

James Archer,  
'Le Morte  
d'Arthur' (1860).



# My Favourite Stories when I was Young

Jacqueline Simpson

**T**ry as I might, I cannot fix upon one single favourite, so here are my 'top three or four'.

My childhood was rather unusual in being bilingual, since my father was English and my mother a French-speaking Belgian, and though we lived in England she made sure I spoke and read in both languages from the start. And so, weirdly, though the Grimm's *Fairy Tales* were definitely a top favourite, I knew them through a French book my mother had had since her own childhood and from which she read aloud to me until I was old enough to read for myself. I loved them unreservedly. The 'cruelty' people get het up about nowadays never bothered me, for it was only the wicked who were rolled downhill in spiked barrels or forced to dance in red-hot shoes, while whatever hardships the heroes and heroines went through were only temporary. Nor was I annoyed by the passivity of most *Märchen* heroines; I now see this was because I automatically identified myself not with them but with the heroes.

Looking back, I think my favourite Grimm story was 'The Fisherman and his Wife'. I loved the lavishly detailed descriptions marking each stage of the story: the seascape gradually changing from calm to choppy to rough to wildly stormy; the wife's home growing from hovel to cosy cottage to manor house to castle to huge palace with arrays of pages and footmen; the husband more and more scared and embarrassed. OK, I now know this detailed scene-painting is not the work of a folk storyteller but Wilhelm being literary, but the actual circular structure of the story *does* come from tradition ('Go home,' said the fish. 'You'll find her back in the hovel!') And then there's the repeated verse for summoning the fish ... In short, 'The Fisherman and his Wife' was ideally suited to my moral sense, and gave me what may well have been my first insight into literary skill.

At a somewhat later age, but still before I started school at seven-and-a-half, my mother got me onto the *Fables* of La Fontaine, elegant verse retellings of stories from Aesop. These too I loved – at any rate to hear or to read, perhaps rather less when it became part of the daily lessons Mother devised that I should learn one by heart! Their morality is of course far more cynical than that of fairy tales; might is right, the innocent are sure to be victims, tricksters generally come out on top. But the wit and the sparkling language are superb. A typical example of what I found so amusing comes in 'The Cat, the Weasel, and the Little

Rabbit': innocent and carefree, little Johnny Rabbit is nibbling grass in the meadow, but on returning to his burrow finds to his horror that a weasel has taken possession of it. "'O dieux hospitaliers, que vois-je ici parâître!" / Dit l'animal chassé du paternal logis.' ("Ye gods of hearth and home, what sight here meets my eyes!" / said the animal, expelled from his forefathers' abode.) Such grandiose language from a little bunny is delicious. In case you are wondering, he and the weasel go to law over the matter, and appeal to a famous judge, who is a fat furry cat. The cat gently murmurs: 'Come closer, closer, my children, I am deaf, because of my great age.' And then his claws flash out and he brings the disputants to agreement by gobbling up both the one and the other.

Meanwhile, my father had read the Pooh stories to me quite early on, and Milne's verses, and the Toad chapters of *Wind in the Willows*. Very good fun. And when I was six or seven and reading easily for myself, somebody produced two different selections of Arthurian stories retold for children, with ample illustrations. These I loved, and they inspired me to solitary make-believe games, in which I was Lancelot, armed with wooden sword and shield, and fought evil knights up and down the staircase and all round the garden. Thank goodness I had no brothers to tell me I was a girl, and could only be Guinevere or the Lady of the Lake! One of the books, though not the other, included the final tragedy of Mordred's treachery and the deaths of Gareth, Gawain and Arthur himself. Strangely, I could accept and admire this; apparently even at that early age I was distinguishing between heroic tragedy and the mawkish sentimentality of Andersen, which I also encountered and rejected at about this time.

And so we come to one of the high points of childhood memory – a hot summer day when I was 12 or maybe 13, when I started reading, for the very first time, a complete *Morte D'Arthur* in its original late medieval language, almost every page studded with splendid new words and phrases to be puzzled out – avaunt, maugre thy head, kempys, passing good cheer, habergeon, bawdrick, damosels making great dole, etc, etc. All day I sat against a haystack in my father's market garden, reading. Next morning I was itching from top to toe, for while I was devouring Malory the harvest mites in the hay had been devouring me. But it was worth it.



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