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Book Culture from Below – The Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) in Helsinki, 17–20 August 2010: Keynote session "Exposing the oral and literary background of fairy tales"

Comment: Reflections on Oral and Literary Relations in the Fairy Tale

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Fans of the Victorian novel *Middlemarch* will remember Edward Casaubon, and his obsessive search for 'The Key to All Mythologies' (Eliot, 1871–2). George Eliot mocked a scholarly quest that took a lifetime, but got her character no nearer to his elusive goal. I would like to raise some questions that didn't occur to Casaubon, but may be worthwhile to reflect upon here: why are we still so fascinated with the notion of fairy-tale origins, be they oral or literary, at all? Does authenticity still mean something different to historians of reading and most historians of fairy tales, and if so, what happens when their methodologies meet? Folklore and fairy-tale study has sometimes struggled to transcend the legacy of the real eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Casaubons, who did indeed go in search of just such grand unifying narratives to explain the origin of fairy tales. In the nineteenth-century, these included anthropologists, who believed in a universal 'savage' stage of mental development, and philologists, who argued that the fairy tale could be traced back to the language of early Indo-European tribes.

In her characteristically engaging and thought-provoking address, Ruth Bottigheimer makes no such claims. Indeed, her work is in the spirit of wider interdisciplinary attempts to probe the ideological foundations of the nineteenth-century discipline of folklore. In a British context, we might recall the work of historians such as Peter Burke (1994/1978), folklorists such as Regina Bendix (2002), and Marxist scholars of the folksong such as Dave Harker. To take such an approach is not necessary to disavow a vibrant lower-class culture: Harker's controversial 1985 book, *'Fa-*

kesong': The Manufacture of British 'Folk Song', simply argued that this culture evolved through print and the music hall, rather than being centred in an unchanging oral tradition. Ruth Bottigheimer's paper has led me to reflect on what publishing history has brought – and might continue to bring – to these debates. And in keeping with the theme of the 2010 SHARP conference, it has made me ponder another question: how might – *and can* – historians of reading still tell a history of the fairy tale from below? As my own research has focused on nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland, and as the rural Irish were so often cast as 'the folk' in Romantic folklore scholarship, I hope you'll forgive this historical and geographical inflection in my response.

THE *CELTIC TWILIGHT*

I'd like to begin with a quotation that seems pertinent to Ruth Bottigheimer's reflections on oral/literary relations. In the *Celtic Twilight*, first published in 1893, the Irish writer W. B. Yeats recalled a curious oral narrative, which he claimed had been told to him by an old peasant woman in rural County Mayo, Ireland:

> *[…] she told me of two friends of hers who had been made love to by one whom they believed to be the devil. One of them was standing by the road-side when he came by on horseback, and asked her to mount up behind him, and go riding. When she would not he vanished. The other was out on the road late at night waiting for her young man, when something came flapping and rolling along the road up to her feet. It had the likeness of a newspaper, and presently it flapped into her face, and she knew by the size of it that it was the Irish Times. All of a sudden it changed into a young man, who asked her to go walking with him. She would not, and he vanished (Yeats 1893/1902, 69-70).*

Here is an oral informant (if Yeats is to be believed) who wittily responds to print, making the newspaper the subject of her own verbal folklore. While there is no doubt about the sly dig intended at the (unionist) *Irish Times*, this was certainly not the only newspaper cast as a satanic seducer, out to bewitch and bedevil the folk.

