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Bettelheim Among the Folklorists

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Psychoanalysis and folklore have been uneasy bedfellows. Any psychoanalytic interpretation of folktales makes folklorists twist and turn. Their reactions have ranged from ambivalent acceptance to unequivocal rejection. Psychoanalysts, on the other hand, are ever too ready to consider such a reaction as denial, or at least avoidance of the "true" meaning of fairy tales. As a psychoanalyst, Bruno Bettelheim could have bridged between the two disciplines with his book *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). His valuation of orality, his erudite familiarity with the classical sources of European folktales, and his sheer love for the fairy tale, qualified him for mediating the two disciplines. Surely, Bettelheim did not conceive of himself as a broker between two intellectual fields. However, by writing such a book this role was inevitably thrust upon him. The assessment of his success or failure requires, first, the examination of the theoretical, methodological, and attitudinal conflicts between folklore and psychoanalysis. Secondly, there is a need to clarify the charges of plagiarism that were brought against Bettelheim, and finally a need to evaluate his methodological contribution to the psychoanalytic interpretation of the fairy tale.

Folklore And Psychoanalysis

In an essay that has since become a "classic" of folklore scholarship, William Bascom (1954) discusses the Freudian approach to folklore, recognizing its import and yet expressing reservations about its merit. He writes:

> The psychoanalytical school provides well-known answers to what have been considered atrocities and obscenities, based largely on the identification of sex symbols and the Oedipus and Electra situation in

> myths. Some of the contradictions between folklore and culture are thus explained as wish fulfillment or escape from sexual taboos on a fantasy level by mechanisms comparable to those found in dreams or daydreams. (p. 340)

Later, taking a cross-cultural perspective, he adds:

> Whatever one may think of the various applications of classical Freudian theory to folklore, one must admit that there are basic ideas here which go far beyond sexual symbolism and the Oedipus plot. Viewed in this light folklore reveals man's frustrations and attempts to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon him by society, whether these repressions be sexual or otherwise and whether they result from taboos on incest or polygamy, or from a taboo on laughing at a person afflicted by yaws. The concepts of compensation and the escape mechanism are fully as suggestive when applied to the familiar themes of rags to riches, or to the Cinderella and Frau Holle tales, as when they are applied to the Oedipus myth.…
>
> Classical Freudian theory has required considerable revision to make it applicable cross-culturally in a meaningful way. (p. 343)

Yet, lest the proverbial baby be thrown out with the bath water, he concludes:

> If Freud's biological determinism has been rejected, Freudian mechanisms have not; and when translated into cultural, rather biological terms, Freudian mechanisms are meaningful and suggestive for the interpretation of folklore. (p. 344)[1]

Over the years the opposition to psychoanalytic interpretation has even hardened. When **Richard Dorson (1972)**, for example, presents the “psychoanalytic theory” in folklore in an introductory text, he describes it as “[t]he most speculative body of current folklore theory” and states that “[t]his is also the school of interpretation most abhorrent to orthodox folklorists” (p. 25). He laces his discussion with sarcasm, undermining the very theory he introduces, and concludes with the observation that the reaction of “orthodox folklorists,” as well as anthropologists, to psychoanalytic theory ranges “from disgusted rejection through cautious, partial acceptance to some instances of wholesale endorsement” (p. 33). In this case, Dorson undermines even the positive response to psychoanalytic theory describing it as “wholesale endorsement,” which in an intellectual context is a denigrating descriptive term of support.[2]

The vehemence of the repudiation of psychoanalytic interpretation may have abated over the years, but its substance has not changed. Recently, **Bengt Holbek (1987)** has concluded his discussion of this subject as follows:

> We have found that, given the necessary ingenuity… almost every theory of the mind… can be demonstrated operational. Every analyst can point to parallel material from his or her clinical experience or to parallel symbols in literature and art. We cannot pronounce any one of them more "right" than any other because of the exasperating lack of independent evidence. Then what can we do?
>
> Under the circumstances *we have no choice but to reject them all* [emphasis mine]. None of them has proved beyond reasonable doubt that their particular brand of latent or unconscious meaning is actually present in any given text.…
>
> This means that we cannot base our interpretation on any supposition of unconscious meaning. The tales must be read as stand. (p. 319)

Holbek replaces Dorson's emotive language with a reasoned discourse yet arrives at the same conclusion. In the process he commits two errors—one logical, the other theoretical—and proposes to expand the positive basis for inference of verifiable meanings in fairy tales. Logically, the validity of any interpretation does not depend on the number of available alternatives. A single interpretation of a text is not inherently correct, and many are not necessarily wrong. Quantity is simply irrelevant to the validity of interpretation, which depends on the relations between reality, the text, and the interpretive discourse about the text. Therefore the availability of many psychoanalytic interpretations indeed might have baffled Holbek, making it difficult for him to choose one over the other, but it has not necessarily invalidated any of them.

Theoretically, interpretation, unlike explanation, is subjective. The interpreter's experience and associations are legitimate and relevant dimensions of any exegetical discourse. Thus the very subjective aspect that Holbek discerns in psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales, and which gives him ground for rejecting them, is one of their fundamental features. Obviously, in the medical tradition, Freud considered his interpretations of dreams—and by extension, fairy tales—as clinical explanations of neuroses. Such a rhetorical and theoretical mode of discourse was necessary because of its clinical context. The search for a cure requires the exclusive identification of the root cause for the ailment. But narrative texts of fairy tales do not yield themselves to causal explanations, only to multiple interpretations. Therefore they cannot be subject to a single explanation of their meaning, and the "truth" of their symbolic significance is culturally dependent.

