ONE

WHY A NEW HISTORY
OF FAIRY TALES?

INTRODUCTION

Most traditional histories of fairy tales begin with an unlettered country folk that invents fairy tales and then passes them along by word of mouth from generation to generation. Somewhat less frequently, fairy tales have been presented as disintegrations of ancient myth, as the remains of paleolithic beliefs, as fictionalized remnants of elementary planetary observations, or as evidence of universal archetypes. Such explanations have resulted in a sense that fairy tales' origins are elusive, a sense of elusiveness that has shaped grand narratives of the genre as well as references to fairy tales in books about history, literature (including children's literature), psychology, and folklore. It has been said so often that the folk invented and disseminated fairy tales that this assumption has become an unquestioned proposition. It may therefore surprise readers that folk invention and transmission of fairy tales has no basis in verifiable fact. Literary analysis undermines it, literary history rejects it, social history repudiates it, and publishing history (whether of manuscripts or of books) contradicts it.

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The current understanding of the history of fairy tales is not only built on a flimsy foundation; its very basis requires an absence of evidence. A belief in fairy tales' oral origins requires that there be no written records of fairy tales themselves. This perception goes against the grain of every scholarly undertaking since the scientific revolution made evidence the central plank of its platform.

People who subscribe to a belief in fairy tales' oral origins and dissemination are not embarrassed by the fact that all references to old women or other people's telling tales or stories before 1550 are just that—references to old women or other people telling *stories*, and the most we learn about the stories themselves is that some of them had witches or monsters. Inadequate to prove that fairy tales existed in the ancient and medieval worlds, those reports merely validate the existence of storytelling in the ancient world, a fact that has, however, never been in doubt.

Anyone living in a structure with a foundation as rickety as the edifice that houses the traditional study of fairy tales would search out strong timbers to prop it up. In recent years that has indeed happened but with problematic results. In *The Uses of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim implies that as children's psyches develop, their changing psychological needs result in their projecting complementarily constructed fairy tale plots to provide solace for and understanding of their own young lives and experiences. A tension runs throughout Bettelheim's book between the fact of the fairy tales' book sources and an implication that children and their psychological needs authored fairy tales' plots, although he never explicitly deals with that issue. His views, although initially persuasive, have not weathered close scrutiny. Jack Zipes's effort to shore up the weak structure of fairy tales' origins and history in *Why Fairy Tales Stick* takes a different tack: he attributes fairy tales' remarkable staying power to brain modules, for which he has borrowed the term "memes." Bettelheim and Zipes are the best known of many fairy tale

scholars in the United States, England, France, and Germany who have incorporated folk creation and dissemination into their theoretical structure of fairy tales' origins and history. Along with making valuable contributions to the study of fairy tales, these many scholars have accepted theories of long standing in the secondary literature about fairy tales in good faith. *Fairy Tales: A New History* will offer evidence and reasons for an alternative history.

It is difficult to question long-held beliefs, such as the belief that the folk invented and then communicated fairy tales from one generation to the next, from one country to another, and from language to language. These are long-accepted, hallowed beliefs, and so I won't ask readers to accept a new proposition without strong evidence of its own. Instead, I invite them to make a journey of exploration, examination, and discovery along with me.

Thinking about fairy tales begins by thinking about the differences between folk tales and fairy tales. Fairy tales are often called "folk tales" in the belief that unlettered folk storytellers created both kinds of stories. But treating fairy tales and folk tales as one and the same thing obscures fundamental, and significant, differences between them.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Folk Tales

In their terminologies, traditional histories of fairy tales generally conflate two terms, "fairy tale" and "folk tale." Interchanging the two terms leads to terminological misunderstandings and results in confounding difficulties for any discussion of fairy and folk tales. It's therefore necessary to distinguish clearly between folk tales and fairy tales and to clarify their differing histories and separate identities.

