasant or Ice Age storyteller from whom we have supposedly inherited this allegedly sacred possession.

While this religious or quasi-religious reverence is certainly appealing and even reassuring, it is dangerously misleading. As an antidote to it, consider two of the 24 theses offered by the German writer Wolfdietrich Schnurre, in a piece he aptly entitled “Heretical Thoughts on the Treasury of Fairy Tales.” In a sardonic letter to the long deceased Brothers Grimm, Schnurre seeks to explain why he thinks fairy tales have lost their value for us. “The primary guilt for the decline of the fairy tale,” he claims, “rests with those who [originally] made them. They forgot to impress on them the stamp of copyright” (23). In this case, not the culture industry, but the folk themselves are held responsible for the fairy tale’s bankruptcy. Ironically, the fairy tale’s status as communal property is proposed as the very cause of its neglect and demise. It is a fairy tale, Schnurre asserts, to believe “that fairy tales are the property of the *Volk*—the people. Property is cared for. The *Volk*,” he asserts, “has ruined fairy tales” (23).

These statements are heretical to established views that tell us not only why folktales are still relevant but to whom they belong. However we might feel about the tales of the Brothers Grimm or Perrault, Schnurre's provocative heresies raise intriguing questions about the reception and cultural ownership of fairy tales. Who are the folk, that anonymous group we often view as the originators and owners of the fairy tale? And if the tales do not belong to the folk, then to whom do they belong? And, finally, why does the issue of ownership matter at all?

The Nationalistic View of Folklore

The concept of "the folk" is a slippery one. To some, the folk are an ethnic or national group sharing common traditions, lore, and social or cultural traits. In general parlance, "the folk" are the common folk, the working or peasant classes. But as the Italian folklorist Giuseppe Cocchiara has suggested, the identity of the folk transcends classes and "is the expression of a certain vision of life, certain attitudes of the spirit, of thought, of culture, of custom, of civilization, which appear with their own clearly delineated characteristics" (4). While Cocchiara's definition avoids the class bias of earlier definitions, Alan Dundes excises the ethnic and national emphasis by defining the folk as "*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor" (2).

However, for the Grimms and many early folklorists, it was the so-called common people who best embodied a nation's folk life. It was their lore—including their folktales—that was to become the reservoir and model of national character. As the product of the German folk, the tales were thought to contain the scattered fragments of ancient Germanic myth, which—when collected—would provide the German people with a magic mirror in which they could discern and thus reassert their national identity. In this way,

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Grimms' collection of folktales was conscripted into nationalistic service and became a political weapon in the Grimms' intellectual resistance to the Napoleonic occupation of their beloved Hessian homeland.

To define the folk in nationalistic terms establishes fairy tales as national property. They are either yours, or they are mine. Following—and, it must be emphasized, grossly exaggerating—the Grimms' nationalistic understanding of fairy tales, many Germans were only too ready to exercise their right of ownership by advocating the Grimms' tales as a national primer, after 1871, for the newly unified nation. In 1899, for instance, Carl Franke gave this explanation of the close link between Grimms' tales and the education of a nation:

To the spirit of German schoolchildren the tales have become what mother's milk is for their bodies—the first nourishment for the spirit and the imagination. How German [are] Snow White, Little Briar Rose, Little Red Cap, the seven dwarfs! Through such genuine German diet must the language and spirit of the child gradually become more and more German. . . . (cited in Snyder 51)

Given the Grimms' precedent and given the need of every new state to authenticate its self-image, we can understand such remarks; just as we can understand the lamentable exploitation of the Grimms' tales under National Socialism, which points up all too clearly the dangers inherent in viewing fairy tales as the property of a single group or nation (see Kamenetsky; Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 134-69).

But there is another, hidden danger in this nationalistic view. Ironically, the abuse of the Grimms' tales by the culture industry of National Socialism has reinforced prejudice against the Grimms' tales. So compelling was the German

identification of Germanic folktales with national identity that the Grimms' stories have very often been accepted as belonging uniquely to the Germans. But instead of identifying favorable cultural traits in the tales, some readers have discerned more ambiguous characteristics. In 1939, Vincent Brun accused the Germans of perverting the fairy tale by exploiting its rude primitive instincts to educate and not to amuse children. By the end of World War II, however, the German fairy tale had fallen into such disrepute that during the Allied occupation of Germany fairy tales were viewed with serious suspicion and banned from the public school curriculum. Evidently, Auden's reclamation of the Grimms' tales as common property in 1944 was not universally accepted; in 1947 T.J. Leonard let loose with his infamous attack on German fairy tales, which he unequivocally condemned as relics of German barbarism and blamed for promoting German nationalism and sadistic behavior among Germans. The reverberations of such attacks on Germanic folktales and German national character can still be felt. In 1985, Siegfried Heyer published an abridged German translation of Leonard's attack, and Jörg Becker, in response, reflected on the enduring image of the "ugly German." That the alleged connection between German national character and fairy tales should occupy Becker forty years after the war is not surprising given that the Germans, as well as their former enemies, have kept this essentially postwar issue alive.