Instead of "theories of the mind," Holbek proposes to search for the fairy tale meaning(s) in the social and historical reality and in the traditional cultural symbolism of a people or that of an individual narrator. Language, belief, and behavior offer the necessary data for interpretation. They are observable, obtainable, and verifiable. But most significantly for Holbek, they reflect the tale meaning as it is understood by the narrator and the community of listeners, and not in terms of any theoretical construction.[3]

The argument that folklorists have with psychoanalytic interpretation of fairy tales boils down to the question of reference. While folklorists would like to consider cultural, social, historic, and linguistic meanings of a narrative text **(Honko, 1984)**, for psychoanalysts only the manifestations of the unconscious offer clues for the construction of meaning. Even those folklorists who would agree with such a psychoanalytic approach and would say, together with **Alan Dundes (1976)**, "that much of the meaning of folkloristic fantasy is unconscious" (p. 1503), would criticize the psychoanalytic study of folklore **(Dundes, 1985)**. The main bones of contention are the logical rules of inference and the constant psychoanalytic disregard of the nature of folklore texts: their orality **(Dundes, 1986)**, the multiplicity of their variations, and their cross-cultural occurrence. Identifying, as he is, with the Freudian school, Dundes still **(1980b)** contends that "[p]sychoanalysts often appear to offer symbolic readings of events and data without recourse to conventional canons of proof. It is deemed sufficient that a patient volunteered a free association to a symbol occurring in a dream or that an earlier psychoanalyst proclaimed the validity of a particular symbolic equation [for determining the meaning(s) of symbols]" (p. 91). They analyze a single version of a tale, most likely a Grimm text, that has been written down and has been reedited to conform with its readership's expectations and moral standards (Rölleke, **1975**, **1986**), yet they read it as if it were an oral text into which a narrator projects personal and cultural unconscious symbols. The neglect of cross-cultural comparisons is unfortunate because such a method would have often enhanced the very interpretation psychoanalysts espoused (Dundes, 1985, 1988).

Psychoanalysis And Folklore

The rejection of psychoanalytic interpretation of fairy tales is distinctly one-sided. Freud himself articulated his wish that professional folklorists would yield their expertise to his interpretive effort. In a reply to a rhetorical epistemological question that he posed in the tenth lecture of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916), “how we in fact come to know the meaning of these dream-symbols, upon which the dreamer himself gives us insufficient information or none at all,” he replied that

> [W]e learn it from very different sources—from fairy tales and myths, from buffoonery and jokes, from folklore (that is, from knowledge about popular manners and customs, sayings and songs) and from poetic and colloquial linguistic usage. In all these directions we come upon the same symbolism, and in some of them we can understand it without further instruction. If we go into these sources in detail, we shall find so many parallels to dream-symbolism that we cannot fail to be convinced of our interpretation. (pp. 158-159)

In the same lecture he repeats the proposition, drawing analogy between symbolism in dreams and in myths (p. 166), and as he brings the lecture to a close he pleads:

> We know more on the subject; but you may imagine how much richer and more interesting a collection like this would be if it were brought together, not by amateurs like us, but by real professionals in mythology, anthropology, philology, and folklore. (p. 165)

However none accepted the challenge. **Ernest Jones (1930)** literally went courting, appearing before the English Folk-Lore Society at their 50th anniversary congress comparing the use of the doctrine of survivals **(Hodgen, 1936)** in folklore and psychoanalysis. Freud himself reiterates his evolutionary conception of the human family in *Moses and Monotheism* (**1939**, pp. **80-92**) and states the significance of folklore in that regard: “Numerous relics of the forgotten primeval age have survived in popular legends and fairy tales, and the analytical study of the mental life of children has provided an unexpected wealth of material for filling the gaps in our knowledge of the earliest times" (p. 84).

The recent comprehensive essays by Dundes (1985) and Holbek (1987, pp. 259-322), respectively, survey a broad spectrum of psychoanalytic writings about folklore, focusing upon schools and theories. They notice, but hardly articulate, the fact that in Freud's own writings, and subsequently in those who followed him, there is not one but rather three approaches to folklore. Holbek (1987) delineates two of them, distinguishing between "those who seek to explain the *origins* and those who concentrate on [the fairy tales'] *reception*" (p. 267). However, a closer reading reveals that not every time Freud refers to fairy tales does he seek to explore the importance of the unconscious in their formation. His *evolutionary* approach addresses the issues of the human family, the *therapeutic* approach focuses on the clinical situation, and the *literary* approach concerns itself with human fantasy. Folklore criticism of psychoanalytic interpretations of folk fantasy is not equally applicable to all three approaches.

The Evolutionary Approach.

Freud's opening paragraph of *Totem and Taboo* (1913a) succinctly summarizes the principles of this line of thought. He writes:

> Prehistoric man, in the various stages of his development, is known to us through the inanimate monuments and implements which he has left behind, through the information about his art, his religion and his attitude towards life which has come to us either directly or by way of tradition handed down in legends, myths and fairy tales, and through the relics of his mode of thought which survive in our own manners and customs. (p. 1)

Myths and fairy tales are hence survivals of early evolutionary stages of man. Freud uses this concept in conformity with Victorian anthropology (Stocking, 1987) and the doctrine of survival (Hodgen, 1936). These relics in tales do not have a symbolic but a documentary value, evidencing incestuous desire and murderous aggression that have survived within the unconscious of people who otherwise think they have a loving and nurturing family. For Freud they represent relations that are rooted in the prehistoric clan structure, and which have later been superseded by civilization. Such a use of the doctrine of survival had been rather conventional at that time (Lang, 1887). It was not the method but the subject of human sexuality that made it difficult for James Frazer, whose work Freud used extensively, to accept Freud's thesis (Ackerman, **1987**, pp. 333-334, note 54).

The Therapeutic Approach.

