Rewritten by Adults: The Inscription of Children’s Literature

Follow children learning their fables; and you will see that when they are in a position to apply them, they almost always do so in a way opposite to the author’s intention, and that instead of looking within themselves for the shortcoming that one wants to cure or prevent, they tend to like the vice with which one takes advantage of others’ shortcomings.

Rousseau, Émile

When Folktales retreated from workrooms and parlors to take up residence in the nursery, something was lost in the move. The tales may not have forfeited their hold on the imagination of young and old alike, but they did lose many of the elements that accounted for their appeal to adults qua adults, rather than as parents, guardians, or teachers. “Little Red Riding Hood,” as we shall see, started out as a ribald story with a heroine who spends a good part of the narrative undressing while provocatively asking the wolf what to do with her bodice, her petticoat, and her stockings, and who then tricks the wolf into freeing her by asking if she can go outdoors to relieve herself. It is not difficult to imagine what a skilled raconteur could do with this story to enliven the hours spent husking corn or mending tools. But in the hands of those who turned traditional tales into literary texts, the story of Red Riding Hood came to be oriented toward a new audience and transformed into a solemn cautionary tale warning children about the perils of disobedying mother’s instructions. “The Frog
King," a story rich in opportunities for risqué humor, was similarly recast to produce a tale designed to issue stern lessons about the importance of keeping promises—even when it means sharing your bed with an amorous frog. The twins born to Rapunzel materialize in magical fashion when they appear between the covers of books for children—not once are they connected with the heroine's daily romps with the prince in her isolated tower.

Those who recorded folktales for a posterity that included children as well as adults often took the path of least resistance and turned a deaf ear to stories that showed priests hightailing it when husbands returned home unexpectedly or that described worldly men helping naïve young women "put the devil into hell." With some imagination and ingenuity, it was also not that difficult to alter a few details in a tale to make it acceptable—if not necessarily appealing—children's fare. In the oldest versions of "The Three Gifts," a boy wishes for a bow that will hit its every target and a pipe that will force people to dance. He also asks that whenever his stepmother glares at him, "her bum might then let go, and crack like roaring thunder." Later versions of the story show the boy wishing for a bow, a pipe, and the ability to make everyone do as he commands.  

Every collector, of course, had a different bias. The Frenchman Henri Pourrat, for example, let scatological episodes slip into his multivolumed anthology of folktales but excised anything that smacked of anticlerical sentiment or sacrilegious conduct. In his story "The Stupid Wife," a woman hiding in a tree with her husband cannot restrain herself and defecates. The substance lands in a pot of soup being cooked by bandits, who chant "Bubul, bubble, rich and brown, / God's own fat is tumbling down." Pourrat had the "delicacy" to change "God's own grace" ("la grâce de Dieu") into "God's own fat" ("la graisse de Dieu"). Yet Pourrat's practice in this particular tale represents something of a deviation from the norm, in part because he was less intent on writing for children than on preserving rustic customs. In general, the closer we move toward the nineteenth century, the lower the tolerance of collectors for virtually anything that touches on bodily functions.

Scholars have produced abundant evidence to show that folk raconteurs took advantage of opportunities to blend generous doses of earthy humor into their plots and season them with sexual intrigue. The liberties they took by the fireside were almost always eliminated once the stories reached print and moved into the realm of "official" culture. As Bakhtin has taught us, the grotesque realism of folk culture produced a boundless world of carnival humor that stood in a contestatory relationship to the official ecclesiastical and feudal order. Bodily functions were celebrated in both their degrading and reproductive aspects—the material triumphed over the spiritual as the source of life. "Grotesque realism...is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving," Bakhtin asserts.  

Laughter becomes a subversive power, undermining the stable truths of official culture and producing an irreverently playful world of change and renewal. As folktales became divested of their humorous elements, they also lost their subversive edge and became assimilated into the official canon of children's literature, which had always been more interested in producing docile minds than playful bodies.

Thanks to the efforts of certain folklorists (many of whom were considered uncomfortably close to the lunatic fringe in their own day and age), we possess unbowedlerized versions of some popular tales. Alexander Afanasev, the Russian counterpart to the brothers Grimm, had to print the bawdy tales he had collected at his own expense, in the city of Geneva, "without fanfare, in a place far from the cataclysmic events of the world, a place that the censorious hand of the censor has not yet violated." Even in the recent past, folklorists have felt obliged to keep their anthologies clean and to file away any "dirty" stories they may have heard from raconteurs. The American folklorist Vance Randolph, for example, published numerous collections of Ozark folktales in the 1950s, but the off-color tales he recorded were quietly deposited in the Library of Congress and in the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University and did not reach print until some twenty years later under the title Pissing in the Snow and Other Ozark Folktales.

