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*Sheila Egoff's
Legacy*

Violence and Fear in Folktales

by David Boudinot

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The use of fear and violence in folk and fairy tales is a contentious issue which illuminates disparities of societal difference between those firmly entrenched in beliefs of righteousness and others who believe no harm is done by frightening children with folklore. Some people believe that children need to be shielded from all displays of violence, especially violence found in video games, television, and folk tales, because children might emulate it and bring harm to themselves or others. Studies trying to prove that displays of violence in print and visual culture lead to fear and violence in our youth are frequently inconclusive at best, and these studies are often funded by those whose ideologies detest any mention of potentially sinful activities. Conversely, there is some supportive evidence from educators and sociologists which show fear and violence in folk tales contributing to a safer and more educated society.

With roots in the oral tradition, folk and fairy tales have morphed and changed from generation to generation. Mimicking elements of society, folk tales have provided a vehicle for sharing caution, fears, and values, while entertaining adults and children with fantasy. Jack Zipes says in his book *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*:

At the beginning, the literary fairy tales were written and published for adults, and though they were intended to reinforce the mores and values of French civilité, they were so symbolical and could be read on so many different levels that they were considered somewhat dangerous: social behaviour could not be totally dictated, prescribed, and controlled through the fairy tale, and there were subversive features in language and theme. This is one of the reasons that fairy tales were not particularly approved for children.

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Over the centuries, folk and fairy tales have retained important fragments of their original storyline as well as developing culturally specific details and elements. Bruno Bettelheim wrote that their meaning and role in society "carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time" (6) as well as conveying universal human problems. Historians and enthusiasts of folk tales, such as Marina Warner, Bruno Bettelheim, and Jack Zipes, agree that the exact origins of folk tales remain cloudy and uncertain because we cannot pinpoint exactly how a tale began and who was the originator. Over time, folk tales have been created organically and moved haphazardly across borders, societies, and generations germinating minds like pollen being spread by the wind. "In fact, the literary fairy tale has evolved from the stories of oral tradition, piece by piece in a process of incremental adaptation, generation by generation in the different cultures of the people who cross-fertilized the oral tales and disseminated them" (xi) according to Zipes in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm*.

Fear and violence in many forms have permeated societies around the world since the beginning of time, so it is no surprise that these themes are prevalent in folk and fairy tales. Tales of monsters eating children, parents beating their young, and witches putting spells and curses on beautiful maidens are only a few of the many fantastical examples of violence, cruelty, and fear evident in folk tales. In some tales the purpose was to instil

caution while others demonstrate or grow out of forms of discipline administered to children in the past. "In groups, children encounter existential challenges that we also battle with in adult life: betrayal, intrigues, overcoming fear, feuds, quarrels and jealousy. They are faced with the ugly sides of mankind but also learn to mobilize capabilities in order to deal with these dark forces." (Guggenbuhl 7-8)

Teaching fear through fairy tales is a proven method of helping children learn about safety and it can help improve a child's judgement and critical thinking skills. Fear is an instinctual aid to survival, according to the British naturalist Charles Darwin, and it shapes psychological and sociological structures. "Darwin speculated that fear's instinctual symptoms evolved, like all other features of life, because they aided survival. Fear was a response to some threat in the environment, especially to the approach of a predator." (Kendrick xii) In many folk tales and oral traditions these "predators" are imaginary creatures such as trolls, ogres, and giants who serve the purpose of frightening children away from dangerous situations. In Iceland, stories are told to children about elves and trolls inhabiting hillocks and boulders. "Oral tales concerning Icelandic elves and trolls no doubt served as warning fables. They prevented many children from wandering away from human habitations, taught Iceland's topographical history, and instilled fear and respect for the harsh powers of nature." (Thorvaroadottir 34)

The cautionary folk tale can be traced to cultures all over the world and in each instance fear is used to warn children of certain dangers. For instance, children are warned of the threat of being kidnapped in Native American folklore by "Basket Woman," a cackling ogress who creeps up on children when they are out past their bedtimes. She whacks their heads with a cane, collects the bodies in her basket, and later drops them in a pot of boiling water to cook for dinner. As with most folk tales, in the end, the victims triumph through cleverness and a little bit of luck, and manage to escape from the ogress who ends up melting away in the boiling pot. (Livo xxv) What is remarkable about this tale and others like it is that variants of the story exist or have existed in cultures all around the world almost simultaneously—which demonstrates that protecting children is a universal concern.