In an essay that appeared in 1913, the same year as *Totem and Taboo*, **Freud (1913b)** explores two clinical cases in which the respective patients make allusions to fairy tales in the course of a therapeutic free association. In both cases these are tales that appeared in Grimms' collection, which by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries had become an integral part of the nursery repertoire of the European middle class. In fact all three tales that Freud discusses, "Rumpelstiltskin" (Tale Type 500 *The Name of the Helper*), "Little Red Riding Hood," (Tale Type 333 *The Glutton [Red Riding Hood]*), and "The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats," (Tale Type 123 *The Wolf and the Kids*)[4] have an international distribution. Yet, for Freud's present purpose, unlike his sense of the Oedipus story, the potential universality or antiquity of these tales is irrelevant. He treats them, particularly the first two (he cites the third as his own interpretive association), no differently than any other material a patient might bring up. Their application to the therapeutic situation is limited to the individual case history, the patient associative strain, and the significance he or she attributes to them. In this context the tales have no universal or even cultural, but only individual, symbolism. Their clinical interpretation does not defy "conventional canons of proof" (Dundes, **1980b**, p. 91), nor is it in any way "speculative" (Dorson, **1972**, p. 25). On the contrary, the tales become clinical empirical data. They provide otherwise unaccessible information about the conscious and unconscious use that individuals make of fairy tales in their own lives. Earlier, in 1904, Freud noted down that "fairy tales can be made use of as screen memories" and "become favourites, without the reason being known" (1901, p. 49, note 2). Such an idea also has a sound methodological base within the psychoanalytic practice and has demonstrable analogues in ethnographic research **(Sapir, 1976)**. Freud's proposal to infer from these clinical cases "some hints which will help in interpreting remaining obscurities in the fairy tales themselves" (p. 283) is inconsistent with his own method in this essay. He suggests a shift from analyzing a patient's problems with the aid of fairy tales to the interpretation of fairy tales on the basis of individual associations. This reversal, developed and articulated elsewhere, has opened a Pandora's box of methodological and logical problems that has plagued psychoanalytic interpretations of folklore.

THE LITERARY APPROACH. Freud himself rarely analyzed fairy tales and literary works according to his psychoanalytic methods—many subsequent analysts did—but in his writings he provided the theoretical basis for such an endeavor. A key statement appears at the conclusion of his essay “On Dreams” **(1901)**, in which he argues that

> Dream-symbolism extends far beyond dreams: it is not peculiar to dreams, but exercises a similar dominating influence on representation in fairy-tales, myths and legends, in jokes and in folk-lore. It enables us to trace the intimate connections between dreams and these later productions. We must not suppose that dream-symbolism is a creation of the dream-work; it is in all probability a characteristic of the unconscious thinking which provides the dream-work with the material for condensation, displacement, and dramatization. (p. **685**)
>
> In making such a proposition Freud does trap himself in the logical difficulty to which he later blundered in his essay “On the Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales” **(1913b)**. This is not a suggestion to interpret fairy tales on the basis of individual free association. Rather, implicit in this proposition is the existence of a cultural basis for the creation of symbols which occur in a variety of verbal and visual representations of the mind. This is not a statement concerning the origin of fairy tales in dreams, as L. **Laistner (1889)** proposed and F. von der **Leyen (1901)** explored, but a proposition that all forms of human fantasy, whether conscious or unconscious, share the same pool of symbols. Such an explicit statement, and many other implicit suppositions in Freud's writings, provide the theoretical basis for the psychoanalytic interpretation of literary and artistic works, and for the contribution that Bruno Bettelheim has made to the interpretation of fairy tales.

Charges Of Plagiarism

Before it is possible to assess Bettelheim's contribution, it is necessary to clarify the charges of plagiarism that an educator and a folklorist brought against him after the publication of *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). To the best of my knowledge, **Joan Blos (1978)** was the first to sound a strong dissenting voice in the general welcoming chorus that greeted the publication of the book. The title of her review, “The Emperor's Clothes,” alludes to Bettelheim's public persona **(Roazen, 1992)** and to the nature of her critical comments. In a book with scholarly pretense, though geared for popular appeal, the gravest among them is “not giving credit where credit is due” (p. 71). She points out that Bettelheim does not give sufficient credit to the scholarship that preceded him in education, in children's literature, and even in psychoanalysis. But the most blatant violation of publishing ethics was Bettelheim's failure to credit whole sentences that he simply lifted up, or slightly paraphrased, from a little-known book by Julius E. Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Fairy Tales: Their Origin, Meaning, and Usefulness* (1963). A few years later **Dundes (1985)** pointed out that Bettelheim's discussion of the shoe-fitting episode in Cinderella is an adaptation of a comment he made in 1967, in the *Psychoanalytic Forum* on an essay by Baryl Sandford (1967). Coy but hurt, Dundes says: “Of course, I am flattered that Bettelheim thought enough of my analysis to borrow it” (1985, p. 25). **Later Dundes (1991)** added to Blos' early charges and identified two more sentences that Bettelheim copied from Heuscher without proper attribution (Dundes, **1991**, p. 80), pointing out also that Bettelheim followed Heuscher in the selection of tales and the order they appear in his book (p. 79). Heuscher's book served Bettelheim more than just a source of sentences. Terms related to utility and meaning appear in the titles of both books, suggesting the borrowing of a framework and a theory. Normally scholars acknowledge, even pay tribute to, their predecessors in theory and method without worrying that their own originality will be overshadowed.