When it came to violence, the collectors of folktales put a different strategy into operation. Instead of disguising it or blotting it out, they preserved and often intensified it, though usually only when scenes of physical suffering or mental torment could be invested with a higher moral purpose. Since many classic fairy tales for children move along the path from victimization to retaliation, there was always ample opportunity to dilate on a person's misfortune. The example of the Grimms' "Cinderella" illustrates the attentive detail lavished on a heroine's trials and tribulations.
3. Fairy-tale villains often receive the punishments they have designed for others. Here, Sleeping Beauty’s mother-in-law ends up in the barrel of snakes she had prepared for the heroine.

[The stepsisters] expected her to work hard there from morning till night. She had to get up before dawn, carry the water into the house, make the fire, cook, and wash. Besides this, her sisters did everything imaginable to cause her grief and make her look ridiculous. For instance, they poured peas and lentils into the hearth ashes so she had to sit there and pick them out. In the evening, when she was exhausted from working, they took away her bed, and she had to lie next to the hearth in the ashes. This is why she always looked so dusty and dirty and why they all called her Cinderella.⁶

The Grimms were astute enough to know that a fairy-tale character obliged to do any housework at all—let alone all of it—has the immediate sympathy of most children. To turn a heroine into a tragic martyr often required little more than putting a broom into her hands.

The punishment of villains rarely called for restraint: most nineteenth-century anthologies of folktales paint remarkably vivid scenes of torture and execution. In some instances, violence was even added to stories. In the Grimms’ first printed version of “Cinderella,” for example, the stepmother and stepsisters are “horrified” and “turn pale” when they witness the heroine’s good fortune.⁷ By the time of the second edition, when Wilhelm Grimm was well aware that the collection had become a big hit with children, pigeons peck out the eyes of the stepsisters and they are “punished with blindness for the rest of their lives [for] their wickedness and malice.” American versions of the tale were rarely so violent, in part because they were usually based on Perrault’s version of “Cinderella,” which showed the heroine (“as good as she was beautiful”) setting aside apartments in her palace for her sisters and marrying them to “two gentlemen of high rank about the Court.”⁸ But Perrault’s ending was the exception rather than the rule: other printed versions of “Cinderella” (including French ones) show the stepsisters and their mother enduring agonizing mental or physical pain. From Basile’s stepsisters, who creep home to their mother “livid with envy and unable to bear the torment of their breaking hearts,” through French stepsisters who are turned to stone or get jaundice and die, to Portuguese stepsisters who are put to death, we can get a rough idea of the full palette of punishments reserved for Cinderella’s rivals.⁹ As the old wives who tell the tales collected in Basile’s Pentamerone observe, the stepsisters always get off too easy, for “no punishment or disaster can be too great for the deserts of pride and envy.”

Why this strong moral indignation? If we look at the frame tale for Basile’s Pentamerone, we discover that “The Cat Cinderella” is, like the other stories in the collection, “one of those tales that old women tell to amuse children.”⁰ We know, then, that in seventeenth-century Italy, folktales were already oriented toward children, though Basile’s collection was produced with an adult audience in mind. The judgmental posture of the narrator derives, to some extent, from the need to provide a moral backbone to what otherwise might be perceived as an utterly frivolous tale. Unfortunately, not only stories like “Cinderella” (with its victimization/retaliation pattern) became grist for the mill of those who felt a relentless need to teach children lessons. “Little Red Riding Hood,” which began with a prohibition followed by the hero-
ine's violation of it, played right into the hands of those who were eager to find morals and send messages. In it, however, as in its folkloric cousins, the heroine (not her oppressors) meets with a violent end—only in a few versions (like the Grimms') is she rescued from the belly of the wolf. This cautionary tale makes an example of its protagonist, the very figure with which children identify, rather than of its adult villain, and thus becomes a true horror story.

Folktales began to reach print at just the point when a real commercial market was developing for children's literature. Ever adaptable, they could easily be harnessed into service as stories for children so long as a few key changes were made—changes that divested the tales of their earthy humor, burlesque twists, and bawdy turns of phrase to make room for moral instruction and spiritual guidance. Those who produced the great anthologies of folktales and fairy tales had an ever watchful eye on the models generated by the authors of children's books.

