Arthur Rackham illustration in John Milton's *Comus* (1921) and cover image to Langrish's *Seven Miles of Steel Thistles*.

On Fairy Tales

Katherine Langrish

This article was originally published as the introduction to Langrish's *Seven Miles of Steel Thistles* (Greystone Press, 2016).

I was lucky enough to grow up in a house full of books, and though I can remember learning to write, I have no memory at all of learning to read; it seemed something I was born doing. As a child I felt incomplete without a book in my hand and, as often as not, that book would be full of fairy tales. Soon I was also reading legends and myths from around the world. I chose the Norse myths for a school project, retelling and illustrating stories about Thor, Odin and Loki. I read the tales of King Arthur; I read the *Arabian Nights*. And though I hardly know how, I became gradually aware of distinctions between these, to me, very similar genres. Some were taken more seriously than others. Myths were at the top; legends came next; fairy tales were the poor cousins at the bottom. 'Greek myths' weren't fairy tales: they were supposed to be more important than that. But there seemed to be quite an overlap. Andrew Lang included the story of Perseus and Andromeda in *The Blue Fairy Book*, under the title *The Terrible Head*. And surely it is a fairy tale, about a prince who rescues a princess from a monster. Surely he was right?

The field of fairy stories, legends, folktales and myths is like a great, wild meadow. The flowers and grasses seed everywhere, boundaries are impossible to maintain. Wheat grows into the hedge from the cultivated fields nearby, and poppies spring up in the middle of the oats. A story can be both things at once, a 'Greek myth' and a fairy tale too: but if we're going to talk about them, broad distinctions can still be made and may still be useful. Here is what I think: a *myth* seeks to make emotional sense of the world and our place in it. Thus, the story of Persephone's abduction by Hades is a religious and poetic exploration of winter and summer, death and rebirth. A *legend* recounts the deeds of heroes, such as Achilles, Arthur or Cú Chulainn. A *folk tale* is a humbler, more local affair. Its protagonists may be well-known neighbourhood characters or they may be anonymous, but specific *places* become important. Folk narratives occur in real, named landscapes. Green fairy children are found near the village of Woolpit in Suffolk.[1] A Cheshire farmer going to market to sell a white mare meets a wizard, not just anywhere, but on Alderley Edge between Mobberley and Macclesfield.[2] In Dorset an ex-soldier called John Lawrence sees a phantom army marching 'from the direction of Flowers Barrow, over Grange Hill, and making for Wareham.'[3] Local hills, lakes, stones and even churches are explained as the work of giants, trolls or the Devil.

Fairy tales can be divided into literary tales, the more-or-less original work of authors such as Hans Christian Andersen, George MacDonald and Oscar Wilde, and anonymous traditional tales, originally handed down the generations by word of mouth but nowadays usually mediated to us via print.[4] Unlike folk tales, traditional fairy tales are usually set 'far away and long ago' and lack temporal and spatial reference points. They begin like this: 'In olden times, when wishing still helped one, there lived a king …' or else, 'A long time ago there was a king who was famed for his wisdom through all the land …' A hero goes travelling, and 'after he had travelled some days, he came one night to a Giant's house …' We are everywhere or nowhere, never somewhere. A fairy tale is universal, not local.

Characters in fairy tales rarely possess names: when they do, these are either descriptive, like 'Little Red-Cap' and 'Snow-White', or else extremely common, such as Gretel, Hans, Kate, Jack. The effect is inclusive: these are the adventures of Everyman and Everywoman, but most of the time fairy-tale characters are referred to even more generically, as 'the king's daughter', 'the boy', 'the maiden', 'the soldier', 'the tailor', and so on.