Neither Blos nor Dundes have examined the German books that Bettelheim lists in his bibliography (pp. 326-328), nor have I done so systematically, yet one phrase stands out. As Bettelheim discusses “how the fairy tale depicts the world,” he says: “Every figure is essentially *one-dimensional* [my emphasis], enabling the child to comprehend its actions and reactions easily” (p. 74). The Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi opens his book *Das europäische Volksmärchen: Form and Wesen* (1947/1960) with a chapter dealing with the “one-dimensionality” (*Eindimensionalität*) of the fairy tale (pp. 8-12). Bettelheim lists several of Lüthi's books in his bibliography. However, this particular work appears neither in the bibliography nor in the notes, and there is nowhere an acknowledgment of Luthi's articulation of this concept. From the time of its publication in 1947, *Das eurpäische Volksmärchen* was very popular in Europe, where it went through seven editions by the time it was translated into English in 1982, and the likelihood that Bettelheim missed this book is rather slim.

These are grave charges that leave stain marks on Bettelheim's scholarship and personal integrity. In a moment of compassion, it is possible to observe that his violations of scholarly ethics expose his own insecurities, and that the arrogant disregard for the labor of others covers up his own human frailties. Be that as it may, with all the unacknowledged borrowing, Bettelheim has not duplicated Heuscher's book, nor is his interpretation of the Cinderella story limited to the comments Dundes made. There are many substantive issues with which *The Uses of Enchantment* has challenged folklore and children's literature scholarship, and their critical assessment is the task at hand.

Bettelheim's Methodology

Bettelheim was not a folklorist, nor did he pretend to be one. His *The Uses of Enchantment* is an interpretive study of fairy tales that circulated orally in Europe in the past and that are now narrated by people in traditional societies in other continents. But Bettelheim limits his analysis to the printed variants of these tales that appeared in Europe from the 16th until the 19th century, which are currently available in the many nursery books. *The Uses of Enchantment* is addressed to the modern parents evoking the value of traditional literature. Bettelheim's selection does dip into the vast diversified repertoire of oral tradition but is limited to “The Classic Fairy Tales,” to use Iona and Peter Opie's apt title (1974), save a few digressive remarks about other stories.

The Utility Of Fairy Tales

In many societies adults, often mothers, tell tales to their young. At least in European literate cultures this educational activity has periodically been curbed by philosophers, scientists, and even educators who considered traditional tales to be harmful to growing minds. In a dialogue in the second and third books of *The Republic*

(377a—391e) **(Bloom, 1968)** Socrates proposes, and Adeimantus concurs, that in order to forge the citizens' character, it is necessary to exercise control over the tales they hear in their child-hood, because of the formative impact of these narratives. There-fore, the philosophers would have liked to excise from the repertoire of tales that children hear any stories about the sufferings that the gods inflicted upon each other (378a), as such tales would be models for injustice and revengeful acts for humans to follow in the relations between father and son. Similarly, they would have eliminated stories of anger and quarrels (378c—e), thereby removing such emotions from behavior that people might imitate. The stories of the gods should present the young only with examples of good conduct (380a—381c). Children should not be exposed to frightening tales (381c) nor to themes involving supernatural omens. The ideal gods should appear in tales as simple and true in their deeds and speech (383a). Finally, parents should not tell children about Hell. This theme is harmful according to Socrates because in war or other crises, the future citizens would be scared into preferring slavery over death (386a). In the ideal educational program that Socrates outlines he implicitly describes the reality of his time.

Such conflicts between parents and intellectuals are likely to occur when new educational ideals, new narrative repertoires, or new means of communication change the tales that become available to parents for their children. During the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries—simultaneous with the emergence of rationalism and science as the goals of modern education—there was a renewed interest in the oral tales of European societies. Over a long period the several publications exposed the European middle class to the narrative traditions of peasants and servants: Giovanni Francesco Straparola, *Piacevoli Notti* (**Venice, 1550-1553**/1894); Giambattista Basile, *Lo cunto deli cunti* (1634), better known by its later title, *Il Pentamerone* (1674); [Charles] Perrault, *Histoire ou conies du temps passé* (**1697/1989**); and the Brothers Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1815). Galland's French translation of *Les mille et une nuit* (1704-1717) brought the oriental popular literature into the hands of European reading children.[5] Inexpensive publications like the *La bibliothéque bleue* (**Andriés, 1983**; **Mandrou, 1964**) in France made themes from the oral narrative of the illiterate classes accessible to the reading children and adults.

There was a dual reaction to these new literary and educational encounters. On the one hand, such a contact sprouted some literary fashions of artificial imitations, notably in France and Germany (**Grätz, 1988**; **Zipes, 1989**). On the other hand, later in the 19th century, particularly in England, educators condemned fairy tales as unfit for children, harming them cognitively and morally (Repplier, **1892**, pp. 289-297). By now this battle has been won twice over. Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens believed the fairy tales to have a positive effect on character formation (**Kotzin, 1972**; **Stone, 1979**). As **Joan Blos (1978)** points out, by the second half of the 20th century fairy tales have become the regular staple of the nursery room.

Ironically, since the rise of psychoanalysis in America, there have been a few voices suggesting that fairy tales could stimulate certain neuroses (**Brill, 1914**; **Lorand, 1935**). Although even these ideas have long been squelched and Bettelheim preaches his gospel to the faithful, he provides them with an authorative psychological rationale for the fairy tales and its distinctly positive influence on a growing human personality. For a psychologist who just a few years before entered into *Dialogues with Mothers* (1962), chastising them for the ways they treated their offspring, his present book was reassuring, adding a measure of comfort in an anxious modern world. Indeed, two storytellers **(Baker and Greene, 1977)** have specifically credited Bettelheim with the acceleration of the "the revival of story-telling" (p. xi). For them he explains how and why irrational narratives are the proper rational mental nourishment for today's children, upholding, as he persuades his readers, two model mothers who succeeded in their task—Goethe's and his own (pp. vii, 152-153).