In 1978, Louis Snyder repeated the thesis he first put forth in the 1950s that the Grimms' tales, having played a role in the development of modern German nationalism, emphasize "such social characteristics as respect for order, belief in the desirability of obedience, subservience to authority, respect for the leader and the hero, veneration of courage and the military spirit, acceptance without protest

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of cruelty, violence, and atrocity, fear of and hatred for the outsider, and virulent anti-Semitism" (51). Readers like Snyder clearly relinquish title to the tales and deed them back to their owners. The implicit nationalism of the message is clear: these tales are yours (German), not mine (American).

Differentiating between tales belonging to different countries, and thus differentiating between the countries themselves, has become standard practice. In his study of the French folktale during the Old Regime, the historian Robert Darnton has insisted on the unique characteristics of the French folktale that distinguish it from its German counterpart. Darnton summarizes the differences in this way:

Where the French tales tend to be realistic, earthy, bawdy, and comical, the German [tales] veer off toward the supernatural, the poetic, the exotic, and the violent. Of course, cultural differences cannot be reduced to a formula—French craftiness versus German cruelty—but the comparisons make it possible to identify the peculiar inflection that the French gave to their stories, and their way of telling stories provides clues about their way of viewing the world. (50-51)

Although Darnton tries to avoid stereotyping national character by adding a disclaimer and by referring instead to differing world views, in the final analysis his implicit notion of fairy tales as culturally defined property makes this difficult. However, he is at least aware of the danger of idealizing the national ethos. In pointing to the similarity between the tales of French peasants and those of Perrault, Darnton says that both groups of "tales communicated traits, values, attitudes, and a way of construing the world that was peculiarly French. To insist upon their Frenchness," he notes, "is not to fall into romantic rhapsodizing about national spirit, but

rather to recognize the existence of distinct cultural styles, which set off the French . . . from other peoples identified at the time as German, Italian, and English” (63). Perhaps it is easy for Darnton to avoid rhapsodizing, because he is not French. That is, the tales he discusses are “theirs,” not his.

Although the French are not immune to praising the unique nature of their national fairy tales, they seem to be less dependent on the tales for the codification of their self-image than are the Germans. France lacked—indeed, did not need—strong nationalistic voices such as the Brothers Grimm, who set the German precedent for folktale worship. Moreover, because the French enjoyed a strong literary heritage, they were perhaps more likely to find models of the national ethos in their classical canon than in popular folk literature. After all, unlike the Grimms’ tales, Perrault’s stories are usually considered not so much examples of the folk culture as part of the elevated literary tradition of the Old Regime. So whereas Robert Darnton might find the French popular tale characterized by the earthy and bawdy, Paul Hazard praises Perrault’s fairy tales for their expression of such typically French characteristics as logic, wit, and refined femininity (121-24). Fernand Baldensperger, not without irony, has even observed that Perrault’s fairies are charming Cartesian fairies (cited in Hazard 122).

The pride the French take in their tales rarely gets more impassioned than this. Perhaps this has something to do with the influential essay on Perrault written by Sainte-Beuve in 1851, in which he stressed not only the naivete and simplicity, but also the universal appeal of the French stories (273).

Such a view draws on another interpretation of the folk that does not rely on national or ethnic identity and consequently proposes an alternative ownership for the fairy tale.