None of the traditional forms – myth, legend, folk or fairy tale – can or should be approached in the same way that we approach a novel. They are not, for example, the least little bit interested in building characters' inner lives. Fairy-tale characters are established briefly, succinctly and once for all: 'a dear little girl', 'a poor old woman', 'two daughters, one ugly and wicked, the other beautiful and good'. That's it, set in stone. They won't develop or change, and everything that happens to them happens on the outside. Again, though fairy-tale narratives operate perfectly well by their own sets of rules (the third son is the lucky one; kindness to an animal wins you a magical helper), these are not the rules we expect from a novel. At the beginning of her story, Snow-White is a child of seven. By the end, she marries the prince. So … how old is she now? How long did she keep house for the dwarfs? How long has she lain in the glass coffin? Is this a lingering memory of some dark practice of child brides? It's a mistake to ask. It's a category error to look for that kind of consistency in a fairy tale. Snow-White is old enough to marry the prince at the end of the story for no other reason than that the narrative demands she should be. *That is how the story ends.*

Plenty of traditional fairy tales contain no actual fairies at all. (Unless you count the dwarfs, there are none in *Little Snow-White*, for example.) The term 'fairy tale' seems to have originated with Madame d'Aulnoy's *Les Contes de Fées* or 'Tales of the Fairies', published in 1697. According to Jack Zipes, 'By the time of her death a few years later … d'Aulnoy's name had become synonymous with an expression she was the first to use – *contes de fées*.'[5] Madame d'Aulnoy's sophisticated, literary, fanciful stories feature characters such as the amiable Fairy Gentille or the wicked Fairy Carabosse, who help or harm the fortunes of pairs of delightful young lovers. The magic in these tales is

consciously amusing: in *The Blue Bird*, for example, King Charming rides in a chariot drawn by winged frogs, and shouts, 'My frogs! My frogs!' when he wishes to depart.[6] Good and bad fairies make appearances in many of Charles Perrault's tales (also published in 1697, a good year for the genre) but certainly not in all: there are none in *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Bluebeard*, for example. Perhaps reflecting this, Perrault's collection is called simply *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, 'Stories or tales of long ago'. And in 1810 Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, whose interest was in the origins of traditional German tales, gave to their own collection the unassuming title *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 'Children's and Household Tales'. There are fewer fairies to be found in the Grimms' tales than there are witches and wicked stepmothers, but English translations persist in calling them 'fairy' tales. And why not? It's what we've grown used to.

Of course, the Grimm brothers were an inspirational part of the great Europe-wide revival of interest in traditional tales that sprang up as part of the Romantic movement and of nascent nationalism. They set the standard for many other collectors throughout the 19th century and into the 20th.[7] The world became a wilder, more magical place. Selkies plunged through the wild waves beyond Orkney. Undines drew themselves sinuously out of German rivers. The Neckan plucked his harp and sang mournfully on Scandinavian headlands and Baba Yaga flew through the Russian forests in her pestle and mortar to light down at her skull-bedecked garden gate.

At first, such stories were collected by adults and intended for adults. Sir George Webbe Dasent specifically forbids 'good children' to read the last two (mildly naughty) tales in *Popular Tales from the Norse*, his 1859 translation of Asbjornsen and Moe's *Norske Folkeeventyr*.[8] Referring to himself in the third person, he writes:

> He will never know if any bad child has broken his behest. Still he hopes that all good children who read this book will bear in mind that there is just as much sin in breaking a commandment even though it not be found out, and so he bids them goodbye, and feels sure that no good child will dare to look into those two rooms. If, after this warning, they peep in, they may find something that will shock them.
>
> 'Why then print them at all?' some grown reader asks. Because this volume is meant for you as well as for children, and if you have gone ever so little into the world with open eyes, you must have seen, yes, every day, things much more shocking.[9]

Concern for children's morals was to exercise many an editor in the decades to follow, most of whom trusted to censorship rather than simple appeals to honour. In 1889 Andrew Lang published *The Blue Fairy Book*, the first in his immensely successful

series known as 'the Coloured Fairy Books'. Actually his wife, Leonora Blanche Alleyne, whom he credits in *The Lilac Fairy Book*, was 'almost wholly' responsible for the selections and translations. Compiled specifically for children, they were collections of stories, both literary and traditional, from many different countries and cultures, lightly bowdlerised where necessary. Parents could be confident in their suitability, and children liked them because Mrs Lang's choices were excellent and she didn't preach. Her husband struck hard at the 'new' fairy tales then being churned out for children's consumption:

> The three hundred and sixty-five authors who try to write new fairytales are very tiresome. They always begin with a little boy or girl who goes out and meets the fairies of polyanthuses and gardenias and apple blossoms: 'Flowers and fruits and other winged things.' These fairies try to be funny, and fail, or they try to preach, and succeed. Real fairies never preach or talk slang. At the end, the little boy or girl wakes up and finds that he has been dreaming.[10]

Coincidentally, 1889 was also the year in which Lewis Carroll published *Sylvie and Bruno*, a book which most people now find unreadable. In it, Carroll also took time to have a go at the moralising tone of late 19th-century children's fairy fiction:

> I want to know – dear Child who reads this! – why Fairies should always be teaching us to do our duty, and lecturing us when we go wrong, and we should never teach them anything?[11]

But he didn't manage to avoid the pitfalls himself. We soon meet two tiny fairies, who are simply miniature children. Good little Sylvie is trying to turn over a big beetle struggling on his back: 'it was as much as she could do, with both arms, to roll the heavy thing over; and all the while she was talking to it, half scolding and half comforting, as a nurse might do with a child that had fallen down.' In contrast to kind Sylvie we next encounter naughty Bruno, who is busy tearing up Sylvie's garden.

> Think of any pretty little boy you know, with rosy cheeks, large, dark eyes and tangled brown hair, and then then fancy him made small enough to fit comfortably into a coffee cup....[12]

Bruno speaks in the lisping baby-talk which Victorian writers found so inexplicably appealing. 'Revenge is a wicked, cruel, dangerous thing,' Carroll-as-narrator tells the little fairy. 'River-edge?' Bruno responds. 'What a funny word! I suppose oo call it cruel and

dangerous 'cause, if oo wented too far and tumbleded in, oo'd get drownded.' This illustrates how difficult it must have been for Victorians to avoid gluey sentiment when writing about fairies for children. Even the creator of Alice couldn't escape it! To return to *The Blue Fairy Book* after this kind of thing is like striding out into open country and wild winds, and to realise what a great service the Langs did for 19th-century children.

And though Lang may have suppressed hints of immoral behaviour in fairy tales, he was bracing in his attitudes to violence. It was in *The Blue Fairy Book* that I first read the full version of Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, with its thrillingly gruesome second half – these days usually forgotten – in which the King's ogress mother orders the young Queen and both her little children to be killed and cooked with *sauce Robert* (whatever that was). After a last-minute rescue, the wicked ogress is thrown into a pit full of toads and vipers. It was not for the faint-hearted. Whether the two halves of the story truly belong together or no, I loved it, and I appreciated its touches of macabre humour: the Sleeping Beauty may *look* young but she is actually a hundred and twenty, so 'her flesh must be expected to be on the tough side'. My local library stocked all of the Coloured Fairy Books: Blue, Red, Green, Crimson, Yellow, Brown, Lilac, Violet … I read the lot. I read everything else, too, but fairy tales were a staple of my diet.

You couldn't exhaust them; they were all so different. Some were quirky and funny, like *Puss in Boots*. Some, especially French stories like *The White Cat* or *Beauty and the Beast*, felt bright and light and pretty. The Grimms' tales were dark and scary. Hans Christian Andersen's stories were beautifully, deliciously sad. The poor little Mermaid! The poor little Match Girl! The poor little Fir-Tree! And sometimes they were horrifying, like *The Red Shoes*, the story of the vain girl whose red shoes dance her away without stopping, until she has to have both her feet chopped off by a woodcutter. I was about eight years old when I first read it, and unfortunately my mother had just bought me a pair of red leather shoes, which from then on I absolutely refused to wear.