Folk tales differ from fairy tales in their structure, their cast of characters, their plot trajectories, and their age. Brief, and with linear plots, folk tales reflect the world and the belief systems of their audiences.[1] Taking their characters from that familiar world, folk tales are typically peopled with husbands and wives, peasants, thieving rascals, or an occasional doctor, lawyer, priest, or preacher. In a typical folk tale plot, one person makes off with another person's money, goods, or honor. More to the point, a very large proportion of folk tales *don't* have a happy ending. Marital strife looms large, because typical folk tales that include a married couple are not about the joys of *getting* married, but about the difficulties of *being* married.

Folk tales are easy to follow and easy to remember, in part because they deal with familiar aspects of the human condition, like the propensity to build castles in the air. Take, for example, the ancient tale of a peasant who had a jug of honey and who dreamed of selling it profitably and being able to buy a flock of chickens. He imagined he'd earn enough from selling the resulting eggs to buy a piglet. When it grew up, it would bear piglets of its own that he could sell for even more money. As is typical for a folk tale, the peasant expected his profits to mount steadily so that he could eventually buy a goat—or a sheep—or a cow. Finally, the daydreaming peasant imagined that he'd build a house, marry, and have a son, whom—in his reverie—he imagined he'd beat when he misbehaved. Flailing about him, the peasant smashed the precious honey jug—and with that, he destroyed his dreams of wealth. Such an ending typifies many folk tales[2] and has long existed, at least since it was documented nearly 1500 years ago in the Indian *Panchatantra*. The story's wry acceptance of sad consequences and limited possibilities for its poor hero fit it into a category of anecdotal and joke folk tales classified as ATU 1430. There are even folktales in which a swineherd marries a princess or in which a goosegirl marries a prince, as in Tale Types 850 and 870, but on close examination these apparently fairy tale endings have no magic about them.

Instead, their unexpected weddings come about through poor folks' cunning, and they are thus categorized as "realistic tales." Even a few tales routinely called "fairy tales," such as Perrault's "Three Wishes" (ATU 750), are by common consent categorized as "religious tales" in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification.

Tales of Magic

As a category, tales of magic necessarily include magic. Magic exists across a broad spectrum of tales, some of which are fairy tales and many of which are not. For instance, an anecdote about an individual who experiences an uncanny and unsettling encounter with one or more extranatural creatures is often an urban legend, while a tale in which a god or goddess magically transforms a human being into something else (such as a tree or a cow or a star) is generally termed a legend. Tales in the Judaeo-Christian community in which saints, angels, or God himself intervene in the lives of human beings are religious tales. In these examples the fantastic, the divine, the magical, the miraculous, and the transformative produce examples of awe of the other-worldly, examples of divine power and divine truth rather than the wedding, earthly happiness, and well-being associated with fairy tales.

The Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale-type classification groups a broad variety of tales together as "Tales of Magic." Some verge on wisdom tales, like one that describes a contest between the sun and the wind to see which can make a traveler take off his coat. When the wind blows as hard as it can, the traveller holds his coat more tightly about him. But when the sun shines gently, he takes it off. Others are exotic oriental tales steered by magic, like ones from *Thousand and One Nights*, in which a magic rug might carry an individual from one continent to another in a matter of seconds, or in which a wicked princess might magically turn her opponents into stone.

Among tales of magic are ones more familiar to readers of fairy tales. In many of them, a youth kills a dragon, thereby rescuing a princess whom he subsequently marries. Sometimes the bold youth is a prince; sometimes he's the youngest and most virtuous brother in a family of starving peasants (or shoemakers or swineherds or woodcutters). Rescuing princesses from all sorts of dangers and all sorts of places and then marrying them ranks high among tales of magic. Traditionally, princesses who rescue princes are relatively rare, although not entirely unknown. More familiar are poor girls who with the considerable help of magic marry princes and in the process have to contend with one or more jealous girls and women: sisters, stepsisters, stepmothers, witches, or mothers-in-law. The tales of magic that end in weddings all share the welcome ending of two people's difficulties and the beginning of a life lived happily ever after. Common usage and scholarly terminology both recognize these tales as fairy tales.