For example, in Nigeria, a folk tale about a woman named "Mommy Water" is told to children to scare them away from water ways and village wells which are non-childproofed unprotected holes in the sand. Tom Weakley, a volunteer of the Earth Watch project established in Nigeria wrote: "[P]arents will tell their children not to go near the river or wander down to the lake or the canals because there is a person down there, usually a woman, who lives in the water and who cries out for her lost child. And if they get too close to the water or the canal, she will reach out her hand and grab their leg and drag them into the water." (Ibid. xii) Young children would most certainly be afraid of this story, and more often than not, folk tales are told in a very convincing and believable way. Either the child's gullibility or impressionable mind (or both) makes the fantasies of folk tales into a pseudo-reality. If no violent or potentially tragic outcome is written into the folk tale, children will be less likely to heed warning and steer clear of danger. For instance, if the "Mommy Water" tale was about a nice old woman who gave away candy in the wells or the trolls in Icelandic folk tales allowed children to magically fly from the rocks, the rate of accidents involving children would likely rise.

It is important to recognize that perceptions of fear and violence change from generation to generation. Marina Warner examines these perceptions in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde*, and says that to fully understand folk tales you must be aware of the environment it was told or written in. "I began investigating the meanings of the tales themselves, but I soon found that it was essential to look at the context in which they were told, at who was telling them, to whom, and why." (xii) As times change, so do the meanings of folk and fairy tales—what was once frightening is now laughable or vice versa. Jack Zipes in *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* contributes this to the current consumer culture obsessed with branding and fairy tale image.

Both the oral and the literary traditions continue to exist side by side today, interact, and influence one another, but there is a difference in the roles they now play compared to their function in the past. This difference can be seen in the manner in which they are produced, distributed and marketed. Profit mars their stories from their cultural heritage. Folk and fairy tales as products of the imagination are in danger of becoming instrumentalized and commercialized. All this has been accomplished within the framework of the modern culture industry.

(2)

Perhaps the commercialization of folk and fairy tales is something to fear more than frightening children with culturally rich stories; however, this is a topic worthy of another article.

Bruno Bettelheim's examination of folk and fairy tales concludes that any violence or fear found in a majority of tales is quickly countered by forces of good. "[I]n fairy tales evil is as omnipresent as virtue. In practically every fairy tale good and evil are given body in the form of some figures and their actions, as good and evil are

omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in every man. It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires the struggle to solve it." (8-9) By presenting good and bad in a balanced way, children will more likely achieve independent judgment. "For the young people of today, living in a pluralistic world and having to adapt to different sets of values, the ability to formulate one's own judgment and evaluate critically one's environment is more important than ever." (Daubert 57)

Interestingly, psychologists and psychiatrists have spent a considerable amount of time examining folk and fairy tales to try to figure out if children are influenced by (and subsequently act out) cruelty, fear, and violence found in folk tales. Their studies show it is not necessarily the actual folk tale which affects the child; rather, it is the way it is read or presented which makes the most impact.

There can be little doubt that the offering of a fairy tale to a fifteen-month-old child would easily pose a threat, as he could hardly separate its content from events of his everyday world. It is unwise to narrate fairy tales to children much below four or five years of age. The years from five to twelve are those during which the child both enjoys and learns from the fairy tale, just as the adolescent years can be enriched by legends, epos, ballads and myths. A rejecting or insecure parent may use the cruelties in folklore for his own sadistic or controlling needs which in the absence of fairy tale material would undoubtedly find other equally effective and equally harmful expressions. (Heuscher 356)

Furthermore, it is not fair to entirely place blame on folk tales or other potentially violent media as the root cause of violent trends in child behaviour. Surely children will be exposed to fear and violence at an early age through their peers, family situations, and societal influences. The real question, drawing away from frightening folk tales, is why would children want to seek out violent behaviour? A *Journal of Communication* study "demonstrated that it is the way that violence is portrayed, and not exposure to violence alone, that may generate problematic outcomes. For example, showing violence as justified and causing little suffering for the victims both increases the likelihood of imitation." (Kremar, Curtis 465)