If traditional fairy tales could be strong meat, in other children's books I still met plenty of the soppy fairies so despised by Andrew Lang – fragile little creatures who danced on tiptoe, lived in flowers or under toadstools, and wore bluebell hats. I didn't altogether mind them, but compared with real fairy tales, they were pretty tame. A good example is *Pink Paint for a Pixie*, a story by Enid Blyton in which a little girl loans her paintbox to a pixie and is rewarded when he paints the tips of the daisies pink so that she can make a magical necklace.[13] Twentieth-century fairies had ceased to preach, but they were always *helpful*: not for nothing did Lady Baden-Powell name her girl scout movement 'The Brownies' – after an earlier name, 'The Rosebuds', proved unpopular with girls. Brownies were presented as helpful domestic sprites (unlike the unpredictable tricksters of folklore), and the traditional names for the Brownie 'sixes' when I joined briefly in the 1960s were Pixies, Elves, Leprechauns, Gnomes, Fairies and Sprites. Prejudice was rife – no one wanted to be a gnome;

there were badges for feminine tasks such as knitting, sewing, and baking buns, and I left after a few weeks, partly because I did not believe I would ever learn to skip a hundred times backwards.

When I was about ten I discovered Alan Garner, who had burst upon the scene in 1960, raiding Celtic and Norse legends and throwing the booty together in the most electrifying way in his first book *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. Here, and in its sequel *The Moon of Gomrath*, two contemporary and quite conventional children – who might easily in other hands have seen fairies at the bottom of the garden – are hurled into a maelstrom of ancient magic, moon goddesses, shapeless terrors and hints of deeper worlds. A flood of magic from legend and folklore was released into children's fiction, changing it forever. There are no obvious fairies in the books; the male supernatural characters consist of a wizard, some rather chilly elves, and dwarves: but Angharad Goldenhand, the lady of the lake, is a fairy queen in the style of the *Mabinogion* or the *Morte d'Arthur*, while her adversary the Morrigan is a witch-queen or crone worthy of Grimm. Yes, these characters are primarily intended to be perceived as aspects of the triple moon goddess, but that's what all fairy queens in folklore and ballads may once have been. And fairies in folklore have always been connected with sex as well as death:

> 'Harp and carp, Thomas,' she said
> 'Harp and carp along with me,
> And if you dare to kiss my lips.
> Sure of your body I will be.'[14]

So Thomas the Rhymer kissed the Queen of Elphame under the Eildon Tree and rode away with her through the river of blood into elfland. Wild Edric lost his fairy wife Godda and rides for ever on the Shropshire hills with his Hunt, searching for her. As for the sexy, beautiful, dangerous male faeries of modern teen novels,[15] they find a traditional antecedent in the Irish *Gancanagh*, the 'Love-Talker', a beautiful fairy youth who waylays young girls in the gloaming and makes them so love-sick for him that they pine away and die.

The Irish have always remembered the dangerous side of the fairies. William Allingham's fairies in *Up the Aery Mountain, Down the Rushy Glen* with its 'Wee folk, good folk, Trooping all together, Green jacket, red cap, And white owl's feather' may fleetingly sound like Walt Disney's dwarfs. But Allingham knew the connection of the fairies with loss and death:

> They stole little Bridget
> For seven years long,
> And when she came down again
> Her friends were all gone.

They took her lightly back,
Between the night and morrow,
They thought she was fast asleep,
But she was dead from sorrow.

Scottish J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* may have given us Tinkerbell, but his second take on a supernaturally extended youth is an eerie play about a girl stolen by the fairies, *Mary Rose*, and it doesn't have a happy ending.