Fairy Tales And Myths

Bettelheim does not provide parents with a wholesale endorsement of traditional narratives. Rather, he carefully distinguishes between fairy tales and myths, highlighting the virtues of the former and exposing the dark side of the latter. His statement that "in most cultures, there is no clear line separating myth from folk or fairy tale; all these together form the literature of preliterate societies" (1976, p. 25) is uninformed,[6] yet it does not prevent him from making some astute observations about the nature of these two genres, observations which become the theoretical core of his book. Bettelheim suggests that

> Fairy tales… direct the child to discover his identity and calling… [and] suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity… but only if one does not shy away from hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. These stories promise that if a child dares to engage in this fearsome and taxing search, benevolent powers will come to his aid, and will succeed. (p. 24)

By comparison

> Myths and closely related religious legends offered material from which children formed their concepts of the world's origin and purpose, and of the social ideals a child could pattern himself after. (p. 24)

Later Bettelheim elaborates upon his initial observations:

> An even more significant difference between these two kinds of stories is the ending, which in myths is nearly always tragic, while always happy in fairy tales. The myth is pessimistic, while the fairy story is optimistic,[7] no matter how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be. It is this decisive difference which sets the fairy tales apart from other stories in which equally fantastic events occur, whether the happy outcome is due to the virtues of the hero, chance, or the interference of supernatural figures.
>
> Myths typically involve superego demands in conflict with idmotivated action, and with the self-preserving desires of the ego. (p. 37)

In his comparative analysis of fairy tales and myths, Bettelheim mentions several heroes from Greek mythology, but his focus is on the Oedipus story as it is available to us in classic sources. For him this is the quintessential myth. While he draws his fairy tales mainly from the baroque and romantic periods in European literary history, his mythic story, the control case that validates his interpretation, is a part of a different culture and a different historical period. Such a disparity is problematic on two grounds: (1) the attribution of the thematic qualities of the Oedipus story to the whole genre of myth, and (2) the functional comparison across cultural and historical boundaries.

Within Greek society the concept of myth went through historical transformations, and although shades of meanings continued to exist, by the end of the 4th century BC *mythos* became to be defined through an opposition to *logos*, as untruth to truth (Edmunds, **1990**, pp. 2-8; Vernant, **1988**, p. 204). In modern times scholars and thinkers have invented myth as constructed concept **(Detienne, 1981)** that involves the attribution of falsity and the assumption of belief. By its very nature, "myth" is an abstract theoretical concept rather than a cultural category of discourse. The anthropologist E. Leach (1982) is correct when he states that "myth is an invention of the scholiasts; it is not a phenomenon that is encountered by ethnographers working among primitive peoples who are in a mythopoeic or any other 'stage of subconsciousness'" (p. 3). Yet as a scholastic concept, involving the dual perspectives of the faithful believers and the outside doubters, myth has served political, sociological, anthropological, and folkloristic theory, explaining the cultural creation of imaginary symbolic systems and their value and function in society. Psychoanalytic theory has demonstrated the importance of myth in the life of the individual **(Arlow, 1961)**. Whether constructed of imaginary symbolic figures or of historical events that gain symbolic dimensions, myth, as a form, could have a positive constructive influence on individuals as well as upon a whole society. Therefore it is erroneous to project onto the entire genre of myth the negative and disintegrative impact the Oedipus story might have on young listeners.

Bettelheim would have been methodologically on a more solid ground had he compared the fairy tale with later European versions of the Oedipus story, many of which were available in print before the publication of *The Uses of Enchantment*, though published as a separate collection only later **(Edmunds, 1985)**. Or, taking another route, he could have compared the fairy tale with the *Sage* ("legend"), as two complementary European forms that are available in their medieval and postmedieval renditions. The *Sage*, no doubt, has its own share of literary—historical problems **(Gerndt, 1988)**, but it is a well-known literary form that could have served some of Bettelheim's analytic purposes well. Max Lüthi (**1961**, **1976**) regards the fairy tale (*Märchen*) as a family story; the legend, on the other hand, recounts the acts of man in society and in nature. Like the Oedipus story, generically it is a narrative of the social self that realistically tells about struggles with social and natural forces beyond human control that end tragically. A. H. **Krappe (1933)** has already proposed viewing the Oedipus narrative as a legend rather than a folk tale (fairy tale). For **Rank (1959)** and **Raglan (1936)**, the story has been the narrative foundation upon which they constructed the biographical pattern of the mythic hero, which **Taylor (1964)** demonstrated has morphological similarity to that of the fairy tale hero.

Morphological, more than generic, comparison places the Oedipus story in relation to the fairy tale tradition. Propp's 1928 book on morphological analysis of the fairy tale, unknown to Bettelheim, has revolutionized folktale analysis. It has been available in English translation since 1958, and in a revised and more accessible edition since 1968. Propp identified in the fairy tale 31 functions which describe in abstract terms the progression of the plot from "abstention" to "wedding." Propp considers the fairy tale as a whole "any development proceeding from villainy… or a lack, through intermediary functions to marriage" (p. 92). He (1983/1944) himself has written about the Oedipus story; however, by the time he had done so, he had shifted from morphological to historic and evolutionary analysis of the folktale **(Liberman, 1984)**. Morphologically, not historically, it is possible to consider the Oedipus story as a fairy tale turned against itself. The hero's departure from his parental home is completely premature by fairy tale standards, and in terms of its motivation it is an expulsion rather than an expedition, and the designed executioner turns out to be a guardian; the journey away from home becomes in fact a homecoming; the hero succeeds in saving the city from disaster by solving a riddle (or killing the monster), but the princess he receives as a reward turns out to be his own mother. While the fairy tale hero departs from his family and starts on the road to discovery and achievements, Oedipus cannot release himself from the web of his own family, to which every journey he takes draws him tragically back.