Fairy Tales: "Oral" and "Literary"

We have now separated fairy tales out from folk tales and general tales of magic, but there remains one other theoretical distinction, one that is highly problematic. The widespread belief that an unlettered folk created fairy tales has led to the category of *folk* fairy tales. Sometimes other names are used: *real* fairy tales, *pure* fairy tales, *genuine* fairy tales, or *uncontaminated* fairy tales. Each of these words implies that fairy tales were created within an oral ("pure" or "genuine") culture and were transmitted through oral cultures as "folk fairy tales" until they were written down by later authors, who collected them from the folk (but "contaminated" them in so doing). Phrases like "write down" and "collect" strongly suggest an act of appropriation, as Marxist critics would express it, a kind of intellectual piracy or theft from an unlettered teller by a literate author. Scholars' utilization of

words like "pure" and "uncontaminated" implies, without actually stating, adherence to a traditional history of orally composed and disseminated fairy tales. Since the general public widely believes in fairy tales' oral composition and transmission, those phrases buy a certain credibility for writers who use them. At the same time, using a vocabulary of implied oralism further authorizes the traditional history, because it appears to accept that history, without having to certify a position vis-à-vis the entire proposition of fairy tales' possible relationships to oral or literate culture. In the end, using language such as "writing down" a fairy tale avoids dealing with central issues concerning paradigms of orality or literacy within which fairy tales might be analyzed.

The term "literary fairy tale" has come to be understood as a reworking of orally composed and transmitted tales. In this context, "reworking" is understood to have been carried out by literate, and literary, authors like Giovan Francesco Straparola, Giambattista Basile, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and by many other writers whose names and collections will be named later. In the case of the Grimms, it was long—and erroneously—believed that they had made great efforts to preserve existing, but nearly extinct, folk versions of the tales published in their collection, whereas in fact their fifty years of editing can be fairly characterized as having turned widely available tales from literary sources into carefully crafted reflections of contemporary folk grammatical usage and contemporary bourgeois beliefs about folk social values. (Whether they did so consciously or unconsciously is another matter altogether.)

Simply using the term "literary" fairy tale powerfully implies an existence of another sort of fairy tale, an oral sort. The historical analysis of chapters 2, 3, and 4 will show that the existence of oral fairy tales, as they are defined above and will be further defined below, among *any* folk before the nineteenth century cannot be demonstrated. The terms "oral" and "literary" usefully distinguish between literary styles in fairy tales. But in terms of the

history of fairy tales, terms like "oral" and "literary" inaccurately and misleadingly suggest that a set of distinctions exist that cannot be proven to have existed before the nineteenth century. Their use serves only to advance an unproveable theory of oral origins and transmission, and I'll therefore avoid them in what follows.

Fairy Tales

So far the discussion has not led to a usable working definition of fairy tales, and that is the subject now at hand. "Fairy tale" is a much misunderstood term, and the source for the confusion about the nature of "fairy tales" is the title of a single book, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. The book's original title, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Nursery and Household Tales), had no fairies in its brief wording, a logically reasonable reflection of the fact that so few fairies can be found in the tales themselves. The contents of the book, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, offers instead a mixed lot of animal tales; tales of origins that explain, for instance, why the moon hangs in the sky; warning tales, among which is the famous "Red Riding Hood" that tells little girls to stay on the path and not talk to strangers; and folk tales whose characters usually end up where they started, like the starveling fisherman and his wife who briefly had an emperor's palace before they were plunged back into wretched poverty. There are even religious tales like "Mary's Child" that pitch their heroines into suffering and threaten even greater pain if they don't tell the truth.[3]