The variant spelling 'faerie' has recently almost entirely displaced 'fairy' in children's and young adult fantasy fiction, probably in an effort to distinguish the human-sized, dangerous fairies of the Celtic tradition from the diminutive milk-and-water flower fairies of late 19th- and early 20th-century children's fiction. Spelt 'faerie', the word somehow just *looks* more magical, too – more romantic, more grown-up, more literary – conjuring 'magic casements opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faerie lands forlorn …'[16] Fairies, faeries, elves, whatever you like to call them, symbolise bereavement and death as well as the lure of love and beauty. That's surely why the ballads divide the 'high' fairies into two 'courts': the 'Seelie Court' and the 'Unseelie Court', representing their benevolent and harmful aspects. European fairy culture is rich and complex. No wonder so many modern fantasy writers plunder it.

But let's forget the ballads and romances and the heroic Celtic legends, and look once again at the humble fairy tale. People who dislike fairy tales (and probably seldom read them) complain that at best they are romantic trivia, at worst escapist nonsense with a side-order of sexism. Aren't they all about princes rescuing passive princesses from dragons, giants and towers? How can any self-respecting adult defend that? If it were true, perhaps I couldn't, but it is simply not so. The Grimms' tales alone include many more stories about peasants and tradesmen, farmers, beggars and pensioned-off soldiers than they do about princesses and queens. And if you think about it for a moment, the world is still full of peasants and tradesmen and farmers and beggars and pensioned-off soldiers. Just as it always was.

Hansel and Gretel, as Adèle Geras has succinctly put it, is 'about hunger' – about the terrible choices people have to face when they are at starvation's door. *The Blue Light* is about a soldier who's done his duty by his country only to be discarded and marginalised and left to tramp the roads. *The Seven Little Kids* is about a single, working mother who has to leave her children alone in the house, knowing they may be in danger. (Yes, she happens to be a goat.) *The Fisherman and his Wife* is about greed (and a poisonous marriage). *The Mouse, the Bird and The Sausage* is a cautionary tale

about the dangers of blind trust and naivety. There's even a far-fetched yarn about organ transplants called *The Three Army Surgeons*.

As Alison Lurie has said, fairy tales are much more realistic than you might think:

> To succeed in this world you needed some special skill or patronage, plus remarkable luck; and it didn't hurt to be very good looking. The other qualities that counted were wit, boldness, stubborn persistence and an eye to the main chance. Kindness to those in trouble was also advisable – you never knew who might be useful to you later on.[17]

Comical, tragic, beautiful or cruel, these anonymous stories are amazingly diverse and amazingly hardy. They've been told and retold, loved and laughed at, by generation after generation, because they are of the people, by the people, for the people. The world of fairy tales is one in which the pain and deprivation, bad luck and hard work of ordinary folk can be alleviated by a chance meeting, by luck, by courtesy, courage and quick wits – and by the occasional miracle. The world of fairy tales is not so very different from ours. It *is* ours.

Katherine Langrish

Notes

1. Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 281.
2. William Axon, *Cheshire Gleanings*, 56 et seq. (and made famous by Alan Garner).
3. Sybil Marshall, *Everyman's Book of English Folk Tales*, 164.
4. Implying the possibly corrective hand of an editor.
5. Jack Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 33.
6. Madame d'Aulnoy, *The Fairy Tales of Madame d'Aulnoy*, tr. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, 38.
7. Such as Ireland's Thomas Crofton Croker, William Larminie, Thomas Keightley, Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, Norway's Peter Christen Asbjornsen and Jorgen Moe, Britain's Sir George Dasent, Andrew Lang, Sir William Craigie and Joseph Jacobs (who was actually Australian), and Russia's Aleksandr Afanasyev.
8. Published in Norway, 1841.
9. Sir George Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse*, vi.
10. Andrew Lang, *The Lilac Fairy Book*, viii.
11. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno*, 190.
12. Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno*, 198.
13. Enid Blyton, 'Pink Paint for a Pixie', *A Story-Party At Green Hedges*, 106.
14. 'Thomas the Rhymer', *The Oxford Book of Ballads*, ed. James Kinsley, 7 *et seq*.
15. Such as Holly Black's *Tithe: A Modern Faerie Tale* (2004) or Melissa Marr's *Wicked Lovely* (2009).
16. John Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, l. 69, 70.
17. Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell The Grown-ups*, 18.