

## THREE EARLY PIONEERS IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF FAIRY TALES

FIRE IN THE DRAGON AND OTHER PSYCHOANALYTIC ESSAYS ON FOLKLORE.  
By *Géza Róheim*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992,  
xxvi + 194 pp.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FAIRY TALES. By *Marie-Louise  
von Franz*. Zurich: Spring Publications, 1973, 155 pp.

THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY  
TALES. By *Bruno Bettelheim*. New York: Knopf, 1976, 327 pp.

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Fairy tales have a raw power to transport the hero or heroine out of everyday life into an enchanted space of transformation. Such crossing is frequently prompted by a problem—what to do with an unwanted child; how to find a wife; who will succeed to the throne—but it may also be an adventure of a more transgressive fear or seeking of forbidden knowledge: incest, abandonment, or murder. The magical space may be located in the outer world or in secret interior places: the woods, the depths of the earth, etc. Within this quest, however, primitive and raw emotions are encountered and mastered, and the hero or heroine emerges having grown psychically and socially. Forbidden and repressed conflicts (involving, e.g., incest, cannibalism, envy, sibling rivalry, sexuality) are taken up and worked through for resolution and psychic growth.

Oral folk tales are found in every human culture, and they go back a very long time—probably almost as long as language has existed. Written fairy tales, which derive from the oral folk tradition, appeared in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, blossoming first in Italy, then in France, and finally in Germany. Our Western tales can be traced back to Arabian,

Indian, and Greek sources, and similar tales are found in Asian, African, and Native North American traditions as well. The pleasure and enchantment of fairy tales never fails. As old as they are, these stories still capture the interest of children and of adults, too.

Clearly there is something universal in them that transcends the particulars of plot or character, yet the two main groups of theorists who have studied them, academic folklorists and psychoanalysts, have failed to reach any substantial agreement on what this universal is. The folklorists have largely studied structural issues—the cross-cultural migration of tales, the way traditional themes recur and vary both within and across cultures—while psychoanalysts have concerned themselves with symbolic content and neglected the structural and historical character of the stories. My effort here is twofold: first to use structural findings from academic studies, especially variants of individual tales, to show the full extent of what those tales can mean, opening up a wider range of possible symbolic interpretation. Second, because even the psychoanalysts do not agree among themselves, I hope to bring some order to a fascinating but confused area of psychoanalytic investigation. The work on fairy tales by Freud and his contemporaries tends to be dogmatic, usually a single, definitive interpretation to a particular symbol based on the author's understanding of psychoanalytic theory. Over the past forty years, we have come to accept a plurality of theories, each taking up a different point of view about the structure and function of the mind. Now, instead of a single symbolic meaning, we find multiple symbolic interpretations at different developmental levels; we might say that the fairy tale is multidetermined and can be read as a group of compromise solutions to the posed problem. I will understand fairy tales as a developmental quest, a movement through trauma, regression, reorganization, and growth.

Psychoanalysts have approached fairy tales from three distinct perspectives. The first derives from Freud and Jung, who considered myths and fairy tales an evolutionary vestige of primitive thought that could be mined to reveal its origins. This view is exemplified in the work of Freud and of Marie-Louise von Franz, a Swiss Jungian psychoanalyst, on fairy tale archetypes.

The second perspective is clinical. It did not take long for analysts to apply the Freudian method of dream analysis to fairy tales. Like dreams, these stories seemed to capture usually inaccessible symbols, bringing them closer to consciousness. Freud himself offered some examples of the use of

fairy tale references in clinical work. Bruno Bettelheim, whose popular book on the subject deals here and there with therapeutic issues, focuses mainly on the situation of a parent reading to a child, not clinical psychoanalysis.

The third perspective is literary. Objects and actions in literary and other cultural works are assumed to have an underlying psychoanalytic meaning pertaining to the body: its desires, fears, and anxieties. The problem here is that there is no patient to provide feedback via associative response to an interpretation. The resulting lack of a method of validation makes the use of literary interpretation controversial, as there is no way to test hypotheses. What often results is speculation based on a subjective reading and a narrow psychological explanation, ignoring findings from other fields. The Hungarian analyst Géza Róheim and the Jungian analyst von Franz, as well as Bettelheim and Freud, illustrate literary analysis.

### FREUD AND JUNG

Freud, Jung, and the Grimm brothers were all heirs of the German romantic tradition, which emphasized instinct and feeling over rationality, leading to an emphasis on cultural traditions and myths of a particular “land,” a tendency now called romantic nationalism<sup>1</sup> (Wilson 1973; Kamenetsky 1973). By 1806, the Grimm brothers began to collect folk tales; they assumed that fairy tales and myths represented a purer, more authentic mode of German thinking uncontaminated by foreign sources<sup>2</sup> (Newmann 2001). Similar to the Grimms’ belief in the primitive origin of culture, Freud postulated a type of Lamarckian inheritance of acquired mental characteristics, calling it a “phylogenetic inheritance” or “regression.” This was Freud’s version of romantic nationalism; phylogenetic inheritance was a window into preliterate modes of thought. Throughout his life he continued to maintain that there are two fundamental forms of regression: the phylogenetic, which reflects archaic biological patterns of functioning, and the ontogenetic, which reflects infantile fixations and early experience (Freud 1939). For most Freudian psychoanalysts, interest in

<sup>1</sup>The fate of romantic nationalism in modern society is quite mixed. On the positive side, it has led to interest in unique cultures, the preservation of language diversity, and the revival of cultures that have been suppressed by colonial powers or swamped by the dominant cultures. On the negative side, it has led to genocide, ethnic cleansing, racial hatred, apartheid, and the rise of extremist movements.