The Aarne-Thompson-Uther *Types of International Folktales* avoids the term "fairy tale" altogether, instead designating Tale Types 300–749 as "Tales of Magic." In the "Introduction" to the *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Jack Zipes cites miraculous transformations, a happy ending, the presence of stock characters, settings, and motifs as determining components of "oral" wonder tales. According to Zipes, "writing [them] down" resulted in "literary" fairy tales (xvii–xix). Writing about folktales in

Donald Haase's *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, Maria Nikolajeva takes a cautiously print culture stance in noting that folktales are "a form of traditional, fictional, prose narrative that is said to circulate orally" (363), while Donald Haase accepts a distinction between "folktale" and "literary fairy tale" and provides a history and description of several scholars' attempts to define the term, but takes no position vis-à-vis those definitions there (322).

Most definitions of fairy tales center on the tales' structure and component motifs. In *Fairy Tales: A New History*, however, I'll view fairy tales as *narratives* whose plot, that is, whose narrative trajectory, is a fundamentally defining part of their very being. I accept the central importance of fairy tale motifs, fairy tale structure, and fairy tale happy endings, but none of those categories, in and of themselves, achieves a workable definition for fairy tales. Fairy tale motifs such as magic rings and the number three appear in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian romances; fairy tale structure, Proppian or otherwise, underlies a great many novels; and fairy tale happy endings define nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century bodice-ripping romances. Thus it is not motifs, structure, or happy endings alone that define fairy tales, but the overall plot trajectory of individual tales in conjunction with those fairy tale elements all brought together within a "compact" narrative, to borrow a term from Elizabeth Harries's *Twice Upon a Time* (16–17). All this together creates a fairy tale as we know it in the modern world and as it first appeared in the sixteenth century.

Length, too, is central to defining fairy tales. After all, some lengthy medieval romances, predating by hundreds of years fairy tales as we now know them, built in all the elements (motifs, structure, happy ending) of modern fairy tales. But their interminable length separates them incontrovertibly from the genre of fairy tales. In the age of print, books prepared for a popular market were routinely abbreviated, and when they appeared in drastically shortened form with their conclusions more often

happy than unhappy, they emerged from a long medieval history into the world of early modern print as something that began to resemble modern fairy tales.
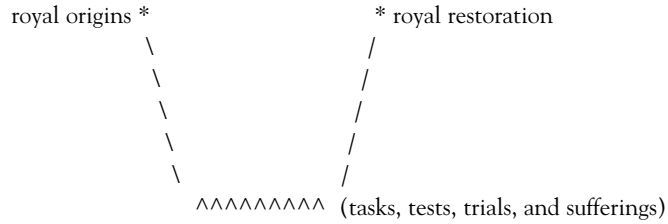
Restoration Fairy Tales

Restoration fairy tales are firmly based in the world of human beings.[4] Like their medieval precursors, they begin with a royal personage—usually a prince or princess, but sometimes a king or queen—who is driven away from home and heritage. Out in the world, the royals face adventures, undertake tasks, and suffer hardships and trials. With magic assistance they succeed in carrying out their assigned tasks, overcoming their imposed hardships, and enduring their character-testing trials, after which they marry royally and are restored to a throne, that is, they return to their just social, economic, and political position. The Grimms' "Twelve Brothers" (Zwölf Brüder) is a classic restoration tale:

> A royal pair had twelve sons, but the king vowed that if the next child were a daughter, the boys should be killed and their inheritance given to the girl (sic). When a girl was in fact born, the brothers fled. Some years later, the princess learned of her brothers and set off in search of them. Having accidentally turned them into ravens, she suffered seven years' silence to redeem them. Although she nearly died from the hardships of her long trial, in the end she married a king and lived happily ever after.

Classic authors of fairy tales in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—Straparola in Venice, Basile in Naples, Perrault and d'Aulnoy in Paris, Leprince de Beaumont in London—all composed restoration fairy tales, although they did so with considerable variation. For instance, the well known restoration fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" has a heroine who does little to bring about her return to royal station. In its Basilean,

Perrauldian, and Grimm incarnations, the heroine remains passive, her sole adventure a century-long sleep, after which a prince who providentially arrives, weds her, and thus restores her to her just royal station.