Allan Guggenbühl argues in his book *The Incredible Fascination of Violence* that children who actively seek out violent images in books, video games, and movies are the ones more likely to commit violent acts. "Violent scenes in video games or in the media are fatal only if the child is searching for images in the realm of violence." Placing blame on a gruesome folk tale or racy video game is not the solution to the child behaviour puzzle. "Violence in the media is not the cause of violent behavior in children but gives certain children a legitimization," says Guggenbühl, and moreover, "The moral superstructure of healthy children does not break down when they are faced with violence in the media." (31-32)

Fear and violence in folk and fairy tales have a legitimate reason to be prevalent in our increasingly violent and fearful culture. Exposing children to *controlled* violence in books allows for healthy discourse and provides a means to discuss fears and insecurities in the real world. Make-believe characters and fantasy contribute in a positive way to the dialogue—in ways in which a violent television show or movie could not. Gillian Cross wrote in the *School Library Journal*, "I think [violence is] crucial to the nature of children's fiction. Death and danger and injury are hard, definite, dramatic things. Either they have happened, or they haven't. They change you. Real life is like that, too." (45)

What truly defines folk and fairy tales are the natural ways in which a metamorphosis occurs in the fantasy world. Marina Warner describes this as shape-shifting which "creates a huge theatre of possibility in the stories: anything can happen."

Shape-shifting is one of fairy tale's dominant and characteristic wonders: hands are cut off, found and reattached, babies' throats are slit, but they are later restored to life, a rusty lamp turns into an all-powerful talisman, a humble pestle and mortar becomes the winged vehicle of the fairy enchantress Baba Yaga, the beggar changes into the powerful enchantress and the slattern in the filthy donkeyskin into a golden-haired princess. (xv-xvi)

Fairy tale enchantment would not hold its hard edge without a little fear and violence thrown into the storyline and it is the magical qualities of overcoming the seemingly impossible that really draw children in. Without these elements, the fairy tale becomes just another sanitized story and it starts to lose some of its magical qualities.

Jack Zipes critiques the critics of folk and fairy tales fervent in the 'exposing children to fear and violence' debate by claiming the opponents of fairy tale violence are missing the point. In *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* he says:

Instead of examining social relations and psychological behaviour first—the very stuff which constitutes the subject matter of the tales—both the proponents and opponents of fairy tales have based and continue to base their criticism on the harsh scenes and sexual connotations of the tales, supposedly suitable or unsuitable for children. [...] The code words of the debate change, but there is, in fact, a 'real problem' which remains: the moral attack against fairy tales (censorship) and the rational defence of the tales (liberal civil rights) emanate from a mutual repression of what is actually happening in society.

(1)

Childhood is a very scary and intimidating place for a multitude of reasons, but trying to attribute all of this fear to folk tales is unfair and ill-informed. Stepping back and looking at the social context of why folk tales were created illuminates great concern for the well being of children. Zipes' 'real problem' demonstrates further analysis is needed on the causes of child aggression. Based on the research already available, it is unlikely that folk and fairy tales will rate high on the list of child aggression influences. However, it is important to note that the environment in which the folk tales are told contribute highly to how they are perceived by children.

Storms are violent but not generally thought of as having intent to harm. The definition does not allow analysis of acts that do have intent to harm. Is yelling at someone more or less violent than stabbing them? One would think it is less violent, but children may be more frightened by it. Is stabbing someone more or less violent than blasting them with a shotgun? Here the harm may be the same, but the activity, and therefore the response elicited, may be different.

(Haney, Harris and Tipton 166-167)

Terry Heller writes in the book *The Delights of Terror* that "we know from childhood experience that tales of terror can really frighten us, though we may not understand why we ever listened to such stories or how we survived them." (206) Zipes, Warner, and Bettelheim might say it is not the folk tale that is scary, but the stigma surrounding such tales. After all, "we humans are born without fear. We are taught fear, first and foremost by our parents when they themselves face fear with a constant knot of fear in their hearts, minds, and bellies." (Maser 25) Therefore, one could posit society is to blame for fear and violence found in folk and fairy tales and moreover, frightened children grow up to share the thrill of fear with others because it is a learned activity.

Most fairy tales begin with a somewhat believable setting, move through episodes of fear and violence to prove a point, then end with "and they lived happily ever after." This demonstrates that these legends of the literary tradition are balanced and wholesome, despite criticism from all angles. It is not anticipated that the strong current of folk and fairy tales in our society will weaken, although there may be times of drought and flood depending on cultural trends. If we can teach our children how to deal with fear and violence in a healthy way by using good examples from folk and fairy tales, our world (hopefully) will become a better place.

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