<sup>2</sup>The Grimms’ sources were more complicated and hardly pure German. They used French sources as well as literary works.

phylogenetic symbols has waned in favor of symbols that are individually generated and unique to the individual.

Jung posited both a personal unconscious, similar to the Freudian ontogenetic unconscious, and a collective unconscious, similar to the Freudian phylogenetic unconscious. The contents of the collective unconscious are phylogenetic symbols, which Jung (1960) called archetypes. The archetypes, instinctual manifestations of fantasies found in our collective unconscious, tend “to form such representations of a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern” (Jung 1964, p. 67). They are unknowable and never conscious, but they can generate images and symbols, as they interact with life experiences, that are found in dreams, myths, fairy tales, and works of art, as well as conscious thought. I will explore the Jungian use of archetypes in taking up the work of Marie-Louise von Franz.

Having recognized the symbolic vitality of fairy tales (though they did not necessarily agree on how to explain it), psychoanalysts soon expanded their theoretical interest in these stories to the question of therapeutic usefulness. Dreams are valued theoretically as the earliest model of the unconscious (Freud 1900) and, therapeutically, as the royal road to it. Like dreams, fairy tales seemed to capture unconscious symbols, bringing them closer to consciousness: “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” (Freud 1901, p. 685).

In Freud’s first brief paper on fairy tales (1913a), he interpreted fairy tale material found in dreams as personal associations in two individual patients; that is, he treated the symbolism as personal, according to tested tenets of clinical methodology. For example, he recounts the Wolf Man’s dream of six or seven white wolves sitting in a tree and the dreamer’s great fear of being eaten. When Freud asks for associations to the dream, the Wolf Man thinks of a picture from *Little Red Riding Hood* of a large bold wolf. The tree reminds him of another folk story, this one about a tailor who pulls off the tail of a wolf when attacked. Freud interprets the tailless wolf as evidence of the castration complex. The Wolf Man then associates again to another fairy tale, this one called *The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats*. In this tale, which is related to *Little Red Riding Hood*, six little goats are eaten by the wolf after their mother had gone away, and only the seventh escapes. Freud interprets the Wolf Man’s association to

these tales of dangerous animals as animal phobias, a fear of castration displaced from the patient's fear of his father. What we see technically here is a patient associating to specific fairy tales and Freud using the content of the tales as further associations and grounds for interpretation. We will explore this method in the section on Bettelheim, whose interest was in the experience of a child reading fairy tales but who followed the clinical method of association and interpretation in looking for the tale's meaning for the child.

The first-generation psychoanalysts were very interested in interpretation as a tool for the study of literature, and it is here that we see their third style of approach to fairy tales, as well as to myths, poems, novels, and other literary productions. Freud (1913b) took up "a small problem" (p. 291) in the theme of the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*. There are three suitors for the hand of the fair and wise Portia, and her father has decreed that the suitor who chooses the casket with her portrait inside will win her as his bride. The third suitor, the star youth, chooses the third casket, made of lead, which is the correct choice. Freud asks why the *third* casket is the one to choose to win a wife, and why it is made of lead; he then uses a combination of his own associations and interpretations to answer the question. Freud uses as sources a wide range of cultural associations: folk epics; *Grimms' Fairy Tales*; Greek, Roman, and Germanic myths; and other plays of Shakespeare. Freud first thinks that caskets stand for the bodies of women and the number three stands for three women, in support of which interpretation he cites King Lear choosing among three daughters, Paris choosing among three goddesses, and the prince in *Cinderella* choosing among three sisters, the third always being the most beautiful. Freud thinks of the third daughter in these sources as "dumb"; she "loves and remains silent" (p. 294). Bassanio, in his speech defending his choice of the lead casket, speaks of the metal's paleness, an attribute Freud attributes to the third woman: "lead is dumb" (p. 294). Freud decides that dumbness is equated with death, for which he cites as evidence the Grimms' tale *The Twelve Brothers*, in which the heroine, in order to save her brothers from death, must remain "dumb" for seven years. Freud then suggests that the third woman represents the Goddess of Death: the three Norns of Norse mythology or the three Moerae of Greek mythology. Freud, citing man's fear of death, invokes the defense of reaction-formation to suggest that death is replaced by the Goddess of Love. Fears of death are mutated into the most lovely and

desirable of women, “a triumph of wish-fulfilment” (p. 299). “It is in vain that an old man [Lear] yearns for the love of woman as he had it first from his mother; the third of the Fates alone, the silent Goddess of Death, will take him into her arms” (p. 301).

This method of using folk material is very different from Freud’s approach to the Wolf Man’s dream. Here he offers parallels from different sources (that is, from sources determined by his own associations) as evidence to support a particular interpretation, also determined by him. He uses the parallel cases to argue for the universality of his interpretations, ignoring the possibility that his interpretations are more subjective than general, that he sought evidence to support these subjective interpretations, and that the same literary material could be interpreted in other ways. Freud starts with a theory and then finds evidence to support it. Additionally, he assumes that the unconscious, bodily based symbols posited in psychoanalysis are necessarily the primary source of fantasy formation in all cultural productions, ignoring historical, sociological, and literary influences. Folklorists would see the fairy tale as the product of many forces: historical, cultural, and sociological as well as psychological, deploring the type of analysis Freud and other psychoanalysts propose (Esman 1998; Ben-Amos 1994).

In the sections that follow, I will examine three early psychoanalytic books on fairy tales that use a mixture of the methods described above. I will pay particular attention to how symbolic content (individual or phylogenetic) is interpreted, and to how hypotheses are validated.