In fact, the notion that print – and the newspaper in particular – was a killer of the oral fairy tale was a claim frequently made by Yeats himself, and one which resurfaces (from a Marxist rather than a nationalist angle) in Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay 'The Storyteller'. Why is this relevant to Ruth Bottigheimer's paper? Perhaps because we still wrestle with the legacy of these debates today. Jack Zipes, one of the foremost scholars of the genre, has written widely and often sensitively on the fairy-tale tradition in print, but also acknowledges his own debts to Benjamin. He has explicitly argued that the 'establishment of the bourgeoisie' was based on the 'violation of oral tale telling' (Zipes 1994, 12–13). Zipes, it should be stated, does not locate the fairy tale's origins in a romantic and distant period of pre-history: indeed, he argues that 'there is no evidence that a separate wonder tale tradition or literary fairy tale tradition existed in Europe before the medieval period' (Zipes 2000, 846). Signi-

ficantly, however, while he acknowledges a rich intermixture of the spoken and written in the fairy tale's history, he is also sure that the oral tradition came first. We see, then, why Ruth Bottigheimer's work is so controversial: for she argues that there was no demotic fairy tale tradition *there* to be violated at all. Interestingly, one would not necessarily have to agree with her claims about print, Straparola and urban culture as originators of the fairy tale tradition to see the bigger ideological challenge that Ruth Bottigheimer (and book history) has posed to fairy-tale scholars. Why should we assume that authenticity is impossible without orality? Where *is* the evidence that verbal storytelling was besieged by a deadening print culture? At a SHARP conference, of course, this is preaching to the converted – such an audience hardly needs persuading that reading can be an active, creative and resisting process.

Ruth Bottigheimer, we might note, is not arguing that there was no early oral tale- telling (or *folktale*) tradition; just that there was no oral tradition of *fairy tales* before print. The argument for Straparola as the inventor of an early modern fairy-tale tradition is elaborated in fascinating detail in her book *Fairy Godfather* (2002). As her paper made clear, however, this argument relies on a particular *definition* of fairy tales – as rise and restoration narratives. It's fair to point out that this aspect of Ruth Bottigheimer's argument has also caused contention. So I'd like to raise another question for discussion – how easy is it for the scholarly community to define the fairy tale?

DEFINING THE FAIRY TALE

Looking at British eighteenth-century newspapers and magazines, there is no doubt about the existence of a sophisticated, literate, fairy-tale tradition. An extended newspaper serialisation of the *Arabian Nights*, for example, was published in a half-penny London paper as early as the 1720s (Mayo 1962, 59). Interestingly, however, we also find confusion as to what constitutes a fairy tale in the first place. In 1717, a text entitled a 'fairy tale' is advertised in the papers *The Post Boy* and the *Daily Courant* – but this appears to be an authored poem, not a prose narrative. In 1743, the *Universal Spectator* published a translation of Madame L'Heritier's magical French tale The Wary Princess: or the Adventures of Finette, but it was subtitled 'a novel', not a fairy tale. A serialisation of L'Heritier's 'The History of Blanche' the next year was also referred to as a novel, although it was set 'In the Days of Fairyland', and claimed an oral provenance: to have been circulated by 'Troubadours or Tale-tellers' and 'mothers and nurses', before entering print. These ephemeral print sources reveal that, in a British print context, the fairy tale was still an emergent genre, developing in dialogue with a rich variety of literary forms – the novel, the oriental tale, the newspaper leader. That dialogue was not always the same: Maria Kaliambou's work on the heterogeneous material in Greek fairy-tale booklets, for instance, might lead us to ponder how publishing context shapes genre definition in other national contexts (Kaliambou, SHARP 2010). When tracing international lines of influence, we

come up against the significant problem of the different definitions used in different languages, and in different nations and regions: *eventyr*, *märchen*, *contes des fées*, wonder tales, fairy legends, and fairy tales, to name just a few. But we also find those definitions shaped far more specifically, emerging from distinctive storytelling and print communities.

As Ruth Bottigheimer eloquently argues, a print-based history of the fairy tale needs to be attentive to literary cross-pollination. And as her work on fingerprints makes clear, it needs to be careful not to overplay the readership for key book editions. Edgar Taylor, for example, the first English editor of Basile's *Pentamerone*, actually found it impossible to obtain a copy of this text in England in the 1830s, finally succeeding only through a contact in Naples. The pioneering work of Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton encouraged us to focus instead on the more pervasive influence of *cheap* print, revealing the complex ways in which it became historically interwoven with French oral and folk tradition (Chartier 1987; Darnton 1990). Ruth Bottigheimer's own work on European chapbook circulation has also made a persuasive case for the early and wide circulation of fairy-tale plots through print, and across all social classes (Bottigheimer, 2003). She is right, of course, that there is much more evidence to gather.

