Ideas of Orality in Fairy-Tale Criticism

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Folk and fairy tales are generally assumed to have a close relationship with "the oral." This paper[1] will look at some of the ways orality is associated with folk and fairy-tale texts, and consider the implications of this association which is often taken for granted. I am not attempting to prove or disprove the oral nature of fairy tales, but rather trying to think about what these ideas of orality are doing in criticism, through close reading of selected critical texts. In my view, the concept of orality can highlight some of the issues central not only to fairy tales but also to children's literature and reading in general.

1. What Is Orality?

Even when they are written or printed, fairy tales are frequently regarded as having a certain power that is related to oral storytelling. This brings up a number of problems. In many cases, the assumption is that orality in a text is recognisable as some kind of narratorial technique, and this notion of orality has much to do with "formulas" and communication, as we can see in Roderick McGillis's discussion of Joan Aiken's work:

> But her story consciously uses print to call attention to the voice, to the reading-aloud-dimension of the text. As in all oral tales, especially the fairy tale in which tradition Aiken writes, we find formulaic conventions. . . . Other oral devices sound from the story: the narrator, or more accurately the storyteller, speaks directly to the audience . . . ; alliteration and repetition of words, phrases and sentences dot the text; and, of course, dialogue dramatically enlivens the text. ("Delicatest" 3)

Here "print" is opposed to "the voice," as the word "consciously" suggests that it requires some artificial effort. What this passage refers to as "the voice" and "the reading-aloud-dimension" is based on a particular notion of orality, which is associated with tradition, directness, and vividness. "Formula" as well as convention is a problematic notion, because there is certain arbitrariness in deciding what constitutes a formula and whether something belongs to it or not. In order to recognise "formulaic conventions," one needs to have an awareness of tradition: a single tale has to be considered in relation to other stories. Formula and convention are grounded on the idea of repetition, but the recognition of repetition itself can be arbitrary, for even within a single text it is often the case that certain "words, phrases and sentences" are counted as repetition while others are not even when they appear several times. The same can be said of "alliteration," which involves repetition of sound. Repetition is generally regarded as a

very strong marker of orality. According to Jan Vansina's study of oral tradition, "The only marked difference between written and oral literature of fairly regular occurrence is that repetition is more frequently employed in oral literature," even though "there is no special form belonging to oral literature alone" (55). The difficulty this time is where to draw the line, when the difference between the written and the oral is seen to be a matter of degree rather than of kind.

Another notable point in McGillis's passage is that despite the fact that the story is printed and written, the phrase, "other oral devices sound from the story," presupposes a reading-aloud situation. The use of dialogue is associated with liveliness presumably because it is regarded as a more "direct" representation than reported speech. There is also a problematic notion of direct communication between the "audience"—which seems to mean the "real" readers or listeners rather than textual narratees—and the "storyteller," who is distinguished from a "narrator" for a reason which is not quite clear, though the use of the word "storyteller" may increase the sense of fictionality or performance. This argument can lead to an idea that the orality in a written fairy-tale text "demands" reading aloud. Joyce Thomas associates orality with rhythm and life, saying:

> Nor can we forget the tale's oral origins, for the sense of rhythm communicated through narrative repetition and variation is markedly stronger when the tale is spoken. The tale's oral recitation encourages a sustained sense of rhythm, a sense both the taleteller and audience seem to demand, perhaps because our experience of rhythm equates it with life. . . . (261)

Repetition again is mentioned, along with variation, which also entails the problem of how to recognise it. The most important aspect of the fairy tale here is the communicated "sense" or "experience of rhythm" and not the narrative, and people "seem to demand" the rhythm as a necessity. Orality is connected to "life," something vital and fundamental to humans. This resembles the association of orality with universality. Gillian Klein writes: "If proof of their oral origins were needed, I find it in the otherwise inexplicable way in which certain mystical themes occur in far-flung parts of the world not in any way linked by trade or communication" (55). This argument can be tautological but shows strong belief that oral tradition has universal elements.