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This view of the folk is informed by a universalizing tendency that completely disregards social, historical, and cultural factors. It is the view espoused in particular by psychoanalytic, archetypal, and anthroposophical-spiritualist (Waldorf school) readers of fairy tales. It is best summed up in this amazingly wrongheaded passage taken from the book *Fairy Tales and Children* by psychologist Carl-Heinz Mallet:

Fairy Tales are popular poetry, for they originated and developed among the people [the folk]. They were born in dusty spinning rooms. Simple people told them to simple people. No one else was interested in these "old wives' tales." No superior authority, whether profane or ecclesiastic, exerted any influence. Fairy tales developed outside the great world, beyond the centers of political and cultural power. They absorbed nothing from these areas, no historical events, no political facts, no cultural trends. They remained free of the moral views, behavioral standards, and manners of the various epochs. . . . Human beings *per se* are the focal point of fairy tales, and people are pretty much alike no matter when or where they have lived. (38)

What a striking contrast to the opinions discussed earlier in this chapter. Here the folk constitute not a national group bound together by a common culture, but an ill-defined population of idyllic innocents whose sole characteristic is simplicity. Rousseau is responsible for this model. But both this mythical peasant and the ensuing notion of a fairy tale untouched by its social or historical context are ridiculous. Yet these are the very premises upon which very influential and popular theories of the fairy tale have been built. Their unfortunate success lies in their reassuring appeal to our humanity, to the soothing promise that both human beings and values transcend time and space. In other words, as vessels of purportedly universal human truths, fairy tales

belong to us all. The classic example of this view is Bruno Bettelheim, whose popular psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Perrault have been widely and enthusiastically embraced.

Bettelheim's Psychoanalytical Interpretations of Fairy Tales

From Bettelheim's psychoanalytic perspective, fairy tales address "essential human problems" and "have great psychological meaning" (*The Uses of Enchantment* 17). Through fairy tales, Bettelheim argues, both children and adults can find their way through life's existential dilemmas. Bettelheim can come to these conclusions because he assumes that fairy tales transcend the specific time and place of their origin and give us insight into "manifold truths . . . which can guide our lives; . . . truth as valid today as it was once upon a time" (310). Thus, fairy tales, whether German or French, for example, would seem to belong to us all, not simply by virtue of our sharing a common Western culture, but because the fairy tale's transcendent nature addresses our common humanity. However, Bettelheim's point of view is problematic because what he believes to be universal truths ultimately turn out to be the values of nineteenth-century Europe.

The repressive moralizing inherent in Bettelheim's readings of fairy tales has been solidly criticized before, but I mention the issue again here because his understanding of fairy tales remains influential, especially among teachers and children's librarians, who often rely on his work (see Bettelheim, "Children and Fairy Tales", and Flatter). Jack Zipes' criticism of what he calls Bettelheim's "Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children," in particular, deserves reading or re-reading in light of the recent, sobering allegations by one of Bettelheim's former patients at the Orthogenic School that the author of *The Uses of Enchant-*

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ment was an authoritarian who physically and emotionally abused children in his care (Pekow; see also Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm* 110-34). The values that Bettelheim views as timeless and common to us all frequently turn out to be those of the authoritarian, patriarchal society in which he was raised (Haase, " 'Verzauberungen der Seele' ").

Some of Bettelheim's influence has been mitigated by recent studies that reveal the specific sociocultural roots of many tales and thus expose their historically determined values. In fact, for the last fifteen years the Grimms' tales have been the center of considerable discussion and controversy as a result of renewed interest in evidence that the Grimms did not give us authentic, unaltered folktales transcribed from the mouths of the simple people, but instead drew many of their tales from highly educated informants or printed literary texts (see Bottigheimer; Rölleke; Tatar; Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm*). That Wilhelm Grimm had freely revised, edited, added to, and basically rewritten many of the classic tales to reflect also his own aesthetic and moral values renders the universal, transcendent view of these tales untenable.

But the discrediting of theories has affected not only those who, like Bettelheim, believe in the universal nature of fairy tales. The nationalists have had to confront the discovery that many of the best known and most cherished of the Grimms' tales are not purely German. They are in many cases of mixed origin. Some of the Grimms' most significant informants have turned out to be educated bourgeois women from families of French Huguenots who had settled in Germany after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Of course, to say that these oral sources spoke French and were familiar with the tales of Perrault is not to say that what the Grimms have given us is a collection of French tales. They

did not. But it is enough to undermine the view that makes fairy tales the possession of a single nationality.

We are left, however, with a question. If fairy tales are not the universal possession of an all-encompassing, undifferentiated humanity, and if they are not the sole property of any single national group, then to whom do fairy tales belong? This question can be best answered by turning first to the question: Why does it matter at all to whom fairy tales belong?