George Cruikshank (1823): Title page illustration to Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm, German Popular Stories. London: Baldwin. Used by permission of the University of London Library.

In nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland, fairy tales in cheap print certainly found mass audiences, but the largest numbers of readers were reached through a different medium to the chapbook. In fact, as I have argued in *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*, lower-class engagement with cheap magazines and newspapers –particularly the penny magazines of the 1830s – was intimately connected to the antiquarian celebration of the chapbook, an increasingly obsolete print form that was recast as the 'true' culture of the folk. It is a shift that we see in George Cruikshanks's 1823 title page to the first English translation of the Grimms' tales *German Popular Stories*. In Cruikshank's image, the tales (as we can see, supposedly taken from German 'Oral Tradition'), are linked not only to oral culture, but to the oral delivery of printed text (figure 1). Epigraphs to both volumes of *German Popular Stories* make direct reference to exactly what these texts might be – seventeenth–century British chapbooks containing the tales of 'Thom Thumbe the Little' and 'Valentine and Orson'. Ironically, this romanticisation of the chapbook has tended to mean that scholars – with a few notable exceptions – have overlooked the influence of the press in shaping fairy-tale traditions. Cheap serial literature certainly causes us to reflect on those attempts to define a fairy tale so central to Ruth Bottigheimer's work. And it makes familiar nineteenth-century assumptions about the provenance of orally-collected fairy tales much more difficult to sustain.

We might briefly take just one national context. Brian Earls has shown that the Irish Folklore Commission, which collected oral tales between the 1920s and 1950s, contains within its archives a significant number of redacted stories that can be traced to the print culture of over a century earlier – particularly to the works of William Carleton (Earls 1984, 9). This, perhaps, should be no surprise, for a significant investment in education, a nascent nationalism, and technological advances allowing the cheaper production of papers and magazines begin to converge in Ireland in the 1830s (Paddy Lyons 89–100; Earls 1992–3). Newspapers, of course, were reaching many rural Irish readers earlier than this: as Linde Lunney has shown, the local Anglican curate of the small village of Maghera, County Londonderry, estimated that eighty pounds a year was spent by the village on newspapers in 1814. Yet cheap magazines from the early 1830s – including *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* and the *Irish Penny Magazine* – were particularly significant, for they published many fairy tales, fairy legends and articles on folklore, and certainly targeted rural Irish (as well as urban) audiences.

Should we then dismiss the material in the Irish Folklore Archives that can be traced to print sources as a tradition based on 'fakelore' – a term coined by Richard Dorson in 1949 for the falsification 'of folklore […] for capitalistic gain'? (Dorson 1959, 4). To my mind such material remains part of an authentic tradition – in the sense that it was meaningful to the community who shared it. If we operate with this context-specific understanding of folklore, it doesn't matter if these tales were read – or heard from print – before they were appropriated into oral tradition. Before the age of sound recording, of course, our speculations on the oral tradition rely on written culture. Historically, folklore as a discipline was always bound up with print, the oral tradition messily intertwined with those commercial processes.