Not because it is a myth, but probably because it is a narrative that counters the fairy tale morphology, the Oedipus story has been banished from the modern nursery storytelling hour (Cook, **1969**, pp. 123-129), even before Bettelheim condemns it as unfit for children. Although his own analysis of the Oedipus myth in the classical tradition (1976, pp. 196-199) is very insightful, complementing Lévi-Strauss' classical essay on the subject (1955), his conclusion had been accepted long before by publishers and mothers.

Consciousness And Unconsciousness

Bettelheim has written his book for modern middle-class parents. In spite of the fact that on several occasions he invokes the wisdom that tradition imparts, the texts that he has selected have been published and subject to the scrutiny of editors and publishers. The case of the Brothers Grimm is particularly prominent as their tales went through seven editions in which Wilhelm Grimm in particular made conscious editorial modifications (Rölleke, **1975**, **1986**). Bettelheim, as others before him,[8] is aware of the nature of the texts and correctly points out that, unlike dreams, "the fairy tale… is very much the result of common conscious and unconscious content having been shaped by the conscious mind, not of one particular person but the consensus of many in regard to what they view as universal human problems, and what they accept as desirable solutions" (1976, p. 36). However, in his analysis he centers exclusively on the unconscious aspects of the fairy tales. Heuristically, it is possible to concentrate deliberately on one aspect of a subject matter and to ignore any other. However, in this case such a strategy distorts the reality of the texts, presenting the fairy tales as if they were representations of unconscious symbols, whereas in fact their literary history suggests otherwise. Editors have consciously attempted to make the texts adhere to the public mores of their times, and in turn, educationally, sought to foster their own ethical values in their young readers. **Bottigheimer (1986)**, **Tatar (1987)**, and Zipes (**1979**, **1983**) have been able to demonstrate that the "writers of fairy tales for children *acted* ideologically by presenting their notions regarding social conditions and conflicts, and they *interacted* with each other and with past writers and storytellers of folklore in a public sphere" (Zipes, **1983**, p. 3). Therefore the conflict resolutions that the fairy tales offer are not only psychologically appropriate, as Bettelheim contends, but also culturally acceptable as social ideals. In fact, it is possible to turn Bettelheim's argument around and to suggest that the fairy tale is a literary agent for the achievement of social conformity rather than unconscious conflict resolution. If, as Bettelheim suggests, the tales have been shaped by the unconscious and conscious mind, their psychological analysis requires an integrative method that would have balanced them.

Interpretive Methodology

The interpretation of the relations between the conscious narrative and its unconscious significance is essentially a methodological question. Bettelheim conceives of such an interpretation as uncovering, or discovering, the meaning the tales have for the listening children, and their importance to their psychological growth. His critics (Zipes, 1979, pp. 160-182) and even his admirers (Arthur, 1978, p. 458) regard him to be an orthodox Freudian, and therefore his interpretations suffer from "his method's limitations" (Heisig, 1977, p. 112). However, Bettelheim's Freudianism is not as orthodox as Zipes suggests, nor is his method that clear and consistent. Rather, it is possible to discern in his book at least three different methods which intertwine as he develops his psychologic and psychoanalytic exegesis of the tales.

First, Bettelheim engages in an *allegorical interpretation* in which fairy tale figures symbolize abstract psychoanalytic concepts. At one point he even resorts to a 19th-century "solar mythology" (**Bird, 1976**; **Dorson, 1955**) in which "Snow White's perfect beauty seems distantly derived from the sun" and "the seven dwarfs suggest the seven days of the week" (p. 209),[9] but in the main, characters and objects in tales represent id, ego, and superego. In the Snow White story (Tale Type 709 *Snow White*) "the red [is] chaos of unbridled emotions, the id; and the white purity of our conscience, the superego" (p. 214). The king in the frame story of *Thousand and One Nights* "symbolizes a person completely dominated by his id" whereas Scheherzade herself "represents the ego," but because of her determination to risk her life to save the other young women from certain death, Bettelheim considers her's "an ego very much dominated by the superego" (p. 88).[10] In the story about a youth who learns three languages (Tale Type 671 *The Three Languages*), the frogs stand for the id, the dogs for the ego, and the birds for the superego (pp. 99-101), regardless of the fact that in the narrative sequence the hero encounters dogs—ego first and the frogs—id last. The marriage that often concludes the fairy tale is an allegorical act for psychological integration of personality in which id, ego, and superego achieve harmony (p. 146).

Allegorical interpretations of sacred, even secular narratives are hardly new; this method has been an integral part of both Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian traditions. In previous psychoanalytic scholarship, writers assigned symbols in folklore as well as in dreams explicit genital and sexual meanings. Similarly, *The Uses of Enchantment* still relates with such a decipherment of symbols. But what is new in Bettelheim's current methodology is the conception of tales as an allegory for abstract psychoanalytic concepts, substituting them for ethical and religious concepts such as virtue and vice, truth and falsehood.

More central to Bettelheim's thesis is the second method, in which he offers a *psychodynamic interpretation* of the fairy tales. He says they are an anxiety-reducing projective mechanism. In doing so he seeks to elevate the very anxiety that psychoanalysis has provoked in modern parents, namely the fear that frightening fairy tale figures like ogres and witches would further disturb the growing child. Bettelheim argues against such a notion contending that

> [T]he child is subject to desperate feelings of loneliness and isolation, and often he experiences mortal anxiety. More often than not, he is unable to express these feelings in words, or can do so only by indirection: fear of the dark, of some animal, anxiety about his body. Since it creates discomfort in a parent to recognize these emotions in his child, the parent tends to overlook them, or belittle these spoken fears out of his own anxiety, believing this will cover over the child's fears.
>
> The fairy tale, by contrast, takes these existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life and the fear of death. Further, the fairy tale offers solutions in ways that the child can grasp on his level of understanding. (p. 10)