From its inception, children's literature had in it an unusually cruel and coercive streak—one which produced books that relied on brutal intimidation to frighten children into complying with parental demands. This intimidation manifested itself in two very different forms, but both made examples of children. First, there were countless cautionary tales that managed to kill off their protagonists or make their lives perpetually miserable for acts of disobedience. Then there were stories about exemplary behavior which, nonetheless, had a strange way of also ending at the deathbeds of their protagonists.

Since cautionary tales and exemplary stories were the two principal models available for producers of children's fiction and biography, they exercised a powerful influence on writers who were (sometimes intentionally, sometimes unwittingly) turning folktales into stories for children. Although transforming a folktale into a cautionary tale or exemplary story may seem like a futile exercise producing nothing more than tales graceless and contrived in their effect, the opposite, in fact, holds true. What is astonishing is the ease with which folktales could be transplanted into the flinty soil of what was once considered suitable reading matter for children.

Since the cautionary tale and the exemplary story played so instrumental a role in the revision of folktales, we need to take a short detour to explore their form and function. Let us begin with the cautionary tale, a genre that flourished in the harsh climate of nineteenth-century childrearing practices. Here we find Heinrich Hoffmann's Pauline, who plays with matches in the German children's classic Struwwelpeter, goes up in flames, and perishes. While she is reaching for the matches and lighting them, her cats chant warnings: "Your father has forbidden it... Your mother has forbidden it." Pauline's fate does not deviate sharply from that of her German antecedents and their French and British counterparts, who all suffer dreadful consequences for their lapses. When a young procrastinator tries to learn her lessons on the way to school, the British Miss Kilner lets her trip, fall on her face, and run home with blood pouring over her. "I am sorry you are hurt, still I do really think you deserve to be so for your own indolence and folly," the girls mother announces with more than a touch of satisfaction.

Karl August Engelhardt recounts the story of a boy who, with no malice aforethought, pulls a caper whose consequences are spun out so broadly that they include the loss of the family home and the death of the boy's parents. One false step, these tales imply, and you will perish or, better yet, suffer a thousand deaths as you watch your home put on the auction block, your father go blind, your mother die of grief, and your siblings land in the poorhouse.

Just what is this false step? Pauline's cats proclaim that the deeper cause of the girl's death lies in disobedience. The boy who mistakes arsenic for sugar and dies from eating it in countless children's stories and poems deserves his fate not because of his gluttony, but because he has disobeyed parental commands. "The little Fish that would not do as it was bid," in Ann and Jane Taylor's Rhymes for the Nursery (1835), makes the following speech before expiring on a fisherman's hook: "Dear mother, had I minded you, I need not now have died." The cardinal sin of youth is disobedience, and it is a sin that habitually demands the death penalty. What is particularly odd about these stories is that the pedagogical program of each tale clashes so starkly with the tale's content: survival and good fortune are promoted through images of death and disaster.

The titles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bestsellers for children are telling: A Tale of Warning, or, The Victims of Indolence; The Good-Natured Little Boy and the Ill-Natured Little Boy; Meddlesome Mattie; Dangerous Sports, a Tale Addressed to Children Warning them against Wanton, Careless, or Mischievous Exposure to Situations from which Alarming Injuries so often Proceed; and The Adventures of a Whipping-Top. Illustrated with Stories of many Bad Boys, who themselves deserve whipping, and
of some Good Boys, who deserve Plum-Cakes. The wave of moralism that swept through children's fiction to produce tales of the "awful-warning" school also encroached on other areas of childhood culture. In Rhymes and Pictures for the Nursery and School. By a Lady, we hear of a little girl who insists on eating forbidden fruit:

They went on a little, but Anna complain'd
Of pain in her stomach and head,
And very soon follow'd most terrible pains,
She shriek'd out with anguish and dread...She died from not doing what Ma had desired,
And eating the fruit of the wood.

The year 1810 witnessed the issue of the British New Game of Virtue Rewarded and Vice Punished, whose game board was covered with such attractive scenes and figures as "The Stocks," "The House of Correction," "Faith," and "Prudence." The popular American children's game Chutes and Ladders, in which game pieces landing on pictures of children eating candy, reaching for a cookie, or drawing with crayons on a wall must slide away from the goal down a chute, while game pieces landing on pictures of children mowing the lawn, sweeping the floor, or baking a cake may advance up a ladder, was probably evolved from its British equivalent. There too a child is to learn "the rewards of good deeds and the consequences of naughty ones."