### **FIRE IN THE DRAGON AND OTHER PSYCHOANALYTIC ESSAYS ON FOLKLORE BY GÉZA RÓHEIM**

Géza Róheim (1891–1953), a first-generation psychoanalyst and member of Freud’s circle, was born in Budapest, the only child of a wealthy Jewish merchant family. In 1914 he obtained a doctorate in geography, anthropology not being an option, from the University of Budapest, but he had an early interest in folklore and mythology and soon became intrigued with psychoanalysis as well. He was analyzed by Sándor Ferenczi in 1915 and 1916, at the same time Melanie Klein was.

Róheim first met Freud in 1918. The only psychoanalyst who trained in both anthropology and psychoanalysis, he was cited by Freud (1925) for work in psychoanalytic anthropology that culminated in an effort to

test the universality of psychoanalytic concepts in other cultures. Encouraged by Freud and funded by Marie Bonaparte, Róheim did important field work in Australia, New Guinea, and the American Southwest between 1928 and 1931. In 1938 he immigrated to the U.S., working first at Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts and then in private practice in New York City.

Róheim published extensively in the psychoanalytic literature throughout his life, but had little influence on psychoanalytic theory. It seems that psychoanalytic interest in anthropology had waned after 1930, in large part paralleling the loss of a belief in phylogenetic inheritance and the universality of concepts. In anthropological and folkloric circles, Róheim's psychoanalytic interest was ignored as unscientific. Moreover, Róheim had what Calogeras (1971) has described as a "peremptorial and polemical style" (p. 156), which did not endear him to either camp. The one exception to this generalized neglect is the renowned folklorist Alan Dundes (1992), who many years later edited a collection of Róheim's essays, which he called "bold and sometimes startling" and "an inspiration" (p. xxii).

Róheim proposed the original theory, evident in that book of essays, that folk narratives are originally dreams that have entered the oral tradition: "the hypothesis that some myths and folk tales are directly derived from dreams, dreamed by someone, somewhere, and many times told and retold till only rudiments of their dreams remain" (Róheim 1992, p. 168). He gives as an example the tale of *Hansel and Gretel*, where he imagines the starving children dream of eating their mother (p. 170). It is impossible to verify such a grand hypothesis and it has not been taken up, either by the academic or the psychoanalytic community.

One of the problems in reading Róheim is that he never connects his theories to clinical work. In none of his papers does he ever demonstrate how myths and fairy tales might be used by either patient or analyst. As with Freud, I think it might be possible to use his dream theory clinically by treating fairy tale narratives as if they were dreams, having a manifest content and a latent meaning. This would have clinical usefulness. But Róheim does not give us material on which to test this method. Nonetheless, his work with these tales is interesting.

Róheim's approach is well illustrated in his analysis of the Grimms' tale *The Cunning Little Tailor* (1944a). In it, three tailors compete for the hand of a princess, who will only marry the one who correctly guesses a

riddle about the two colors of her hair. The third tailor guesses correctly, but the princess, who does not want to marry at all, gives him another task—to spend the night in a stable with a bear. That, she assumes, will rid her of her suitor. The tailor, however, takes his violin to the stable with him, and his playing so pleases the bear that he wants to learn to play too. But the tailor points out that the bear’s claws are much too long to play the violin, and he promises to trim them if the bear will put his paws in a vise to hold them still. Thus he traps the bear for the night and wins the girl. The other two tailors, envious of his good fortune, release the bear, but the tailor sticks his legs out of the window of the wedding carriage in the form of a vise and scares the bear away.

Róheim’s method is to look at variants of the tale in which a particular symbol in the tale is repeated.<sup>3</sup> In his analysis of *The Cunning Little Tailor*, he explores a series of other tales in which a vise or wedge is used to subdue a would-be attacker. In some stories, for example, a demon thrusts his nose—not his claws—into a room and gets it caught in a vise. In others, it is a woman who stands on her head (and presumably exposes her genitals) to scare off the intruder. Róheim sees the vise as the symbolic equivalent of the sight of the woman’s genitals, which is frightening enough to scare off a male bear. He concludes that such tales symbolize male anxiety about the bridal night and validate Freud’s ideas about castration fears; these fears are projected onto the bear or the demon: “I, the dreamer, do not suffer from castration anxiety. I get the miller’s daughter or the princess. It is the haunting father (bear, water spirit) who is afraid of the vagina” (p. 110).

Róheim then leaps off to other tales in which he finds evidence for castration anxiety: the stories of Beowulf, Odysseus, and Hercules, and various Hungarian ballads. Here, for example, Róheim makes another intuitive jump in discussing the blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus: when he is asleep, Odysseus rams a stick into his one eye. Róheim concludes that “the sleeper’s castration anxiety (blindness) is here projected to the father imago” (p. 111). Róheim then cites a variant in which the hero has to cut off his own finger when chased by the giant; this time it is the dreamer who is castrated. The juxtaposition of the castrated bear (his claws in the vise) and the castrated giant (blinded by the sharpened stick

<sup>3</sup>You can see why Dundes might favor Róheim, who was very familiar with folkloric research.



of Odysseus), among a number of other folk tales cited, is used as evidence that castration anxiety is universal.