Bettelheim resonates these programmatic principles for the interpretation of storytelling for children through out the book. He agrees that “a particular story may indeed make some children anxious,” but argues that “once they become better acquainted with fairy stories, the fearsome aspects seem to disappear, while the reassuring features become ever more dominant. *The original displeasure of anxiety then turns into the great pleasure of anxiety successfully faced and mastered*” (p. 122, emphasis in the original). It is quite possible that clinical experience provides Bettelheim's with validations for his assertion. However, epistemologically as an adult, sympathetic to the child's world as he could be, he obtains the children's perspective only through the mediation of a psychoanalytic theory. The difficulty of establishing the child's point of view is similar to establishing the “native point of view” in an ethnographic description **(Geertz, 1973)** and, therefore, in advocating the psychodynamic function of the fairy tale Bettelheim resorts to an authoritative voice instead of substantiating his ideas with empirical clinical information. Surprisingly, his selection and analysis of tales include but few in which he demonstrates, literarily if not clinically, the psychodynamic of tales as an anxiety-reducing mechanism. He does it most clearly in the one tale of the Brothers Grimm's collection in which fear occurs literally rather than symbolically, “The Fairy Tale of One Who Went Forth to Learn Fear” (Tale Type 326 *The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is*), in which the experience of fear releases the youth from the suppressed anxiety about fear itself.

Bettelheim confidently argues that children's anxiety of loneliness, abandonment, and worthlessness is curable through the fantasy play that fairy tales provide. However, he is more ambivalent regarding the effect of storytelling on the basic neurosis that the human nucleus family generates, namely the *oedipal conflict*. At his early exposition of his method Bettelheim states in the context of differentiation between fairy tales and myth:

> The Oedipus complex is the crucial problem of childhood.… A young child is completely caught up in oedipal conflict as the inescapable reality of his life. The older child, from about age five on, is struggling to extricate himself by partly repressing the conflict, partly solving it by forming emotional attachment to others besides his parents, and partly sublimating it. What such a child needs least of all is to have his oedipal conflict activated by such a myth. (p. 38)

Yet, in spite of such a cautionary observation, Bettelheim points out in his analysis of fairy tales, rather than myth, how prevalent is the representation of the oedipal conflict in fairy tales, not necessarily myths. Such oedipal images as split mothers and ogres (representing a threatening father) are common in the fairy tale repertoire. How then would Bettelheim reconcile the apparent contradiction that appears in his thought, arguing for the therapeutic value of fairy tales and yet denying them such an effect for the most common and most fundamental conflict. His selection of tales for detailed analysis offers a solution: most of these are fairy tales with heroines rather than heroes. Since “the oedipal problems of a girl are different from those of a boy” (1976, p. 112) they appear to be resolved by fairy tales. The genre difference between myth and fairy tales ends up in Bettelheim's analysis to be a gender difference between boys and girls. Boys' oedipal conflict should remain repressed and unprovoked, whereas girls' emotional growth benefits the exposition of their oedipal conflict and its narrative resolution. Significantly, in the European fairy tales boys extricate themselves from the family bond through actions, girls through marriage. But such a resolution of oedipal conflict leaves open the basic questions of relations between consciousness and unconsciousness. Does society impose its traditional values upon the next generation, or does indeed the unconscious express itself through these tales, providing a resolution to internal conflict?

In his interpretive method Bettelheim is so eager to consider the children's world that he has completely neglected the world view of the narrators. Can we assume that they had had an innate psychoanalytic wisdom and selected from tradition those tales that would benefit the mental well-being of the children, or have they, as many narrators do, told stories that represent their own unresolved conflicts?

From folkloristic perspectives it would be unwise and self-defeating to conclude that the psychoanalytic value of fairy tales has been greatly exaggerated. Yet, if storytelling in traditional societies is any guide to their psychoanalytic function, as Bettelheim implicitly and explicitly suggests, then it is necessary to infer their value from ethnographic and experiential observations of such verbal behavior. Recent studies in European societies (**Dégh, 1969**; **Falassi, 1980**) clearly demonstrates that children are not necessarily the target audience of such stories, and when they are, their parents do not necessarily tell them the stories that are appropriate for their psychological age. The romantic view of tradition as inherently wise is unwarranted. People can be wise or stupid, not tradition.

Tradition is not a static body of knowledge. By its very nature it represents the authority of the past and has become an object of longing and a source of normative ideals. But these very qualities enable people to use the idea of tradition for their own social and psychological needs and goals. Therefore the interpretation of traditional fairy tales, whether told in oral societies, read in literate cultures, or viewed in visual environments, requires their examination in terms of cultural, individual, and contextual meanings that are imputed into them by narrators and listeners. In the process of telling they become a symbolic representation of conscious and unconscious social, artistic, and psychological forces that mutually influence narrative formation. Fairy tales, like tradition itself, are dynamic, ever-changing, verbal symbolic representations. Their conscious role in society does not exclude their unconscious significance, and by the same token, unconsciousness could not spell out their only, or truest, meaning.

Conclusion

The criticism that hindsight permits should not obscure the contribution that Bettelheim has made. His psychoanalytic reading of fairy tales goes beyond the iconic and symbolic interpretation of objects, figures, and actions. He perceives in traditional fairy tales an actual therapeutic potential, extending Freud's clinical approach from the proverbial analyst couch to the nursery, and empowering parents with healing abilities. For Bettelheim fairy tales are verbal representations of childhood fears, anxieties, confusions, and conflicts. Since they are pure fantasy they offer resolutions to situations that are not usually possible but are helpful to the child's development. They articulate the unconscious in children, exposing the tensions in their souls and suggesting wishful goals. Bettelheim has proposed a psychodynamic view of stories and storytelling in which there is an interactive relationship between children and fairy tales heroes and heroines. Set in words, the imaginary world provides a meaningful alternative to the harshness of reality. His analysis is as much a description as it is a prescription. It is an interpretation that proposes psychoanalytic validation for traditional narrative and formulates, though not with sufficient rigor, a hypothesis for future applications.