All these tales, rhymes, and games operate with a minimal narrative unit that consists of a pattern basic also to folk tale plots (prohibition/violation/punishment). We can see this syntagmatic unit at work in "Sleeping Beauty," where the heroine must not touch a spindle. When she violates the (unspoken) prohibition, the penalty consists of a deathlike sleep that lasts a hundred years. Unlike the naughty children of cautionary tales, however, Sleeping Beauty never willfully defies an order—in fact, she does nothing at all to merit the punishment visited on her. There is no moral dimension whatever to her action. This could easily be changed, and often was changed, once fairy tales were appropriated by the purveyors of children's literature. Sleeping Beauty usually remained morally unimpeachable, though one recent American version turns her into a girl who, like Bluebeard's wife, succumbs to the temptation of taking a key and opening the door to a forbidden chamber—one that houses a spinning wheel. On the other hand, Sleeping Beauty's folkloric sisters (among others, Little Red Riding Hood, the princess in "The Frog Prince," and the heroine of "King Thrushbeard") nearly all became models of bad breeding. By the middle of the nineteenth century, they had become morally reprehensible in one way or another and in some sense responsible for their fates.

Defenders of fairy tales often fall into the trap of elevating these stories into repositories of higher truths and moralities. Fairy tales, we have been taught to believe, offer comfort to children, for in them we find a moral corrective to everyday life, a world in which the good are consistently rewarded and the evil are just as consistently punished. In reality, the picture is quite different. Although fairy tales often celebrate such virtues as compassion and humility and show the rewards of good behavior, they also openly advocate lying, cheating, and stealing. The heroes and heroines (who are not necessarily either "good" or "virtuous") get all the rewards while the villains (who are not always "evil" or "sinful") are dispossessed and tortured. Think of the miller's daughter in "Rumpelstiltskin," who marries a king and lives happily ever after even though she fails to keep up her end of the bargain struck with the "villain" of the tale's title. Rumpelstiltskin, by contrast, fulfills all the terms of his contract but perishes because he is moved by the queen's tears and agrees to build an escape clause into the contract.

The moral depravity of fairy-tale heroes and heroines did not escape the attention of those who had an audience of children in mind as they prepared volumes of fairy tales for publication. In order to please "every tender mother, and every gentle tutor," Benjamin Tabart had to make sweeping changes in traditional tales to produce his Popular Fairy Tales, or, a Lilliputian Library. His Jack, for example, does not rob the giant of his rightful possessions—he simply reclaims (as we learn in a lengthy digression) what the giant had previously stolen from his father.

Once fairy tales entered the realm of children's literature, they took on a protective didactic coloring that has been virtually impossible to remove. Rather than toning down scenes of violence for children's stories, recorders and collectors often added moral lessons that, in their eyes, gave them license to emphasize or even exaggerate descriptions of punishment and death. At the same time, authors of conventional cautionary tales were learning some lessons of their own from didactic fairy tales, enlivening their often dreary depictions of virtue rewarded and vice punished by dwelling on the naughty, corrupt, and evil deeds of children and by borrowing surreal elements from folk tales to add spine-chilling effects. The result occasionally added up to gratuitous cruelty,
as in the case of Mrs. W. K. Clifford's *Anyhow Stories* (1882), in which a "wild woman" tempts two small children to engage in ever more naughty deeds until finally their mother can bear it no longer and turns over her children and her home to a woman with glass eyes and a wooden tail. The children flee into the woods. "They are there still, my children," Mrs. Clifford solemnly concludes. "Now and then . . . [they] creep up near to the home in which they once were so happy, and with beating hearts they watch and listen; sometimes a blinding flash comes through the window, and they know it is the light from the new mother's glass eyes, or they hear a strange muffled noise, and they know it is the sound of the wooden tail as she drags it along the floor."19 

This story, which plays on children's deepest fears about maternal abandonment, stands as the most extreme example of what could happen when an author combined naturalistic descriptions of children's behavior with surreal incarnations of punishing parents.