Coming out of the Ferenczi-Klein Hungarian tradition, Róheim mixes classical Freudian thought with object relations theories. Differing from Freud, Róheim is immersed in the preoedipal levels of development, which he finds elaborated in Ferenczi and Abraham.<sup>4</sup> Oral and anal motifs are common, while aggression takes its place with sexuality in his interpretations. He is clearly aware of the early writings of Melanie Klein (they are cited four times in the essays), which Bettelheim is not. For example, in a discussion of witches, Róheim references Klein's "body destruction fantasy" in which "the infant . . . reacts to frustration of any kind with a violent aggression with the desire to rend the mother's body apart and to tear out all the valuable 'body contents'" (p. 23), an idea he later uses in interpreting *Hansel and Gretel*. Róheim finds a number of variants of the tale in which the witch eats her own child. The cannibalistic bad mother is the projection of the body destruction fantasies of children after they overhear their parents plotting against them (p. 170).

Like Freud, Róheim lacks any awareness of his own subjectivity. Further, his is a writing style quite different from that of the other analysts cited here; he makes intuitive leaps, but they are often idiosyncratic and difficult to follow, jumping as they do from one topic to another while assuming, often ill-advisedly, that the reader is familiar with his background material (Dundes 1992). Again like Freud, Róheim uses his vast knowledge of folk tales and myths to find confirmation of his ideas. But we are faced with the same problem as with Freud: Róheim forms an interpretation and theory, and then selects "evidence" to support his idea.

In today's broader theoretical landscape, it is easy to imagine other psychoanalytic interpretations of a tale like this. From an object relations point of view, for instance, we might see the bear as the "bad" mother, orally retaliatory and perhaps murderous, and split off to preserve the princess (who, however beautiful, is cold and rejecting) as the "good" mother. The vise then becomes the retaliatory attack that the boy expects when he needs his mother, or his retaliatory defense against such an attack. There is also the perverse theme of the envious rivals, who want to destroy the victor.

<sup>4</sup>Ferenczi is referenced twice in the essays and Abraham not at all. Yet Róheim's use of oral and anal stages strongly suggests the influence of Abraham, who was active in this period.

Róheim is rarely read in our time, partly because he is rooted in early Freudian thought, partly because his anthropological focus is uncomfortably connected to phylogenetic ideas, and partly because of his writing style. However, he has a grasp of the breadth of fairy tale variations, and a vivid and intuitive interpretive response to these stories that most psychoanalysts lack. While Róheim seems arbitrary at times, I nonetheless agree with Dundes (1992) that original insights can be found in his fairy tale studies. It would have been interesting to see how Róheim might have used them in his clinical work.

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
FAIRY TALES BY MARIE-LOUISE VON FRANZ**

Marie-Louise von Franz (1915–1998) was born in Germany but moved to Switzerland as a young child. She studied philology and classical languages at the University of Zurich, where she first met Jung when she was eighteen. She attended his lectures, had a training analysis with him, and was one of his most important collaborators until his death in 1961. She wrote more than twenty books on alchemy and fairy tales, which she saw as the purest expression of the collective unconscious. She opens *An Introduction to the Psychology of Fairy Tales* with this:

Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic process. . . . They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest, and most concise form. In this pure form, the archetype images afford us the best clues to the understanding of the processes going on in the collective psyche. In myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural materials [p. 1].

In any mythological material we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche, which show themselves through an overlay of cultural material. But because in fairy tales “there is much less specific conscious cultural material, . . . they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly” (p. 1).

She thinks of fairy tale language as “the universal language of all mankind—of all ages and of all races and cultures” (p. 18), as equivalent to dreams. If we can put to one side the question of archetypes, von Franz has a love for fairy tales and a conception similar to my own. Specifically, she asks, What is the difficulty that pushes the tale forward and how is it solved? “In hero stories there is nearly always an exposition of a terrible

situation: the land is drying up because the toads block the water of life, or some dark enemy comes from the north and steals all the women and there is no fertility in the land. Whatever this terrible story is, the hero has the task of putting it right. . . . The hero, therefore, is the restorer of the healthy, conscious situation” (p. 45).

Something is wrong, and it must be discovered by a descent into the unconscious, exposing the trauma. The hero (or heroine), in touch with his intuitive unconscious and with the use of helpers and the avoidance of enemies, is able to unfreeze the blockage and achieve real psychic growth. While von Franz’s book is concerned with proving the existence of archetypes, we can also read into it a beginning of how she uses fairy tales clinically. As in dream analysis, each element is taken in turn and examined for its symbolic content. Von Franz believes that it is necessary to understand a comparative anatomy of myths and fairy tales, to know the range of how symbols appear in other folk material, a method she calls amplification. Only in this way can one know if a symbol is being used in a personal or in a universal way. Symbols must be placed in context and connected to other elements in the tale. Since fairy tales mirror the early thinking of the child, they attract fantasy and projection, allowing the child to work on his or her problem. Von Franz does not insist on a single, absolute meaning of a symbol. Since symbols are overdetermined, the use of fairy tales can soften hardened or stereotyped meanings and open up new perspectives in the imagination. Children often take possession of individual motifs in fairy tales, making them self-images expressing how they feel, often a feeling that cannot be expressed in words.

Von Franz thinks of interpretation as a translation from one language to another. In understanding a fairy tale, we aim for a satisfactory conclusion for the individual, what clicks, in the present culture. In other times or cultures, another conclusion may make sense. She is always aware of her own subjectivity, realizing that analysts are limited in what they can know. She often finds an imbalance in the psychic makeup of the hero, often between male and female aspects of the psyche, and a move toward balance by the conclusion. What the fairy tale offers is not consolation but wholeness of the personality.

Von Franz’s use of fairy tale analysis is evident in her interpretation of the Grimms’ *The Three Feathers* (1944b). An old king has three sons, two of whom are clever, and a third who is a simpleton. He needs to choose the son who will succeed him and rule the kingdom after his death. The king blows on three feathers, which fly off in different directions.