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   royal origins *                    * royal restoration
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                  \                 /
                   \               /
                    \             /
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                      ^^^^^^^^^^ (tasks, tests, trials, and sufferings)
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If charted visually, restoration fairy tales start high, fall low, and then return to their original social level. The hardships of suffering royalty (^^^^^) are narratively extensible, and, as was the case in the medieval romances that preceded restoration fairy tales, heroes' and heroines' adventures, tasks, tests, trials, and sufferings could be, and sometimes seem to have been, extended endlessly. In contrast, classic restoration *fairy* tales generally trimmed the test-task-trial part of the story to three episodes, more or less.

Straparola's inclusion of restoration fairy tales in his collection established their abbreviated fairy-tale length in a published prose form. Even so, Straparola's restoration fairy tales remained significantly longer than a second kind of fairy tale in his collection, whose cast of characters began with, and was sometimes dominated by, poor people. The greater length that Straparola accorded his restoration fairy tales generally continued to characterize the stories about royal heroes and heroines in subsequent restoration fairy tales well into the nineteenth century.

Rise Fairy Tales

Rise fairy tales begin with a dirt-poor girl or boy who suffers the effects of grinding poverty and whose story continues with tests,

tasks, and trials until magic brings about a marriage to royalty and a happy accession to great wealth.[5] The earliest enduringly popular rise fairy tale is Straparola's "Puss in Boots," in which a youngest son, left penniless at his mother's death, is helped by a fairy cat to marriage with a princess and consequently to great wealth. The plot has remained popular to the present day as a fairy tale and in a number of other genres.

A rise fairy tale is occasionally extended by the addition of a lengthening coda, a practice for which the Grimms' "Rumpelstiltskin" provides a good example. There a poor girl's rise to queenship is complicated by the bargain she made with a magical creature who had helped her achieve her royal marriage. Working out the secondary plot temporarily retards the achievement of the tale's ultimately happy ending:

> There was once a miller who told the king his daughter could spin straw to gold. The king declared that he would marry the girl if she did so, but would have her killed if she didn't. Brought into a chamber filled with straw, the girl despaired, but a gnome appeared and magically performed the impossible task, for which she rewarded him with her neckerchief. When he helped her a second time she gave him her ring, but on the third occasion, having nothing left to give, she promised her firstborn child.
>
> The king married her, and some time later the girl, now a queen, gave birth to a beautiful baby. Shortly afterward the gnome arrived to claim his reward, and when she protested, he said he'd relent if she could guess his name. On the third try, the queen said, "Rumpelstiltskin," was released from her promise, and lived happily ever after.

Straparola's rise tales were generally shorter than his restoration tales, and the shorter length of rise tales remained one of their features in the following centuries. Their plot trajectory

can be charted visually: a rise tale begins with a poor and lowly hero or heroine who rises dramatically up the social ladder. The rise fairy tale plot became so popular in the early 1800s that it eventually led to rewritings of some restoration fairy tale plots to make them fit the rise fairy tale model. "Cinderella," for instance, is generally understood to be a rise fairy tale in which a poor girl gets a prince. However, in its first appearance in the 1630s, the heroine was not poor at all, but a prince's daughter who had one tormenting stepmother after another, until she was magically helped to a royal ball, where she found a princely husband and a return to a life of ease and comfort.

Fairy tales continue to resonate in people's lives. This is largely so because fairy tales originated among the same kinds of urban assumptions and expectations with which city and suburban dwellers continue to live today. Fairy tales, which speak in a language well understood in the modern world, remain relevant because they allude to deep hopes for material improvement, because they present illusions of happiness to come, and because they provide social paradigms that overlap nearly perfectly with daydreams of a better life.