The anonymous author of a collection of cautionary stories entitled *Tales Uniting Instruction with Amusement consisting of the Dangers of the Streets, and Throwing Squibs* must have had a strange notion of "amusement." The readers of this volume are treated to the contrast between wellbred Edward Manly, who is always careful to watch his step, and mischievous George, who walks out into the street, is run over by a wagon, and ends up on the operating table: "The surgeon took out his instruments, cut the flesh all round with a sharp knife, cut through the bone with a saw, and thus poor George's leg was taken completely off." Then there is Tom, who throws squibs and ends up killing his father and hurting himself: "He often bitterly laments his ill-conduct, and wishes he had followed his poor father's good advice. If he had done so, he might now have been at a genteel boarding school with both his eyes safe, instead of being a chimney sweeper, and blind of one eye."20 The stories were probably meant to amuse in the sense of "divert," yet they inadvertently produce a comic effect. When a punishment is so disproportionate to the crime, as in these cases, there is something ludicrous about the solemnity of the narrator's pronouncements.

*Tales Uniting Instruction with Amusement* can help us understand just why it was that cautionary tales were probably less distasteful to children than one might suspect. The gory accidents that children meet up with when they are careless or disobedient may have been meant to repel children, but the fact is that they could also prove a source of unending fascination. What child is not mesmerized by the sight of the burning dresses, lopped-off thumbs, and tormented animals in Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, a book whose appeal can be traced not just to the need of parents to coerce their children into docile behavior, but also to the desire of children to hear stories as sensational in their own way as the ones once told around the fireside. In many cases, the more carried away adult writers of cautionary tales were in their descriptions of tortures and mutilations, the more attractive the tales proved for children.

At times it seems as if some authors deliberately sabotaged the didactic aim of their stories. Mrs. Bell in Kilner's *Village School* is described as "a very good woman," a "valuable member of society," and "much beloved." Here is how she punishes one of the many "naughty" children at her school:

She took off his coat, and beat him very much with a cane she kept on purpose to beat naughty children. She then tied his hands behind him, and his legs together, and assured him he should not go home that night; but that, when school was over, she would shut him up in some closet, where he might be safe, and not do any more mischief. (9)

It is easy enough to imagine that Mrs. Bell's death in a fire while she is concurrently nursing a sick woman and making a shirt for a neighbor whose wife is also ill is something of a relief for both author and readers. Mrs. Kilner seems almost too eager to describe the demise of her heroine, whose "flesh was so entirely consumed as to make it impossible to distinguish Mrs. Bell from the poor woman she had charitably assisted" (60). Yet when we read the sanctimonious tribute to Mrs. Bell and find that her story culminates in yet another lesson—this time "to be extremely cautious not to leave candles burning near linen"—it is hard to imagine that Mrs. Kilner's aim was parody. This would not, however, prevent young readers of *The Village School* from getting some grim satisfaction out of Mrs. Bell's death.

Exemplary stories could be just as unsparing as cautionary tales in describing scenes of suffering—in some ways they seem even crueler than stories in which boys perish because they have pulled the wings off a fly. That these stories dominated the children's book market for some time becomes clear from an observation made in the 1830s by Catherine Sinclair, when a friend residing in the country asked her to select some books for her children. On surveying what was available, it
surprised Sinclair that "a large proportion of the volumes recommended had frontispieces to represent a death-bed surrounded by the clergyman, the physician, and the afflicted relatives of a dying Christian, the memoirs of children especially, which I examined, were almost invariably terminated by an early death." The most notorious example of a book that celebrated the deaths of "good" children was James Janeway's *A Token for Children: Being an Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1671–72). Janeway is dead set against allowing children to enjoy themselves in this world. Pleasure and joy are reserved exclusively for dead children, or, at best, for those in their death throes. "How do you spend your time?" he asks his audience with calculated artlessness. "Is it in play and idleness, and with wicked children... Do you dare to idle and play upon the Lord's day?" We do not have to read far into the volume to discover the fatal consequences of idleness, but Janeway does not give us, as might be expected, death scenes of wanton young sinners. The sweet children whose deaths he describes "learned God, and were dutiful to their parents." Now that they are in heaven, they see "glorious things, and have nothing but joy and pleasure." For those children who are not yet fortunate enough to experience the "ecstasy of joy and holy triumph" that the four-year-old Mary A. felt on her deathbed, Janeway recommends a combination of "secret prayer" and weeping, with occasional pauses for quoting of scripture, expressions of gratitude for parental prohibitions, and readings in his own book, whose richness, he asserts, will not be exhausted even after a hundred readings.