Each son must follow one of the feathers and, following the path it dictates, complete three tasks. Whoever is most successful at these tasks will become king. The clever brothers put little effort into their tasks and return with inferior goods. Simpleton's feather, meanwhile, leads him to a trap-door; opening it, he descends into the cave of an old she-toad, who gives him first a carpet, then a ring, and finally a beautiful maiden. The clever brothers, unwilling to admit defeat, demand a final task: that the three women the brothers have brought back are to jump through a hoop. But the peasant women the clever brothers have found fall and break their limbs, while the beautiful maiden brought back by Simpleton springs through the hoop as lightly as a deer, winning him the kingdom and, we presume, a beautiful wife.

The extensive detail and complexity of von Franz's thinking is striking in her work with this tale. I cannot in this space do justice to all the elements she discusses but will mention some of her more interesting themes.<sup>5</sup> Von Franz points out that the story starts with a king and three sons; there is no mention of a queen. The general problem for such tales is a gender imbalance—a dominating male attitude and a missing female element. Since in the Jungian worldview the masculine represents logos and rationality and the feminine represents feelings, we can immediately see an imbalance. We also see here an early feminist correction of the masculine biases of the early Freudians. This masculine imbalance, which von Franz calls the loss of the Eros principle—the feminine—is the driving force of the tale. The king incorporates in his body a divine principle, the totem spirit. Upon him rests the vitality and fertility of the community he rules. Von Franz sees the king as a symbol of the Self, a totality of the whole personality, which includes both instinctual urges and the ego complex. She introduces here a second theme: the king is old and has lost contact with the primal unconscious forces that provide life and energy, leaving the regal Self mechanical and dead. What is missing is the queen, representing the emotions and attachments that set a style of erotic behavior. In Jungian psychology, thinking and feeling function as a pair of opposites in what is called the four functions of consciousness.<sup>6</sup> The two clever brothers resemble the king; they, too, have a masculine imbalance. They make little effort, settle for the first objects they

<sup>5</sup>I am not a trained Jungian analyst, so my comments here are necessarily the view of an outsider.

<sup>6</sup>There are the two perceiving functions of Sensation and Intuition and two judging functions of Thinking and Feeling.

find, and have little contact with their unconscious. They say to themselves, “Why should we give ourselves a great deal of trouble searching?” (p. 320). Instead of a carpet, they bring back coarse handkerchiefs; instead of a ring, a bunch of old nails; instead of a beautiful woman, peasant girls lacking grace. The simpleton brother, as a hero, stays closer to the earth, signifying his openness to his feminine side and his descent into Mother Earth, the depths of the unconscious. Simpleton may appear stupid, but “he is simply spontaneous and naïve; he takes things as they are” (p. 46). His role is to restore the balance between the masculine Logos and the feminine Erotic. The tossing of the feathers by the king represents a giving up of ego determination, and a move toward the unconscious. Simpleton’s feather falls on the ground in front of him, directing him to descend into the earth, the holder of the unconscious, lost memories, and traditions. The toad, associated with both poison and aphrodisiacs, is always a feminine symbol; she is the Mother-Earth goddess, surrounded by her children, baby toads. Simpleton first asks for a carpet, life patterns woven together, then a ring, a symbol of connectedness, and finally a beautiful woman. Simpleton is given one of the babies, and a challenge. If he can accept the toad and the toad’s life, that is, the unconscious feeling of the feminine, she will become human and the hero will gain both a connection with his unconscious and a beautiful wife. At tale’s end, Simpleton marries the woman (we presume) and becomes king, thus restoring the balance missing at the beginning, and reestablishing the unconscious vital connections his aging father had lost.

Von Franz criticizes the Freudians for defining the concept of libido as only sexual, to her mind a narrow conception that leaves out the complexity of masculine and feminine. Nonetheless, she does allow a phallic symbol. When Simpleton asks for the beautiful woman, the toad-mother offers him a yellow carrot shaped in the form of a carriage. This von Franz does see as erotic; if the man has the courage to accept his sexual fantasies, his anima will come into the light. Jungian psychology attributes to every man and woman both a male and a female archetype that dwell within. Jung called the female figure in men the *anima* and the male figure in women the *animus*.<sup>7</sup> The *anima* and the *animus* have both creative aspects and negative influences, and, as we can see, they are important aspects of von Franz’s interpretation of *The Three Feathers*. She would say that the hero’s *anima*, his feminine side, has been repressed

<sup>7</sup>For an extended discussion of anima and animus, see von Franz (1964).

and needs to be reintegrated. In *The Three Feathers*, the aged king has lost contact with the primal life forces, and two of his sons squander their opportunity for growth by sticking doggedly to the superficial. By contrast, the hero holds himself open to the vitality of the unconscious and so achieves a more successful level of integration. Balance between masculine and feminine traits is an important aspect of maturity. Another important balance is that between conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. If conscious aspects are too dominant, the self is impoverished, but if the unconscious aspects are too dominant, impulsive and irrational behavior is common.<sup>8</sup>

Von Franz's primary intention in this book on fairy tales is to demonstrate the universality of symbol types, which she believes supports the existence of archetypes, or inherited patterns of symbols. Her topology of symbols is different from that of Freudians and emphasizes, as in the story analyzed above, masculine and feminine aspects of the personality. Whether or not we accept the concept of archetypes, we can appreciate the range and richness of the symbols she identifies and explicates.