Notes

[1] Bascom himself demonstrates in this essay on the “Four Functions of Folklore” his own ambivalence toward psychoanalytic interpretation by giving priority to the psychological function of folklore, discussing it first and devoting to it more space than to any of the other functions. Yet he never states that this is “the first function of folldore.” His enumeration begins with the second function which, according to him, is validating culture (see p. 344).

[2] In spite of the fact that psychoanalytic theory has influenced thought in the humanities and the social sciences, psychoanalytic concepts have made hardly any inroads into folklore studies. Scholars from these two respective disciplines would simply define different issues as worthy of intellectual pursuit. In the United States the negative attitude toward psychoanalysis in folklore studies appears as early as the 1940s in remarks made by A. Taylor (**1940**, p. 17) and continues until the present. **Simon A. Grolnick (1986)** observes that "psychoanalysis has antagonized, and continues to antagonize, many scholars involved in the historical, structural, anthropological, and even psychological study of the fairy tale" (p. 203). **A. Dundes (1992)** explains this antagonism between the two disciplines in psychoanalytic terms: "This 'resistence' is understandable to the extent that folklore presents primary process (id) fantasy materials which play out in disguised form the most basic human traumas. Such materials generally function to provide a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of such taboo topics as Oedipal love or extreme sibling rivalry. Folklorists, like other academics, often choose an intellectual speciality as a form of escape from neurotic tendencies. Hence one can appreciate why non-psychoanalytically oriented folklorists (which means almost all folklorists) are not all that interested in plumbing the depths to explore the latent (as opposed to the manifest) content of folklore. Such knowledge might expose to light the reason why folklorists became fascinated by the subject of folklore in the first place" (p. xxii). Such a wholesale analysis of a professional group may be of a questionable value, yet it is an attempt to explain an apparent oddity in the intellectual landscape of the 20th century. There are some valuable surveys that document bibliographically various attempts to apply psychological and psychoanalytical concepts to folklore studies, or even to foster a theoretical synthesis between the two disciplines. Such valuable studies in English are **Carvalho-Neto (1972)**, **Dundes (1985)**, **Fischer (1963)**, and **La Barre (1948)**. Among past psychoanalysts Géza Róheim (1891-1953) over many years contributed to the psychoanalytic study of folklore in general and the folktale in particular, and his collected essays on the subject have recently been published in a volume (1992) that includes articles from 1922 to 1951. Among current folklorists, Alan Dundes (**1968**, **1987**, **1988**) is the most prominent scholar who champions the cause of Freudian interpretation of folklore. There are some attempts to introduce Jungian concepts into folklore studies (Drake, **1967**, **1969**), and in spite of the prolific writings of Marie Louise von Franz (e.g., **1970**) applying Jungian concepts to fairy tales analysis, her work and that of her colleagues has barely made an impact on folklore studies. In Germany the situation differs slightly. Hedwig von Beit (1952-57) applies a comprehensive Jungian interpretation to fairy tale analysis, and at least three volumes—by **Crames (1975)**, **Giehrl (1970)**, and **Laiblin (1969)**—specifically address the issue of psychoanalysis and fairy tale interpretation.

[3] In his approach Holbek reiterates the attitudes of many modern folklore scholars. Examples of his approach can be found, in addition to his own book, in such studies as **Simonsen (1992)** and Toelken (1987).

[4] The numbers and the titles are according to the classification system of **A. Aarne and S. Thompson (1961)**.

[5] The scholarly literature on these works is very broad. The following cursory selection could serve as a starting point for an interested reader: **Barchilon (1956)**; **Barchilon and Flinders (1981)**; **Bencheikh et al. (1991)**; **Bottigheimer (1986)**; **Gerhardt (1963)**; **Haddawy (1990)**; **McGlathery (1991)**; **Mundus Arabicus (1983)**; **C. Perrault (1697/1989)**; **Simonsen (1992)**; **Soriano (1968)**; Zipes (**1987**, **1989**).

[6] For some recent studies about the taxonomy and poetics of oral literature in preliterate societies, see **Bauman and Briggs (1990)**; Ben-Amos (**1976**, **1992**); **Briggs (1988)**.

[7] Compare Bettelheim's phrase with that of the Brothers Grimm: "The fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historical" (Ward, **1981**, p. 1). For once, the analogy is not accusatory, but rather complimentary, intended to highlight how steeped Bettelheim was in German culture.

[8] **E. K. Schwartz (1956)** states "[The fairy tale's] conscious or unconscious intent is working through some of the problems of growing up" (p. 740).

[9] Earlier in his book (**1976**, p. 13) Bettelheim appears to attribute such an interpretive method to folklorists and linguists, and says that "some see in the motif of Little Red Riding Hood's being swallowed by the wolf the theme of night devouring the day, of the moon eclipsing the sun, of winter replacing the warm seasons." Lest such a comment be understood by any reader as a reflection of current folklore theory it seems advisable to point out that by 1976, when *The Uses of Enchantment* was published, this theory had been taught in folldore departments across the world as part of the *history* of the discipline rather than as a valid interpretation which current folldorists would seriously discuss. For critic and history of the debate, see **Bird (1976)**; **Dorson (1955)**; **Whitney (1892)**.

[10] Compare this allegorical reading of the frame narrative with that of J. W. Clinton (1986), a literary historian who leans favorably toward a psychoanalytic, yet not allegorical, interpretation.

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