In this way, orality is associated with vividness and direct communication. It also implies immediacy and clarity of presentation, as Max Lüthi's statement illustrates: "The folktale does not confirm or explain anything; it simply represents" (59). On the one hand words enable this simple representation and communication; on the other, language as a medium dissolves, or rather is seen to be transparent. Jacqueline Rose writes in her discussion of children's fiction that this view is based on a "'realist' aesthetic":

> [C]hildren's fiction has tended to inherit a very specific aesthetic theory, in which showing is better than telling: the ideal work lets the characters and events speak for themselves. This is a 'realist' aesthetic. . . . What it denies precisely is language—the

> fact that language does not simply reflect the world but is active in its constitution of the world. And this rejection of language as process, its *activity*, means that what is also being refused is the idea that there is someone present inside the utterance ordering it, or disordering it, as the case may be. (60)

The premise here is that the "activity" of language, which is denied by what Rose calls a "'realist' aesthetic" that prefers "showing" to "telling," entails the presence of someone "inside the utterance" who can order or disorder it. Language is seen to take part in constituting the world and yet at the same time to be under the power of "someone." Fairy-tale criticism often conforms to this "'realist' aesthetic" that prizes immediacy of presentation by denying language as well as the speaker, although the latter may not be seen as equivalent to Rose's notion of "someone present inside the utterance" and although critics can also go to the other extreme and claim that what matters is the interpersonal communication process through the act of storytelling rather than the content of the story. It may seem paradoxical, but the basic idea appears to be that through the power of oral storytelling, fairy tales succeed in "showing."

The denial of the speaker and language is manifest in the argument about the "self-consciousness" of the storyteller. Roger Sale criticises fairy-tale writers who cause "damage" due to their lack of "the ear and instinct" (25) of oral tellers, and goes on to characterise an oral storyteller as follows:

> First, the teller is never self-conscious, never calls attention to himself or herself, seldom calls attention to particular details or offers to interpret them; never, as we say in this century, apologizes and never explains. The tone is always assured without any accompanying sense that that tone has been adopted; such assurance comes with the territory. (27-28)

The oral storyteller is a transparent medium and does not explain, because the story will explain itself. This idea of self-erasing narrator has something to do with the supposed collectiveness of fairy tales or what Sale calls "the territory": the speaker is not an identifiable individual but an anonymous part of indistinguishable mass. The "tone" sounds assured and natural, but this assured authority has been called into question. Hilary Crew writes: "As feminist analyses have pointed out, the traditional tales appear to be neutral and value-free because their stories are told by, seemingly, all-knowing and disinterested narrators" (82). Words like "appear to be" and "seemingly" of course mean that tales and narrators do not look neutral to those "feminist" critics. There is also a problem involved in the sense of naturalness: Sale's remark implies that the tone may in fact be "adopted" without appearing to be so. Thus Richard Dorson invented the derogatory term "fakelore, as a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification" (5). However, how do we know whether its perceived orality is authentic or fake, and what difference does it make if we can distinguish between them? In Dorson's view, authenticity of orality is related to the value of the text. Now the question is: why do critics want to talk about the orality of written fairy tales in the first place?

One of the reasons folk and fairy tales are seen to contain orality is concerned with their

status as children's literature, which is based on particular ideas of childhood. Another reason comes from the theories of the history of the fairy-tale genre. These two are actually connected, but we will first look at the association between fairy tales and children or children's literature.

2. Fairy Tales and Children

According to Roderick McGillis, "Young children live as close to a primary oral culture as anyone can. They learn to understand language through the ear, not the eye: they learn to retain what knowledge they need mnemonically" ("Reactivating" 252). Here "young children" are associated with "a primary oral culture," the ear, and memory. Consequently, children's literature is thought to be more oral than other literary genres. Barbara Wall declares: "Writers for children are always inevitably much closer to oral tellers than are writers for adults" (204), and George Shannon insists: "Books for the young *must* be written for the tongue as well as the eye, for they are always shared aloud" (115). These assertions, using phrases like "always inevitably" and "must," show how strong and prevalent this belief is.