### **THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT BY BRUNO BETTELHEIM**

Bruno Bettelheim was born in Vienna in 1903 to an upper-middle-class Jewish family (Cohler and Sanders 1991; Zimmerman 1991). His early intellectual interests were in philosophy and the arts, but he was drawn to psychoanalysis, and was analyzed by Richard Sterba between 1928 and 1931. He never received formal psychoanalytic training, however, and was not part of Freud's circle. He received a doctorate in art history from the University of Vienna 1938. For about six months in 1939, he was imprisoned at Buchenwald for involvement with left-wing politics.<sup>9</sup> Upon immigrating to the United States, Bettelheim joined the faculty at the University of Chicago, where eventually he was named Stella M. Rowley Distinguished Service Professor of Psychology. He served from 1944 to 1973 as director of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School of the

<sup>8</sup>Her stress on the unconscious is very similar to Loewald's idea of transference as a mutual communication between conscious and unconscious fantasies and emotions: "psychic health has to do with an optimal, although by no means necessarily conscious, communication between unconscious and preconscious, between the infantile, archaic stages and structures of the psychic apparatus and its later stages and structures of organization" (Loewald 1960, p. 32).

<sup>9</sup>It is unclear why he was released. Some sources cite bribes, others an amnesty or intervention by U.S. officials (Jacobson 2000).

University of Chicago, a school for very disturbed children and adolescents. His writings covered a lot of territory, including his experiences in the death camps, his work at the Orthogenic School, his theories of autism, and his studies of Freud. A great deal of controversy surrounds Bettelheim's career. Some of it—about his credentials and how he represented them, his work at the Orthogenic School, and his theory of autism—has little bearing on his thinking about fairy tales. But after his death, he was accused of plagiarizing the ideas of several eminent folklorists.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not this is true, Bettelheim's formulations remain an important development in psychoanalytic thought about fairy tales.

In fact, Bettelheim is probably best remembered for *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976),<sup>11</sup> written after his retirement from the Orthogenic School. The book was written for parents, and it suggested that the fairy tales they read to their children symbolically represent universal childhood fears and conflicts. It was widely reviewed, mostly positively, in magazines and newspapers meant for the general public. John Updike (1976) called it “a charming book about enchantment, a profound book about fairy tales” (p. 1), while Harold Bloom (1976) deemed it “a splendid achievement” and “a valid defense of fantasy” (p. 10). Interestingly, no psychoanalytic journal reviewed the book, though it has been referenced many times in the psychoanalytic literature.<sup>12</sup>

There is much to like in this book, especially when Bettelheim sticks to the general theme of why fairy tales are important to children. His point of reference is the child five to ten years old or so, and he shares the preoccupation with male oedipal development characteristic of his time. For Bettelheim, the basic unit of the fairy tale is the quest, and the quest for a solution to the oedipal dilemma is the one he studied most attentively. The action of the quest—leaving home, using one's wits, finding helpers,

<sup>10</sup>The more general charge was that Bettelheim did not acknowledge or credit scholarship in folk studies, education, and children's literature. This appears to be true; there are almost no footnotes and only a limited bibliography, making the book appear to be solely Bettelheim's creation. The more specific charge was that Bettelheim lifted sentences from the writings of the psychiatrist Julius Heuscher and the folklorist Alan Dundes without attribution, a charge that also appears true (Ben-Amos 1994). At best, this calls Bettelheim's scholarship and integrity into question.

<sup>11</sup>The book won the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism and the 1977 National Book Award for Contemporary Thought.

<sup>12</sup>Perhaps because the book was not considered psychoanalytic enough or perhaps because Bettelheim was not considered a trained psychoanalyst.

besting competition, winning the princess—mirrored internal oedipal conflict and the consolidation of personal power and sexuality,

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim works from a basic model of regression and recovery, and proposes that fairy tales help children find ways to deal with this universal experience. By regression, he means contact with unconscious fears:

The 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].

In other words, at one time or another in their lives, all children experience loneliness, fear, anger, or the feeling of being small or abandoned. Fairy tales, Bettelheim thinks, depict emotions in action and symbolic characters that speak directly to the child's developmental level. They put the child in touch with primitive things, animistic things; they stimulate fantasy by which the child can engage these "existential anxieties" and learn to imagine ways of resolving or coping with them. Bettelheim stresses the importance of recovery and reassurance; his is a teaching model. He understands the fairy tale as a road map into adult maturity, providing the experience of personal identity that comes out of emergence "from deep despair, escape from some great danger" (p. 143), and a reassurance that we will never be deserted. "Consolation is the greatest service the fairy tale can offer a child: the confidence that, despite all tribulations he has to suffer . . . not only will he succeed but the evil forces will be done away with and never again threaten his peace of mind" (p. 147).

Bettelheim thinks of the fairy tale as future-oriented: it "guides the child—in terms he can understand in both his conscious and his unconscious mind—to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying independent existence" (p. 11).



Bettelheim believes that, for the prepubertal child, there is not a clear difference between the animate and the inanimate.<sup>13</sup> Children are not surprised that objects and animals can speak. They do not yet have a rational, abstract, or scientific point of view; everything is still subjective, and concepts are highly personalized. In these terms, fairy tales are ordinary. They are about things that could happen to any of us—sibling rivalries, lack of parental love, parental remarriage. Moreover, the fairy tale, with its simplified structure, its suspension of adult rules about who and what is alive, and the magical space of its setting, encourages the free play of fantasy and expression of deep anxieties and fears. The splitting of figures into good and bad aspects helps the child manage anxiety, as he projects aspects of the self into different characters. The overall purpose of the fairy tale is to master and integrate anxieties, and to help create order out of chaos and fear.