This brief literary analysis demonstrates that folk tales and fairy tales differ fundamentally from one another in their narrative trajectories. The two kinds of stories also appear to offer different kinds of storytelling for different sorts of audiences. At this point, it is not possible to declare more precisely what constitutes the audiences' conjectured differences, and so let us continue by refining a definition of fairy tales in an expanded context.

LITERARY HISTORY

Fairies vs. Tales about Fairies and Fairyland

The questions addresssed here are twofold: Are fairies an integral part of fairy tales? If so, does the presence of fairies or fairyland in a tale make that tale a fairy tale?

The British Isles have an extraordinarily rich fairy lore. Well into the eighteenth century, ordinary folks used the fairy universe of extranaturals to make sense of otherwise inexplicable processes and events. Wilkies (who were connected with the dead) had to be propitiated. Brownies (who attached themselves to particular people) had to be appreciated for the good they did around the house, though they mustn't be personally acknowledged or thanked. Fairies could carry off a beautiful infant and substitute a malformed changeling. Wilkies, brownies, fairies, and scores of other little people[6] accounted for the incomprehensibility of unexpected deaths, misshapen infants, dry udders, and missing clothes.

In their childrearing and childcare parents and servants invoked supernatural creatures (of the sort that were known to kidnap and eat little boys and girls) in order to frighten children into docile obedience. One result was that educational reformers like Francis Bacon and John Locke in England and pedagogical theorists like Joachim Campe in Germany inveighed against ignorant servants who used goblins and ghosts to control the young people in their care.[7] Extranaturals were most often to be found in chapbooks for the poor,[8] but some—like Robin Goodfellow and Queen Mab—found their way into high literature like Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* as well as into operas and masques.

Tales about Fairies and Fairyland

Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590) and Ben Jonson's *Oberon, The Faery Prince: A Masque of Prince Henries* (the masque was presented in 1611 and printed in 1616) expanded fairy literature to include much more about the world that fairies inhabited, and they can therefore be said to be tales about fairyland.[9] The same was true of Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia* (1627). Fairies were all the rage in the early 1600s, and these three are only a

tiny fraction of many private and public high culture fairy and fairyland appearances.[10] In England, fairy poetry such as Spenser's, Jonson's, and Drayton's had by and large ended by 1650,[11] but it lived on at the French court of Versailles.

In general, early—that is, medieval or early modern—tales about fairyland are built on a strong Celtic underlay onto which English, French, German, and Italian authors grafted large amounts of indigenous fairy belief. The most significant aspect of tales about fairyland, however, is that they depict two parallel worlds, a fairy universe and the human world. The human worlds in tales about fairyland are more or less familiar with the exception of occasional encounters with fairies, with people being born, living happy or unhappy lives, and dying. The fairy universe, on the other hand, differs dramatically from the human world. Subject to different natural laws, fairyland time is often decelerated, so that one year there equals multiple, sometimes a hundred, years in the human world. The consequences of such differences for mortal visitors can be, and often are, disastrous. Even if humans' visits to fairyland have seemed brief, their absence from the human world has been far longer than they believed to be the case, and as a result, visitors returning home from fairyland find their own world changed beyond recognition. (Washington Irving's Rip van Winkle experienced a nineteenth-century version of this fairyland condition.[12]) Even worse, fairyland's retarded passage of time holds normal physiological aging at bay, so that people who return to the human world from a fairyland visit of only a few days, weeks, or months suddenly shrivel, wrinkle, and die as their mortal bodies, no longer protected against aging by fairyland's slowed time, catch up with the mortal passage of time.[13]

In the later 1600s, tales about fairyland diminished in importance among England's upper classes, but survived and persisted for another hundred years as a set of beliefs held by and published for country people and uneducated but literate city dwellers. In the same period in France, tales about fairyland

continued as a literary idyll among the French aristocracy. One person who left a record of the fashionable fairy fad was the noblewoman Madame de Sévigné (1626–1696). Corresponding with her daughter from the royal court at Versailles on August 6, 1677, Madame de Sévigné wrote that court ladies had amused themselves for nearly an hour by listening to a story about a princess who was reared on earth before a fairy lover carried her off to fairyland in a crystal coach. Madame de Sévigné reported that the ladies called this activity "mitonner."[14]