Fairy tales are commonly regarded as part of children's literature and as suitable for children. Jack Zipes indicates that this notion is established as a scientific fact, saying: "In fact, we already know from sociological and psychological studies which originated after World War I that children between the ages of five and ten are the first prime audience of fairy tales of all kinds" (*Art* 177). The word "audience" suggests both readers and listeners, while the phrase "fairy tales of all kinds" implies both oral and written tales. "Sociological and psychological studies" are assumed to supply some kind of truth. As one author of the "psychological studies," Bruno Bettelheim writes: "The fairy tale proceeds in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world; this is why the fairy tale is so convincing to him. . . . His thinking is animistic" (45). This view claims to know "the way a child thinks and experiences the world" and generalises that both children's minds and fairy tales are "animistic."

However, it has been suggested that the connection between children and fairy tales is historical rather than natural. To begin with, "children's literature" is defined by many critics as a relatively new category. According to U. C. Knoepflmacher, "The notion that 'adult' and 'juvenile' texts should be kept apart did not become prevalent until the end of the nineteenth century" (xiii). In this theory, classification of texts according to age groups is quite a new idea. The implication is that fairy tales have not always been for children specifically. J. R. R. Tolkien writes:

> Actually, the association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the 'nursery', as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused. It is not the choice of the children which decides this. (38)

The phrase "modern lettered world" suggests that things were different in an archaic unlettered world. Although Tolkien provides no evidence, he makes a point that the association of children

with fairy tales has more to do with fashion than natural suitability. But is it entirely accidental? There may be factors that can explain this change of fashion.

Andrew Lang's argument, which is echoed in quite a few narratives about folk and fairy tales, illuminates the logic that combines both views as it simultaneously historicises and naturalises the association:

> These stories are as old as anything that men have invented. They are narrated by naked savage women to naked savage children. They have been inherited by our earliest civilized ancestors, who really believed that beasts and trees and stones can talk if they choose and behave kindly or unkindly. The stories are full of the oldest ideas of ages when science did not exist, and magic took the place of science. . . .
>
> When the nobles and other people became rich and educated, they forgot the old stories, but the country people did not and handed them down, with changes at pleasure, from generation to generation. Then learned men collected and printed the country people's stories, and these we have translated to amuse children. Their tastes remain like the tastes of their naked ancestors, thousands of years ago. . . . But who really invented the stories nobody knows; it is all so long ago, long before reading and writing were invented. (xi-xii)

According to this theory, fairy tales have not always been for children only, but rather for those who have similar tastes and minds to children. The stories are among the oldest human inventions that precede "reading and writing," and are "full of the oldest ideas" despite the fact that the stories have been changed through the process of oral transmission. Their origin is associated with "naked savage" women and children; then follows the "earliest civilized ancestors," whose age or gender is not specified but who believed in magic as opposed to science. Next, Lang draws a distinction between "learned men" and "the country people." The learned men are "the nobles and other people" who "became rich and educated" and acquired literacy. They are grown up and no longer need oral fairy tales for amusement but collect them for academic interest. Meanwhile the country people by implication are poor and uneducated and still enjoy storytelling, much as children do. Oral fairy tales are associated with a certain class and age group, which are seen to be more primitive and less civilised.