The Question of Ownership

The question of ownership is not an idle question. As we've seen, our specific views on the origins and nature of fairy tales necessarily imply that we have, implicitly or explicitly, a specific attitude toward their ownership. And these attitudes, in turn, have an impact on the reception of fairy tales insofar as they determine how we both read and use fairy tales. The problem—indeed, the danger—with both the nationalistic/ethnic perspective and the universal view of fairy tales is that they prescribe forms of thought and behavior, and modes and models of humanity, that are meant to be normative. That is, they stereotype us—either as members of a nationalistic or ethnic group, or as human beings defined by a certain concept of what is or is not normal. This is why fairy tales have been so frequently utilized by *both* nationalists and universalists in the socialization of children. In both cases, fairy tales are supposed to depict or prescribe for us what is true, as well as what forms of behavior are typical, normal, and acceptable. Whether we view them as yours and mine or as ours, fairy tales—read from these perspectives—confine and limit us, narrowing our views of reality while allegedly giving us greater insight into the other, into ourselves, or into humanity. From these perspectives, fairy tales own us, we don't own them.

An important twist was added to the question of ownership with the proliferation of both printed texts and copyright law in the nineteenth century. While folktales remain in the public domain because of their anonymous origin in the oral tradition (which accounts in part for their popularity among publishers), there has been a growing tendency to stress private ownership by individuals or even corporations. This is evident in the way we speak about fairy tales. With deference to the folk's public ownership of fairy tales, the Grimms claimed only to have *collected* the stories in their famous edition. Yet we refer to them as "Grimms' fairy tales." Contemporary storytellers, who work for a fee and are cautious about allowing audio or video recordings of their performances, frequently talk of making a traditional folktale their own. Although this is in one sense an artistic claim, the vocabulary of ownership implies clearly the expectation to control and profit from the tale in question. When Disney called his animated fairy tales by his own name—*Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty*, and so on—he was not simply making an artistic statement, but also laying claim to the tales in what would become their most widely-known, public versions. In 1989, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences used the figure of Snow White in its televised award ceremonies, the Walt Disney Company filed a lawsuit claiming "unauthorized use of its Snow White character," which the corporation felt had been treated in an unflattering manner in the comical and mildly satirical sketch ("Disney Company"; see also Harnetz). When the Walt Disney Company spent \$1 million for the videocassette rights to the "Rocky and Bullwinkle" series—including the "Fractured Fairy Tales" that sometimes parody the Disney versions and Walt Disney himself—its corporate ownership and control of the fairy tale were extended to even the subversive fairy tale

(Kaplan). If the Walt Disney Company cannot completely prevent unflattering parodies of its fairy-tale movies and their creator, at least it will now be able to control and profit from their distribution.

The Disney case demonstrates that the question of ownership is important because it is ultimately a question of control. So who owns fairy tales? To be blunt: I do. And you do. We can each claim fairy tales for ourselves. Not as members of a national or ethnic folk group—as French, German, or American. Not as nameless faces in a sea of humanity. And not in the Disney model as legal copyright holders. We claim fairy tales in every individual act of telling and reading. If we avoid reading fairy tales as models of behavior and normalcy, they can become for us revolutionary documents that encourage the development of personal autonomy.

As some revisionist writers and storytellers have already recognized, the removal of the fairy tale from the service of nationalism and universalism requires the subversion of traditional tales. Thus we find contemporary literary versions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” for instance, that offer alternative visions. In one version, by the Merseyside Fairy Story Collective, a young girl overcomes her fear and slays the wolf who threatens her grandmother (Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* 239-46). In another, by Angela Carter, a young woman, far from becoming the wolf’s innocent victim, accepts her animal nature—her sexuality—and actually leaves her family and village to join the company of wolves (Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations* 272-80). In other media, such as film, video, and song, attempts have also been made to reclaim the fairy tale. In fact, Angela Carter’s Red Riding Hood story, “The Company of Wolves,” has itself been re-made as a movie (Carter and Jordan). And some of the irreverent video adaptations in Shelley Duvall’s *Fairie Tale Theatre* go a long way towards

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offsetting the saccharine Disney model of consumer romance. Even in popular music the Disney claim on meaning has been challenged by authorized remakes of the songs from Walt Disney's fairy-tale movies. Sinéad O'Connor's subtly ironic rendering of "Someday My Prince Will Come," Betty Carter's sensual subversion of "I'm Wishing," and Tom Waits' industrialized "Heigh Ho" give us the opportunity to reinterpret Disney and "his" tales for ourselves and our time (Willner).