Nobody wrote down this kind of oral chit-chat until the Countess d'Aulnoy (1650/51–1705) did so in 1690. In that year, she composed a long novel, *Histoire d'Hipolyte, comte de Duglas* (The Story of Hypolitus, Count of Douglas). Into this lengthy novel she introduced a tale about a fairyland called "The Isle of Happiness" (L'Île de Félicité). Its plot went roughly this way:

> A human hero joined his beloved, a fairy queen, in fairyland. After a year there he wished to visit his homeland. She granted him permission to do so, but warned him to remain on his fairyland horse. [The horse represented a protective equine extension of fairyland's protective powers into the hero's mortal world.] But tricked into dismounting, he was overtaken by death.

Madame d'Aulnoy soon wrote another tale about fairyland, "The Yellow Dwarf" (Le Nain jaune). There a hateful dwarf kills the handsome King of the Golden Mountain; the king's beloved, a princess, falls dead upon his chest; and together their unending love turns them into palm trees that eternally incline towards one another.

The distinguishing characteristics of tales about fairyland—two parallel universes and sometimes unhappy endings—make their differentness from fairy tales obvious. Despite these fundamental differences in location and outcome, tales about fairyland are often, and confusingly, lumped together with human-

centered and real-world-based fairy tales.[15] The existence of tales about fairyland in the environs of the French royal court in the 1650s, such as those reported by Madame de Sévigné, and in Paris in the 1690s, is irrelevant to the question of whether fairy tales were present at the French court in the 1650s, because tales about fairyland and fairy tales are two very different kinds of stories (the first might have an unhappy ending, the second always has a happy ending) with very different centers of gravity (one including fairyland, the other in a world inhabited principally by human beings). It would, of course, have been historically possible for restoration and rise fairy tales from Straparola's *Pleasant Nights* to have been present at the French royal court in the 1650s, because all of his tales were physically available in French translation in the 1650s, as the section on publishing history below will show. But the fact is, that there was never a single report of tellings of Straparola's tales at the French court, only Mme de Sévigné's account of *mitonner,* of telling tales about fairies and fairyland, of which no examples existed in Straparola's much-printed book.

SOCIAL HISTORY

In now-famous studies like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) and Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1975) social historians investigated the living conditions of humble folk, looking long and hard at the historical reality of their life in the late medieval and early modern period. Doing so cast a revealing light on differences between the life experiences of poor people living in the country and those living in towns and cities.[16] What such books disclose also makes the proposition that unlettered country folk composed fairy tales seem very unlikely.

Life in the early modern countryside, that is from the early 1500s to the late 1700s, was rigidly organized and tightly

controlled. With unceasing toil, a long life, and unending luck, an ambitious peasant boy might add two or three additional hectares of land to his family's holdings. If such good fortune continued over several generations, one of his great- or great-great-grandsons might become a rich enough peasant to aspire to marry a merchant's daughter. That snail-slow chain of events, with its inevitable reverses and temporary setbacks, is consistent with *folk* tale content as described on pages 3–5. A girl in the country, for her part, might be raped by a count or a baron and, in recompense for lost virginity, receive a dowry big enough to assure her of a decent match with a fellow chosen from among her country peers. That's also the stuff of folk tales, where stories shine the hard light of reality onto the poverty-stalked lives of their heros and heroines.[17] It thus seems a realistic assumption that country folk might have invented folk tales of the sort discussed above, but not that they would have conceived of fairy tales, the earliest of which are firmly embedded in the imagery, characters, and references of *city* life.[18]

Boys and girls born and reared in Italian country villages and towns didn't necessarily stay at home, particularly during the Renaissance. The island republic of Venice was one city that attracted young people leaving towns and villages behind them to seek their fortune in Italy's old established metropolitan centers—Rome, Naples, Bologna, Milan, and Venice—or in small but wealthy centers of court culture, like Ferrara and Mantua.