The case history of young John Sudlow has Janeway's characteristic touch: a dreary, sanctimonious style combined with a hagiographic tone that wears thin even on a first reading. The death of John's brother inspires the boy "to avoid whatsoever might displease God." His interest in scripture becomes so intense that "when neighbors' children would come and call him out, and try to entice him to go with them, he would by no means be persuaded... if he had any hope that any pious person would come to his father's house" (44–45). His temper is so "sweet" that he is always "dutiful" to his parents and careful not to "displease" them. Compassion for his brothers and sisters runs so deep that he begs his parents to take better care of the souls of their siblings "lest they should go on in a sinful Christless state, prove their sorrow and shame, go to hell when they died, and be ruined forever" (46). Struck down by the plague, this model child remains steadfast in his faith even when the local minister consoles him on his deathbed by asking him whether he is afraid to die and reminding him that he is a sinner who cannot expect salvation.

The London Bills of Mortality reveal that in the period shortly following the publication of Janeway's *Token for Children*, the mortality rate of children age five and under could run as high as 66 percent. Thus when Janeway asked, in the "directions for children" accompanying his volume: "Did you never hear of a little child that died?" he could count on "yes" as an answer. "If other children die," Janeway hastened to add, "why may not you be sick and die? and what will you do then, if you should have no grace in your heart, but are like other naughty children?" (94). Given the visible presence of death in the daily lives of most children growing up in the premodern era and the nineteenth century, the specter of an early death could be raised in a highly effective way by those who chose to use it in their childrearing practices.

Janeway's sensationalizing dramas of children's victories over sin may, like cautionary tales, have ended in the cemetery, but they prospered with the reading public. One critic has likened the appeal of these spiritual biographies to that of romances and fairy tales, for in them sin figures as an ogre or monster against which the child struggles to emerge victorious. Yet while folktales could easily absorb the ethos of the cautionary tale and transform themselves into miniature moral dramas, they proved more resistant to the spirituality of the exemplary story; accounts of pious children lacked the element of transgressive action required to generate fairy-tale conflicts. Still, one should not underestimate the attractiveness of the genre for children. F. L. Travers (author of *Mary Poppins*), for example, writes about her "great affection" as a child for a book called *Twelve Deathbed Scenes*.

As we shall see, there are a number of tales that glorify the sufferings of their protagonists and celebrate the afterlife, among them a story whose most popular incarnation is found in Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Match Girl." *Dear Mill*, a tale by Wilhelm Grimm recently published with great fanfare in this country, is similarly oriented toward death, with a heroine who loses her life during a time of war and is translated into a higher sphere, where she lives with St. Joseph and plays with her guardian angel.

A culture with a high mortality rate will understandably reach for Janeway, Andersen, or Grimm in order to prepare children for death by offering the consolation of spiritual salvation. It is, after all, not easy for
anyone to answer the concerns raised by a child in Lucy Cameron’s *History of Margaret Wythe, or, The Life and Death of a Good Child* (1837): “How can we tell that we shall ever live to grow up? Many children die much younger than either of us; and if we do not think of preparing for death, what will become of us?” Even Janeway seems quite tame by comparison with some of the sermons preached to British children in the early part of the nineteenth century. Here is an excerpt from one delivered by the grim Reverend Carus Wilson, author of a juvenile magazine called—in all seriousness—*The Children’s Friend*:

My dear children, the hooping [sic] cough is spreading fast; several little ones have died of it. Day after day I hear the bell tolling, and one little child after another has been buried here; and as I walk out into the villages, and the lanes, and go into schools, I see your little faces swelled, and hear you coughing; but I am pained to think how few of you would be found ready were you called to die of it. Let me beg of you, dears, to try to think about death; say to yourselves, “Perhaps I may soon die, and then where will my soul go? Will it go to heaven, or will it be cast down into hell, where there will be weeping, and wailing and gnashing of teeth?”

There is no escaping the fact that tales like “The Little Match Girl” and *Dear Mili* use death in much the same way as do sermons like these. The goodness, obedience, and piety of the match girl and Mili secure them a place in heaven; implicitly, we know that their fate would be quite different were they to lack those qualities. It is thus more than odd that a text like *Dear Mili*, which is so firmly anchored in the cultural realities of its time, should be resurrected and hailed as a children’s tale that speaks “so directly to the concerns of our time [1988] that it seems extraordinary to have it appear now.”