At this year's SHARP conference, Martyn Lyons and Nils Erik Villstrand spoke about 'mediated' and 'accessive' literacy (Lyons, Villstrand, 2010). Ruth Bottigheimer's paper also makes the convincing case that it was not just readers who had access to print. Goldsmith fictionalised a squire's oral retelling of chapbook tales; Irish magazines of the 1830s frequently fictionalised the oral recital of fairy legends from penny magazines. It is clear that such magazines hoped for listeners as well as readers amongst their target audience (Sumpter 2008, 20–21). The fairy tale in print, as Rudolf Schenda made clear, participated in 'semi-literate' and 'semi-oral' circulation processes (Schenda 2007, 127–40). We can't, of course, take fictional frames as evidence of actual reading experiences. But we can find much real evidence that challenges assumptions that print killed oral storytelling communities, and often in unexpected contexts. At SHARP, for instance, we heard Archie Dick speak of the use of fairy tales in the early nineteenth-century notebook of Johannes Smiesing, a Cape Colony slave (Dick 2010). In a Finnish context, Satu Apo has shown the interplay of popular print – including newspaper tales – and the development of oral, local legends and fairy tales (Apo 41, 45). Kirsti Salmi-Niklander has done fascinating work on the early twentieth century manuscript newspapers written and orally recited by working-class readers, in both native and ex-patriot contexts. She shows that reading not only remained linked to the spoken word, but inspired an oral tradition based on creative writing: oral performance to the group was comparable to an unofficial 'publication' process (Salmi-Niklander, 2002, 2006, 2007). While she does not explicitly focus on the fairy tale, Kirsti's term 'oral-literary local tradition' (2002) remains suggestive: it captures some of the complexity of the relationships that both Ruth and I have been trying to map here.

'Cullenmore and the Fairies'

Given the creative relationship between popular reading, writing and communal tale telling in these periods, we can't simply reverse the terms of Romantic fairy-tale scholarship. That is, in the nineteenth century at least, we can't claim a single point of creative origin – urban rather than rural, literary rather than oral, educated rather than lower class – for the fairy tale. For example, at SHARP, Kati Mikkola spoke about rural Finnish contributors to the Folklore Archives who also saw themselves as aspirant writers (Mikkola 2010). It is well documented that a number of the writers of fairy tales and legends in the local and national Irish papers of the 1820s–40s were indeed from rural, lower-class backgrounds – circulating their locally inflected tales to urban centres via print, rather than simply internalising urban printed tales (Earls, 1992–93). Recently, I came across an intriguing text from an Irish local paper, the *Tuam Herald*, published in Galway in 1844. The title reads as follows:

> 'Cullenmore and the Fairies'. A Tradition of the West of Ireland. By Terence M'Donagh, an Irish Peasant (from *The World of Fashion*).

What are we to make of this? The tale is presented as a tradition – suggesting communal ownership – and the stipulation of his peasant origins might seek to present Terence M'Donagh as an authentic repository of ancient lore. Yet it is pointedly also 'by' an author. Moreover, it has already appeared in another periodical – it has been taken, not from his lips, but from a London monthly title aimed at female readers, the *World of Fashion* (launched in 1824). The tale itself testifies to an innovative mix of genres, and includes its own fictional frame. In rural Galway, the writer/narrator describes walking home from a fair with Larry Reilly, famed for being 'the best *Seanachuidhe* – an Irish word for storyteller – in the parish. They are speaking in Irish, and debating fairy belief. Larry points out that Terry, our writer, can 'read and write' and knows 'JOMETRY and Latin'; Larry assumes that he aught to know that the fairies are fallen angels. Larry then tells the tale of 'Cullenmore and the Fairies', which M'Donagh then supposedly translates and writes for the reader. The story concerns a sixteenth century Galway farmer and chieftain, Cullenmore, who, having fought the English who have seized power in the West of Ireland, is arrested and is due to be executed. He is visited by the fairy king Finvarra, who informs him that he can help him escape his cell by turning him into a raven, but demands Cullenmore's help in securing a mortal bride. Cullenmore instead claims the bride for himself, and is menaced by Finvarra, who meddles with his beloved, his cattle and his butter. After various adventures (and unsucessful attempts to destroy Finvarra's enchanted hill at Knockma), Cullenmore ultimately outwits the fairy king.