City life differed from country life in primary respects. First, there was a city's relatively large population of thousands of individuals. A typical urban mix included hundreds of servants and more hundreds of artisans and urban workers along with a privileged elite that often included a free-spending urban nobility.

The countryside and cities differed substantially in what constituted wealth. For countrydwellers, it was mainly land that was critical to amassing riches, either in terms of the potential for growing crops and selling the resulting harvest or in terms of sheer ownership, which made it possible to rent out lands you

didn't farm yourself. In cities, however, people could wash off most of the mud of country living, while ordinary people might even accumulate money and rise in socio-economic terms. In cities, unlike the country, it was money itself (what you could buy with it and what you could invest in with it) that was the beginning point for amassing riches.

In northern Italy where Venice lay, a high proportion of Renaissance men and women as well as girls and boys were literate,[19] a far higher proportion than was the case among village dwellers. Every town had one or more schools to teach reading and arithmetic to its young boys and a good number of its girls.[20]

The first flush of printing in the mid-1400s had been devoted to manufacturing books for which there was a preexisting demand, the kinds of books that *scriptoria* had been producing for pupils, students, and scholars. Within a generation, however, Renaissance printing presses had begun to turn out books and pamphlets that a broader buyership wanted for its leisure reading. Concurrently an ingrained habit of communicating values by telling stories had survived from the middle ages into the Renaissance. Consequently, priests told stories from the pulpit and on occasion might augment church-provided manuals with tales from the marketplace.[21] Merchants carried amusing little *vademecum*s on their travels, some of which consisted almost entirely of folk tales and urban tales of rascality and trickery for bookbuyers both rich and poor.

Because city merchants could, and sometimes did, buy the same books that servants and artisans purchased,[22] the entire range of literate city dwellers was envisaged as a reading public for whom new kinds of tales might be created in Renaissance Venice.[23] As a result, maximizing the sales of any given tale collection assembled in this period meant designing that collection to address a broad potential readership. That, in turn, meant incorporating a variety of life situations into its stories.

Venice in the middle of the sixteenth century was a huge entrepôt. Its international printing industry served a large local

bookbuying market as well as distant markets like Naples in southern Italy and, on the other side of the Alps, Lyons in south-central France. In the very period in which Straparola was writing, however, Venice had suffered an economic downturn. Fewer artisans were able to accumulate capital, no matter how hard they worked. Not only that, changing markets, shifting sources of supply, and cheaper goods from abroad were undermining the local economy and destabilizing employment.[24] In these conditions, economic uncertainty stared workers in the face, and they would have known that hard work alone wouldn't lead to prosperity. This was a mental environment that would have been receptive to a new kind of story line, one in which magic facilitated a poor person's ascent to wealth. This was also the age in which stories that we can identify as rise fairy tales first appear.

The elements that make up the fairy tale genre were all in place before the 1550s: the hallmarks of fairy tales—magic objects and sudden acquisitions of wealth—were not new in themselves. What was different was that rise fairy tales built in the kinds of generalized hopes for an improvement in their lives specific to the burgeoning populations of upward-striving young men and women in early modern cities. Since urban money economies entail wealth in coin and cash, it's reasonable to assume that urban hopes of literate but poor readers included dreams of getting rich. But how was that to happen?

In the fairy tales about poor boys and girls getting rich that appeared in Venice in the 1550s, the details are specific to that place—Venice—and to conditions at that time. These brief tales were the first ones in the European tradition in which a poor person, with the help of magic, married a noble or even a member of a royal family and got rich as a result. (See below for an elaboration on this statement.) From the point of view of a poor Venetian boy or girl, such a marriage would have meant a happily-ever-after future with no backbreaking labor, lots of spendable money, and plenty to eat for the rest of their lives. The sticking point, however, was that laws that had been on the