This linking between "naked savage" people, children and "country people" is based on particular ideas of human development. Lang's premise is that different stages of development are found both synchronically and diachronically among human beings, as George Boas summarises:

> The Law of Recapitulation has had two forms, one biological and the other sociological or psychogenetic, as one sees fit to name it. The former was frequently formulated in the simple statement that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. . . . The second formulation of the law asserted a parallelism between the child and primitive man, a parallelism which is obviously psychological, not physiological. (61)

What Lang promotes is precisely this latter form of the law of recapitulation. In this way childhood and fairy tales are associated with "the primitive," which, according to Boas, embraces not only ancestors but also such contemporaries as "Woman, the Child, the Folk (rural), and later the Irrational or Neurotic, and the Collective Unconscious" (8). In Jacqueline Rose's words, "They are connected by a fantasy of origins—the belief that each one represents an ultimate beginning where everything is perfect or can at least be made good" (138). These are respected as pure and innocent and at the same time despised as too simple and immature. Lang's argument suggests that the primitive represents everything that is not "we" and yet has some connection to "us." They are looked back on with nostalgia precisely because one believes one does not belong to them, as Jacques Derrida writes: "Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity" (244). Though it may be excluded, it is still "his other," not entirely separable from the self because the self relies on it for existence. Fairy tales can be added to this list of the "other." To put this relationship between the "self" and the "other" in another way, "The opposition between the child and the adult . . . , between oral and written culture, between innocence and decay. These are structural oppositions in the strictest sense, in that each term only has meaning in relation to the one to which it is opposed" (Rose 50). The suggestion is that these "structural oppositions" can be seen as simultaneous constructions rather than one following the other. We may now focus on one of the pairs of these oppositions and see the relationship between orality and literacy, on which many narratives about the history of fairy tales are based.

3. Orality and Literacy

It is taken for granted that folk and fairy tales have their roots in oral tradition. Orality is almost always believed to precede literacy, but this assumption can be questioned in a number of ways. Roger Sale says: "In our reverence for fairy tales of the oral tradition, we must not think that written fairy tales are any less old" (49), suggesting that written tales can be as old as oral tales. However, perhaps the more important point is that history can be argued to be unknowable, as Bertrand Russell considers:

> I doubt if it is even known whether writing or speech is the older form of language. The pictures made in caves by the Cro-Magnon men may have been intended to convey a meaning, and may have been a form of writing. It is known that writing developed out of pictures, for that happened in historical times; but it is not known to what extent pictures had been used in prehistoric times as a means of giving information or commands. (34)

The passage sees "speech" as "a means of giving information or commands" and defines writing as something that shares a function of speech, that is, something "intended to convey a meaning." "Pictures" are assumed to precede "writing," and what differentiates between them has to do with the writer's intentionality. In this way the "pictures" as "a form of writing" may

be as old as or older than "speech"; however, the overall emphasis here is on the fact that "it is not known."

Although history may be argued to be unknowable in Russell's sense, the concept of orality as "the other" is constructed simultaneously or retrospectively in contrast to the concept of writing. Walter J. Ong suggests that the opposition between orality and literacy may also be described as the contrasts between ear and eye, magic and science, prelogical and rational states of consciousness, savage mind and domesticated thought, and non-western and western views (28-29). Ong discusses how literacy can reconstruct orality:

> Fortunately, literacy, though it consumes its own oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. It can restore their memory, too. Literacy can be used to reconstruct for ourselves the pristine human consciousness which was not literate at all—at least to reconstruct this consciousness pretty well, though not perfectly (we can never forget enough of our familiar present to reconstitute in our minds any past in its full integrity). (15)

"We" in this passage live in literacy. Literacy, having "oral antecedents," is born from orality and is stronger than orality, "consuming" it. Literacy is superior to orality in this respect; however, there is something in orality that makes one want to "restore" its "memory." Orality is associated with the "past" which is not "familiar," and with "the pristine human consciousness," which is more natural but unknowable and can only be imperfectly "reconstructed." It is for this purpose that literacy "can be used," which implies that it is only a tool; and yet, paradoxically, this celebrates the usefulness or "infinite adaptability" of literacy at the same time. Similarly, in some fairy-tale criticism, orality is the ideal. According to Sale, "the earlier the writer, or the closer the writers to the oral traditions, the better or less bruising the result" (25). The word "writer," however, implies that true orality is impossible.