Collectors of folktales nearly always stand in awe of the stories they record. The Grimms never tired of declaring that the tales in their collection captured the authentic voice of the folk in all its purity and artless simplicity. The poetry of the people was also the poetry of nature, unsullied by the corrupting influences of culture and civilization. Yet at the same time, the Grimms called their book an “educational manual.” Folktales were never meant to convey lessons, they proclaimed in the introduction to the *Nursery and Household Tales*, “but a moral grows out of them, just as good fruit develops from healthy blossoms without help from man.” In a sense, the Grimms were trying to have their cake and eat it too: They had a need to enshrine these tales as “natural” stories untainted by the hand of man, yet at the same time they felt compelled to stress their “civilizing” qualities. Unable to escape the influence of Rousseau, yet also children of the Enlightenment who would have applauded the view that “everything, animate or inanimate, may . . . be made subservient to moral instruction,” they found themselves caught in a contradiction that characterized much of post-Enlightenment thinking about folktales.

The myth of folktales as sacred, “natural” texts was deftly propagated by Charles Dickens, who brought to the literature of childhood the same devout reverence that he accorded children. Dickens, like the Grimms, hailed the “simplicity,” “purity,” and “innocent extravagance” of fairy tales, but he also praised the tales as powerful instruments of socialization: “It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forebearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many such good things have been first nourished in the child’s heart by this powerful aid.”

Dickens’ paean to fairy tales was part of a crusade against the efforts of George Cruikshank, his illustrator and erstwhile friend, to produce a new breed of fairy tales. Passions ran high when the two quarreled over the issue. Cruikshank, in response to Dickens’ attack on his versions of “Cinderella,” “Hop-o’-my-Thumb,” “Puss in Boots,” and “The History of Jack & the Bean-Stalk,” correctly pointed out that there was much in fairy tales that was not suitable for children. In the preface to his “Cinderella,” he told readers that he had pored over several versions of the tale and found “some vulgarity, mixed up with so much that was useless and unfit for children, that I was obliged . . . to rewrite the whole story.” Cruikshank could not resist the temptation to introduce “a few Temperance Truths” in his rewriting. When Cinderella is to be wed, for example, the father of the Prince orders “fountains of wine” to be set up in the courtyards of the palace and in the streets. Cinderella’s godmother is appalled by these plans and reminds the monarch that these fountains of wine will foment “quarters, brutal fights, and violent death.” The King’s belief that moderation in drink will avert violence is challenged by the godmother, who tactfully states that “the history of the use of strong drink . . . is marked on every page by excess, which follows, as a matter of course, from the very nature of their composit-
tion, and always accompanied by ill-health, misery, and crime" (2.5). The King is converted and orders all the beer, wine, and spirits in the kingdom collected for a "great bonfire" on the night of the wedding. After reading Cruikshank's "Cinderella," Dickens' words about the intrusion of a 'Whole Hog of unwieldy dimension into the fairy flower garden" seem remarkably apt.34

Cruikshank, however, did not limit himself to "Temperance Truths." In "The History of Jack & the Bean-Stalk," he rambled on about the evils of "idleness and ignorance" and introduced a fairy who tells a reformed Jack: "I have long wished to employ you in a difficult and important matter, but I could not trust you whilst you were so careless and idly disposed; but now, that you have this day shaken off that slothful habit, and have determined to be active, diligent, and trustworthy, I no longer hesitate." in "Hop-o'-my-Thumb," the hero and his brothers learn to wash themselves in "cold water (which they did winter and summer, because it is most refreshing and healthy to do so)" and to "go to bed early, which they all did, like good children, without any grumbling or crying." Cruikshank's passionate drive to correct the moral vision of fairy tales is nowhere harder at work than in his remarks about Cinderella's stepmother. To preserve the sanctity of motherhood, including stepmotherhood, he represents the villain of the piece as an anomalous case. "It is the nature of woman to have children," he pontificates, "because the Almighty has appointed her to bring them up; and when little boys and girls are placed at an early age under the charge of a stepmother, it is very rarely that they feel the loss of their own mother: but there are exceptions, and it was so, unfortunately, in this case; for Cinderella's mother-in-law [sic] was proud, selfish, and extravagant, and these bad qualities led her to be unjust and cruel."35

Cruikshank's reinterpretations of fairy tales may have been more heavy-handed than those of most other authors and collectors, but they dramatically illustrate the way in which the ethos of the collector/editor/rewriter penetrates the moral universe of a fairy tale, even of those tales that escaped a merger with the cautionary tale or exemplary story. "Cinderella," for example, in telling of a child persecuted by her stepmother and siblings and of how the child gets back at them, was probably never really designed to illustrate the rewards of good behavior. Still, as we have seen in the case of Cruikshank's rewriting, this story of a girl's victimization and retaliation left plenty of room for moral glosses on whatever virtue or vice happened to preoccupy its recorder.