Bettelheim is also sensitive to the child's experience of being read to. An adult may start with tales that he or she cared for when young, but the child will indicate by his response what is important to him. "It is always best to follow the child's lead" (p. 18). Bettelheim thinks the parent should not attempt to interpret symbolically, as the child can work it out pre-consciously; he believes that children should solve personal problems on their own, not have them explained. In fact, to explain the tale in any way is to decrease the pleasure it gives the child. It should speak to the unconscious and let the child find his own fantasy in it. However, a parent can share the enjoyment and the emotions of the shared experience.

Parents may tend to overlook a child's anxieties, as Bettelheim suggests, either because they are anxious about their own primitive side, or because they have lost touch with it. Yet the aggressive and sexual content of these emotions must not be watered down. Above all, Bettelheim believes that fairy tales teach step-by-step developmental solutions to the conflicts of growing up. A child must decide which tale and which aspect of a particular tale is psychically important at a given time or place; she will find different meanings depending on her developmental level.

In the book's second half, Bettelheim offers literary analysis of a number of fairy tales. I offer as an example his thoughts about *The Three Feathers* (Grimm and Grimm 1944b), which contrast sharply with von

<sup>13</sup>Bettelheim (p. 46) quotes Piaget's remark that "the child's thinking remains animistic until the age of puberty."

Franz's Jungian view. As Bettelheim sees it, the tale has a basic quest structure, the quest in this case being for a solution to the recapitulated oedipal themes of adolescence. These include the renunciation of childhood dependencies, of being "low man on the totem pole" (p. 106); successful management of oedipal rivalries with the father so as to eventually take his place in power; the switching of object ties from the mother to a suitable sexual partner; and the development of adult capacities for work and achievement.

For Bettelheim, the simpleton symbolizes the child, who is all too aware of feeling small and inadequate. He suggests that being "dumb" suggests an undifferentiated stage of existence, but that Simpleton, having an animal nature, is closer to the unconscious. This is a second theme, the topographic, the importance of contact with the unconscious. The meeting with the she-toad in the cave is a descent into the unconscious, an episode of authentic contact with the child's animal nature and the good aspects of his inner life. The simpleton is open to authentic contact with helpers; the toad becomes a kindly grandmother. In the end, it is Simpleton's ability to love the toad-mother, and the toad-wife he is given, that allows for the transformation. With her help, and with his own courage to undertake the quest, Simpleton solves the oedipal ties to his parents by achieving authentic separation, finding a satisfying sexual partner, and establishing the succession of generations. The pathway to adulthood is found both in authentic contact with unconscious emotions and in the ability to use appropriate help from others. What is important to Bettelheim is that the child must do something to earn his superiority. In fact, only after the child is assured of his eventual superiority can he admit to the identification with weakness.

The story has a third dimension as well, in its insistence that contact with our unconscious is not enough; the hero must "refine and sublimate the contents of the unconscious" (p. 110) and so turn ugly objects into beauty. Bettelheim speaks of the carpet and the ring as "works of great art" (p. 109), signifying the integration of the personality.

The two other brothers, by contrast, although older and apparently more clever than Simpleton, are "fixated on the surface of things" (p. 103). They too are undifferentiated, but unlike Simpleton their unconscious is blocked and they make no effort at gaining maturity; they are unable to learn from experience. What is the consoling message here? That even the child with feelings of inferiority can find success, that

maturation is hard work, that finding adult sexual satisfaction can be achieved, and that development from son into father and the succession of generations is possible.

We have analyses of *The Three Feathers* from both von Franz, a Jungian, and Bettelheim, a Freudian. Both would say that the fairy tale provides meaning to the child or adult reader. But what kind of meaning? A striking similarity between these authors is their emphasis on making contact with unconscious forces. For von Franz, the king is infertile, mechanical, and dead, while for Bettelheim the two clever brothers have “a much depleted ego” (p. 108) cut off from the richness of the id. Each sees the descent into the toad’s cave as making contact with creative possibilities and spontaneous growth. Differences appear when they consider conflictual themes. The key for von Franz is making contact with the primal unconscious: “Psychological interpretation is our way of telling stories; we still have the same need and we still crave the renewal that comes from understanding archetypal images” (p. 32).

Von Franz understands the mind as inherently gendered; the masculine side of the personality contains the Logos and the feminine side the Erotic. The boy hero, starting with a predominance of Logos, must find contact with the Erotic, to achieve an integration of his personality. We achieve integration by deep contact with archetypes missing in our personality.

The key for Bettelheim is consolation. Rather than deep contact, he emphasizes teaching. Like von Franz, he thinks that fairy tales speak to existential fears in all of us—desertion, loneliness, sexual attraction, becoming an adult: “Today, even more than in past times, the child needs the reassurance offered by the image of the isolated man who nevertheless is capable of achieving meaningful and rewarding relations with the world around him” (p. 11).

Consolation and reassurance, missing in von Franz, is the highest value. Consolation provides comfort in times of distress and reassurance that if the child can face his conflicts and struggle with them, he can succeed in finding happiness and satisfying relationships.

Bettelheim understands a generational conflict. The boy hero feels small and inferior to his father; he struggles with both admiration and rivalry, wanting to be big and possess a woman like his father. Bettelheim sees the fairy tale as a kind of road map of navigating from adolescence into adulthood.