In contrast to Ong's argument, Zipes suggests that orality can be stronger than literacy, saying: "There was always tension between the literary and oral traditions. The oral tales continued and continue to threaten the more conventional and classical tales because they can question, dislodge, and deconstruct the written tales" (*Myth* 75). Written tales precede oral tales in this argument, as the latter work on to "threaten" the former. The oral is more radical and flexible than the written, which is seen to be more static. Betsy Hearne, on the other hand, opposes the views that contrast orality with literacy, by drawing attention to the similarity between the oral tradition and printing: "Living things change. Printing and reproduction have not frozen these tales. Before printing, every telling varied around a central pattern. Now multiple printed and illustrated versions vary around a central pattern. . . . The technological era is similar to the oral tradition in many ways" (106). Here the stories are compared to "living things" that "change." Although "telling" comes before "printing," they are claimed to be similar in that both oral and written or printed tales can be subject to change and have variations. In short, they are both alive, not being "frozen." Hans-Jörg Uther also argues against seeing orality and literacy as entirely antagonistic, saying: "It is further evident that the strict division between oral and literary tradition maintained in folk narrative research for decades is a fiction;

at best one can posit an interdependence between the two forms of transmission" (189). There is no "strict division" although the "two forms of transmission" are somehow still distinguishable.

Thus, orality and literacy are not necessarily seen to be incompatible, nor is either necessarily regarded as more advanced or superior than the other. The assumption that fairy tales, having a strong connection to oral tradition, are more natural, universal and innocent in comparison to other literary genres has also been disrupted, mainly through examination of the formation process of tale collections and the role of the collector/transcriber/writer. For instance, Ruth B. Bottigheimer tries to show how Grimms' fairy tales carry ideology and argues: "one must conclude that fairy tales offered an apparently innocent and peculiarly suitable medium for both transmitting and enforcing the norm of the silent woman" (130). Interestingly, however, what Rose calls "structural oppositions" can also exist within historical narratives of the fairy tale genre, when they are based on a progressive view. The fundamental idea is that fairy tales developed from simple to sophisticated, from oral to written, as well as from classic through modern to postmodern, subversive tales. These different qualities may be regarded as positive or negative according to the critic's position: one may see the chronological change as progress or degeneration.

A major distinction made within written fairy tales is one between folk/traditional/classic fairy tales and art/literary/modern fairy tales. Bottigheimer lists some of the differences between these when she writes about one of Grimms' tales:

> Rather longer than the others, it more closely resembles a literary fairy tale, a *Kunstmärchen*. Psychological motivations are accounted for within the narrative; symbolic actions, self-consciously employed magic, the sophistication of a frame tale, and the particularity absent from most fairy tales all make their appearance. (121)

In other words, assuming one can recognise symbols or self-consciousness in a text, classic fairy tales tend to be shorter, simpler and more general, with less explanation or self-consciousness and without "symbolic actions," in comparison to literary fairy tales. The differentiation roughly corresponds to that between orality and literacy. It follows that classic fairy tales, which are more literary than oral folklore, are defined as more oral than modern fairy tales and other literature. Lüthi's "literary folktale" introduces a similar concept:

> Wilhelm Grimm's stylistic recasting was largely responsible for the creation of the literary folktale (*Buchmärchen*), an elevated folktale, so to speak, that we may clearly distinguish from freely inventive stories of deliberate artfulness (*Kunstmärchen*). Literary folktales have an important function in that they fill the gap created by the disappearance of the oral tradition and have become the living possession of both children and adults. They cannot be considered fully representative of the true folktale, however. (110)

The literary folktale or "Buchmärchen" is situated somewhere between the "true folktale" and more "freely inventive" and "deliberately artful" Kunstmärchen, which is seen as a product of

individual authors rather than of the collective folk. The idea of "deliberate artfulness" implies that there is also non-deliberate artfulness or artlessness and that we can distinguish between them. Here again the "oral tradition" is looked back on as something irretrievable. It is necessary that the literary folktale "fills the gap" to be "the living possession of both children and adults," but it is a "creation" and cannot be "the true folktale," which is yet to be "elevated."