All printed fairy tales are colored by the facts of the time and place in which they were recorded. For this reason, it is especially odd that we continue to read to our children—often without the slightest degree of critical reflection—unrevised versions of stories that are imbued with the values of a different time and place. Collections like those of Charles Perrault, the brothers Grimm, and Joseph Jacobs are documents from the past, "old-time" fairy tales which, according to the author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, should now be "classed as 'historical' in the children's library." For L. Frank Baum, the time had come for "a series of newer 'wonder tales' in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and bloodcurdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale."38 We would be well advised, as Rudolf Schenda has proposed, not only to provide the old-time fairy tale collections with prefaces about the genesis of the tales and notes about the cultural milieu in which they flourished, but, even more importantly, to think twice before reading certain stories from the collections to children.39

Schenda's suggestion, however sound, does not take into account a parent's unwillingness to purchase storybooks with a scholarly apparatus, let alone a publisher's horror at the thought of printing such a volume. But how then, do we avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater? How do we preserve the fairy-tale canon even as we divest it of the "wisdom" of another age, of cultural constructs that are irrelevant or inappropriate for the child to whom the tale is read? One obvious answer is to rewrite the stories so that they are closer to our own time and place. But such projects do not necessarily succeed in producing "better" texts—they may end by reflecting the values of one class, ethnic group, or other social segment of our own culture, but that segment may not have much appeal for those living in a culture characterized by ideological pluralism.

Rewriting is often just as likely to produce an unsatisfying text as it is to produce an improved version of the story. Consider the example of the recently issued Princess and the Frog, which is a self-described adaptation of "The Frog King and Iron Heinrich" by the Brothers Grimm.40 This rewriting does not by any means eliminate the father's intervention and his declaration that the princess must keep her prom-
ise and let a frog climb into her bed. "Go and let the frog in," the father insists. "You have made a promise and you must keep it." This new version of an old tale gives us a dutiful daughter who obeys her father, then goes along with the frog's request to let him sleep on her pillow. Instead of a princess who—in a gesture appropriately charged with fear and frustration—dashes the importune frog against the wall, we have a girl who falls asleep three times with the frog in her bed and finally awakens, on the third morning, to find a prince. The adapter is careful, however, to position the frog on the princess's pillow, just as she replaces the girl's feelings of disgust and anger with tolerance toward her amphibian suitor. (The countless cartoons and jokes based on this story have, incidentally, almost all rewritten the scene of disenchanted: the frog is transformed by a kiss rather than by an act of violence.4)

In prefatory remarks to "Princess Furball," a modern version of the Grimms' "Allerleinauh," the American adapter makes a point of acknowledging that she has rewritten the story and erased the theme of incest in it, yet she also asserts that she has remained faithful to the "psychological truth" of earlier tellings.5 Trying to assess the impact of the Grimms' version of the tale and to compare it with the effect of the rewritten version is a task that must be left to the child psychologists. But the examples of the "Frog King" and "Princess Furball" remind us how a story that has been brought "up-to-date" does not necessarily give us an interpretation that is more pedagogically sound or psychologically true.

Fairy tales are not written in granite. My own experience has shown that we continue to rewrite the tales as we reread them, even though the words on the page remain the same. But it is important to remember that what we produce in our retellings and rereadings discloses more about an adult agenda for children than about what children want to hear. Thus fairy tales may not offer much insight into the minds of children, but they often document our shifting attitudes toward the child and chart our notions about childrearing in a remarkable way. It is these discursive practices, as they are embedded in children's literature, that invite reflection as we read to a child or when we put a book into a child's hands.

Maurice Sendak once stated that, as a former child, he felt fully entitled and empowered to write children's stories. In a sense, these same credentials allow all of us to retell fairy tales to our children, even if we may never be able to get the cultural script quite right. Yet while there