Discovering Individual Ownership of Fairy Tales

The opportunity to reclaim fairy tales is as crucial for children as it is for adults. But the right to ownership of the tales may in some ways be more difficult for children to claim. After all, teachers, librarians, parents, and powers in the culture industry exert a certain control over the popular reception of fairy tales by determining to a great extent not only the nature of the tales that are made accessible to children, but also the context of their reception. A storyteller who buys into myths about the pristine origin of fairy tales assumes an unearned mantle of authority and shrouds the stories not only in mystery but error. A parent under Bruno Bettelheim's spell uses time-bound tales to justify a timeless moral authority. And a teacher concerned about the so-called crisis of cultural literacy will emphasize canonized fairy-tale texts and treat them as sacred cultural artifacts. In each case, children's responses are expected to conform to the external authority of the tales they read or hear. It is no accident that parents and educators so often praise fairy tales because of their ability to enchant children. Stripped of sentimentality, enchantment—that is, being spellbound and powerless—is also a curse. We applaud the rescue of a Frog King or a Sleeping Beauty who is powerless to break the spell of a malevolent force, but when a moralistic text

“enchants” and has a child in its spell, we apparently have that child exactly where we want her or him.

There are at least two ways in which children can be awakened from this form of enchantment and helped to discover their individual ownership of fairy tales. First, teachers and parents can offer children a wider variety of fairy tales than is usually proffered. Complementing the classic tales and anthologies with newer or lesser-known stories and variants places the traditional tales in a context that encourages diverse responses, questions, and significant comparisons—even among elementary school children. When I read my own ten-year-old daughter the Grimms’ “Little Red Riding Hood” and the version of the Merseyside Fairy Story Collective, for example, she announced that she liked the second version better “because the little girl was smarter.”

Numerous anthologies that resurrect neglected fairy tales and offer alternatives to the best-known classic tales are readily available today. Among them are Alison Lurie’s *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales*, Ethel Johnston Phelps’ *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folktales from Around the World*, and Suzanne I. Barchers’ *Wise Women: Folk and Fairy Tales from Around the World*. Each of these seeks to provide tales with female characters who resist the stereotypes that dominate the fairy-tale market. Jack Zipes has the same goal in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the Tale in Sociocultural Context* and *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*. Both of these also include significant bibliographies of many other alternative fairy-tales. The traditional fairy-tale canon can also be complemented by stories “belonging” to other cultural traditions. Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly*, for example, is an excellent anthology of American Black folktales

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that can be reclaimed by new generations. Innovative illustrations can also recast a familiar text in such a way as to allow children fresh responses to a classic story. In Creative Education's fairy-tale series, for example, Sarah Moon has outfitted Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* with haunting—for some perhaps troubling—black and white photographs that reinterpret the story for the urban reader. Of video and film versions of fairy tales, teachers might want to explore Tom Davenport's innovative but uneven series *From the Brothers Grimm: American Versions of Folktale Classics*, which now consists of nine Grimm tales transplanted into American settings. While Davenport's film adaptations combine reverence for the tales with moments of humor, Roald Dahl's *Revolving Rhymes* demystifies classic tales. Dahl's irreverent fairy-tale adaptations in verse are a good antidote to the saccharine presentations often found in children's editions.

Beyond presenting children with a variety of fairy tales, adults can also encourage the creative reception of fairy tales. In other words, children can make fairy tales their own by creating and re-creating their own versions. There is good evidence that given the opportunity, children will take fairy tales into their own hands in any case. In his book *The Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes has recounted how fifth- and sixth-grade girls combined the character of Peter Pumpkin-Eater and the story of Cinderella into a new tale that explicitly reflects their developing sexuality and consciousness (146). And Kristin Wardetzky has shown how the storytelling of children in the former East Germany does not always succumb to the dominant cultural models and recreates the fairy tale in ways that express the children's power over the genre.

At the end of his list of heresies Wolfdietrich Schnurre wonders, "Can the fairy tale be saved?" His answer: "Per-

haps. If specialists expose the roots of the tales and tell them in a way that is thoroughly new and which expresses their essence” (25). Writers and professional storytellers retelling tales and making them own can indeed renew the fairy tale. But readers, too—including children—can reread and reinterpret the tales in new ways. By experiencing a wide variety of tales, they can view the stories of the classical canon in new contexts. By actively selecting, discussing, enacting, illustrating, adapting, and retelling the tales they experience, both adults and children can assert their own proprietary rights to meaning. It is no heresy to re-appropriate the tales from either tradition or the culture industry. “They are not,” as even Auden knew, “sacred texts” (28). If the fairy tale needs saving and if we are to save it, then we need to abandon the untenable views of its ownership that put us in its power. We must take possession of it on our own terms. Saving the fairy tale in this way is nothing less than saving our very selves.

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