4. Interpretation

We have seen how fairy tales are associated with orality and suggested why. Orality and fairy tales represent something of the other, being closer to the origin. I would now like to think briefly about the way the notion of orality works in relation to reading. How is the reading of fairy tales affected when the tales are assumed to have some characteristics or traces of orality?

What the notion of the oral entails, namely antiquity and flexibility, are presented as the proof of the fairy tales' fundamental, universal nature. Bettelheim argues:

> Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings—came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult. (5-6)

Although in another passage he recommends a fairy tale's "original form" (19), Bettelheim here attributes the power of fairy tales to the refinement as a result of "retelling" through centuries. Fairy tales come to "speak" and "communicate"—of itself in a direct manner to everyone. Humans here are divided into the "uneducated child" and the "sophisticated adult." The passage also claims that the human personality consists of various "levels" and that there are "overt and covert meanings" of fairy tales.

Problems of interpretation arise from this kind of view that fairy tales can have different "levels" of meaning. Fairy tales are often seen to be simple and yet have a deeper meaning. Simplicity on the one hand is naivety and shallowness. James M. McGlathery laments thus: "Another reason for literary scholars' reticence in interpreting folktale, however, is a belief, deriving from romantic notions about popular culture, that these stories are products of a naive imagination incapable of conceiving hidden or deeper meanings of the sort that critics discover in other types of text" (13). The suggestion is that scholars' prejudice against the popularity and naivety of folktale is preventing them from "interpreting" it. "Interpretation" here is defined as "discovering hidden or deeper meanings." This idea of naivety can be related to the notion that the oral is one-dimensional. According to David R. Olson, "In speech, then, form and meaning are perceived as dissolubly linked by speakers. Literacy is instrumental in pulling them apart by freezing the form into a text" (153). In this view, there is no interpreting oral speech, where "form and meaning" are one and the same thing, in contrast to the written text, which is a "frozen" form.

On the other hand, curiously enough, it is precisely the notion of "simplicity" that invites

various allegorical interpretations of fairy tales. Lutz Röhrich illustrates the point:

> The simplicity, linearity, and one-dimensionality of fairy tales have led to a belief in their allegorical nature, a conviction that fairy tales mean something quite different from what stands in the text. . . . Folktales can be understood on various levels: on the first level accessible to everyone; on a higher level only understood by the initiated; and, finally, on a third level which can only be disclosed with the assistance of psychoanalytic interpretation. (9)

Various questions arise about this "belief" or "conviction": How can a text "mean something quite different" from what it stands, and who determines that? The way the three "levels" are defined is also dubious. Why should psychoanalysis in particular be separated from other strategies of "the initiated"? How can one understanding be "higher" or lower than another? Thus Maria Tatar admits an "arbitrariness" of allegorical reading: "The simplicity of fairy-tale plots invites multiple readings and allows interpretive pluralism to reign supreme. . . . There is inevitably a certain arbitrariness in determining exactly what kind of symbolic struggle is enacted in fairy-tale episodes that depart from everyday reality" (51). Here "multiple readings" of fairy tales are "invited" automatically by the power of simplicity. The premise is that a "symbolic struggle is enacted" wherever an episode departs from "everyday reality," although the definition of "everyday reality" itself can be arbitrary. But then, we may question, why should one bring in a "symbolic struggle" in the first place? It again relies on the notion of something that is not there and yet is there.

I hope I have demonstrated some of the issues and problems surrounding the ideas of the oral in fairy-tale criticism, and that I have opened up assumptions that seem to be ingrained in much of the critical language. Although those problems and assumptions are particularly prominent in fairy-tale criticism, they are not confined to it and can be useful in thinking about the way one reads.

Note

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the CIRCL (Centre for International Research in Childhood) seminar at the University of Reading on 3rd March 2004.

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