How do we classify this text? We might wish to define it as a fairy legend, or in Ruth Bottigheimer's terms, a fairy land *fiction* rather than a fairy *tale* – it does indeed draw on parallel earthly and fairy worlds. It occurs in a historical, rather than a timeless realm, and relies on local place names. Yet publishers certainly played a significant role in defining our genre when they packaged material in ways guaranteed to sell. Indeed, Yeats's publisher, Walter Scott, deemed just such kinds of authored legendary material 'fairy tales' when he published Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in 1888.

'Cullenmore and the Fairies' certainly involves fairy-tale wish fulfilment – but it is an unfulfilled *nationalist* restoration narrative. Cullenmore battles the oppressions of the English as well as the malevolence of the fairy king. It is tempting to assume that this tale has been written for a local audience – the *Tuam Herald*'s readers in 1844 would recognise the region's associations in print and oral tradition with the fairy king Finvarra, and perhaps share Cullenmore's frustration with English domination. Yet the fact that it has been reprinted from the *World of Fashion* suggests that it may have been written for urban, English middle-class, female readers, by an aspirant writer eager for more than local fame. This would surely be a different text to English readers unaware of the whereabouts of Tuam, imbibing Irish legends along with fashion plates.

Again, we must be cautious about taking literary frames at face value. We may be wary of M'Donagh's wish to prove his peasant authenticity (and although a Terry M'Donagh is evicted by a Galway landlord in 1882, I can't prove that this is our writer). In British and Irish contexts, a fairy-tale history 'from below' must surely

interrogate terms such as 'peasantry' and 'folk' – mindful that Anglo-Irish folklorists, rather than the rural lower class, provided Yeats with the texts for his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. But book history surely equips us to explore this commercial and creative traffic – between languages and classes, orality and the literacy, the rural and the urban, the local, national and the transnational.

In her paper, Ruth Bottigheimer made another very important point – that individual readers responded to fairy tales just as creatively as to any other genre. If Straparola could be used for seduction, correspondence columns in English socialist penny papers of the 1890s reveal that Cinderella could also be claimed by working class children for socialism (Sumpter 2008, 88–130). Whether we use the vague (and in a British and Irish context) questionable terms 'peasant' and 'folk' – or the contentious 'proletarian', 'rural proletarian' 'working' or 'lower class' – we must of course acknowledge the creativity and individuality of readers from all classes. At the SHARP conference, we heard not only about Finnish rural correspondents to nineteenth-century newspapers but about a Cornish mining poet who wrote in blackberry juice, and a labouring woman's autobiography on a bedsheet (Stark, Thomas, Martyn Lyons 2010). In the nineteenth century, as well as the early twentieth, a surprisingly wide range of readers wrote back. The greatest myth of nineteenth century folklore is obviously the myth of a unified and unchanging 'folk'. Without this mythical entity, we are left where Ruth Bottigheimer began, with that search for patterns rather than origins. We are left with the meticulous task of tracing individual readers and their creative responses to fairy-tale narratives: evidence found in handwritten newspapers, diaries, letters, commonplace books and songbooks, as well as in autobiographies, letters to newspapers, and periodical correspondence columns.

Recent scholars influenced by publishing history, including Ann Wanning Harries (2001), Nancy Canepa (1997), Jennifer Schacker (2003) and Catherine Vellay-Vallentin (1997), have increasingly sought to offered definitions of the fairy tale that are not universal, but historically and geographically shaped by specific reading and tale-telling contexts. If we are work with such definitions – which see genres as inseparable from the communication circuits in which they are situated – discovering what fairy tales meant to historical readers and reading communities becomes the scholar's most pressing task. Ruth Bottigheimer's work has created a valuable and spirited debate amongst literary scholars, folklorists, publishing historians, and journalists on national newspapers – all of whom have been encouraged to think about their own ideological investments in the terms 'oral and print culture'. How we bring together micro and large-scale histories – that is, how we combine those broad-brush debates over fairy-tale genesis and origin with evidence for specific contexts of reception – is the question that I'll end on. It's my prediction that this might be the biggest – and most exciting – challenge in the next stage of fairy-tale scholarship.

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