How do we view Bettelheim's interpretations forty years later? Here are the views of two critics. Zipes (2002) is critical of a moralizing tendency in Bettelheim's work. He thinks that Bettelheim has a rigid set of psychoanalytic ideas that end up as prescriptive norms and values for children to achieve; the book reads like a "Sunday sermon" (p. 187) and ignores the many historical and societal pressures that weigh on the individual. But this may be more a criticism of psychoanalysis in general, as this is true of all the early psychoanalytic writers. In his focus on intrapsychic content, Bettelheim does not appreciate the many outside forces—poverty, racism, child abuse, alcoholism in the family—that can affect the lives of children. While fairy tales certainly describe trauma, Bettelheim does not acknowledge the effects of sexual or physical abuse, severe neglect, and the like. Zipes's criticism may also be a comment on the psychoanalysis of the day, which by today's standards was authoritarian, dogmatic, and unaware of the effects of subjectivity; the contributions of psychoanalytic gender theory, women's studies, trauma studies, and preoedipal developmental psychology, for example, were simply not available at the time. Bettelheim also fails to recognize that his reading of a fairy tale is conditioned by his unconscious and so may be an idiosyncratic reading that may not resonate with a given child, something we now take for granted. He never questions his analytic authority. Today we are keenly aware of the subjectivity of all of us; what any analyst understands and can interpret is limited by his or her experience, and his or her unconscious. Bettelheim will typically offer a single interpretation of a tale, presented as the truth, nowhere acknowledging that there are limits to what he or any other analyst can know. Bettelheim sees penis envy and castration complexes everywhere, a narrow and rigid reading of early Freud, but this is widely true for his generation of writers.

Further, I agree with Harold Bloom (1976), who felt that Bettelheim misses the daemonic energies found in fairy tales. Bloom finds that Bettelheim "tries to give rather straightforward Freudian readings that become less analyses of the texts, and rather more explanations of how and why young children should emerge with particular meanings to each story" (p. 11). To use *The Three Feathers* as an example, Bettelheim correctly points to low self-esteem, depreciation by siblings, and inadequacy, but he thinks Simpleton "does not mind this condition, since others thus expect nothing of him" (p. 103). Another reading, if we pitch the tale as preoedipal, might find shame, bitterness, and rivalry just below the

surface. We might ask about Simpleton's drive. His brothers get to go off on grand adventures, while his feather lands at his feet. He does have the courage to enter the cave, but then becomes largely passive, receiving magical gifts from the toad-mother. Von Franz situates the daemonic in the missing feminine aspect of Simpleton's personality, but in Bettelheim's oedipal version there is a curious lack of energy and striving. Bettelheim puts such emphasis on consolation and offering solutions that he downplays any fairy tale that does not fit this scheme. For example, commenting on *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (pp. 215–224), part of a group of cautionary tales that feature conflicts ending badly, he objects that there is neither recovery nor consolation in the story and says he cannot account for its enduring popularity.

Bettelheim is right that in *Goldilocks* there is no growth in the heroine and no consolation, but I think him misguided in putting the emphasis on solutions. What is important about fairy and folk tales is their deep immersion in primitive emotions such as hate, fear, envy, or sexual passion. "As told by Bettelheim," Bloom remarks, "a fairy tale may help a particular child, but the larger teaching of the tale, rather than the teller, is that the instinct for Sublime experience can never be satisfied" (p. 11). The Sublime, for Bloom, is the experience of transcendence, of the irrational, the daemonic; it is found in Freud (1910) in his view of the uncanny, that which "arouses dread and horror" (p. 219), "the opposite of what is familiar" (p. 220). For Freud, the uncanny is the return of a familiar primitive thought that has been repressed, "associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfilment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead" (p. 247). The fairy tale depicts the uncanny by setting the magical eruption of sexual and aggressive energies in the ordinary family and home. In a clinical analysis, our aim is uncovering and releasing blocked energies. With neurotic patients, we typically rely on them to find their own solutions.

Overall, when Bettelheim sticks with the experience of children and parents reading fairy tales together, he has much to say that is important and clinically useful. In this sense, he can still speak to new generations of readers of fairy tales. However, when he tries to point out specific psychoanalytic meanings, he sounds moralistic, arbitrary, and arrogant. In fact, he contradicts his own advice. He correctly notes that children need to find their own solutions, yet he goes on to suggest specific solutions they must find.

## CONCLUSION

I have outlined three different psychoanalytic approaches to the study of fairy tales and compared and contrasted them along a number of fault lines. One such fault line is the notion of a collective unconscious. Certainly Freud and Jung came out of a romantic tradition that believed in a kind of cultural unconscious rooted in a common geography and language. They both postulate a personal and a collective unconscious populated by inherited symbols that Freud called phylogenetic symbols, and Jung called archetypes. But of the three writers reviewed here, only von Franz uses the study of fairy tales to demonstrate the existence and centrality of archetypes in fairy tales. Róheim certainly shared Freud's belief in phylogenetic symbols, but the idea is not central in his work. Both of the Freudian writers, Róheim and Bettelheim, are interested only in personal symbols that arise out of experience and are unique to an individual.

A second fault line is clinical. Freud gave us an example of fairy tales used in a clinical setting, which can enter as associations either of the patient or the analyst. Bettelheim in the first part of his book discusses another clinical use, parents reading fairy tales to children. Von Franz implicitly uses clinical dream analysis as a template for the clinical use of fairy tales. For an extended example of how fairy tale material can be used clinically, see my paper on *Hansel and Gretel* (White 2015).

A third fault line is literary analysis. Freud, von Franz, and Bettelheim all give extensive literary analyses of individual tales, each according to the psychoanalytic theories to which they subscribe. Freud and Bettelheim emphasize oedipal issues, while von Franz finds gender imbalance. Róheim too focuses on oedipal issues, but he tends to mix in ideas from Melanie Klein.

Further, each writer finds a different psychological use for fairy tales. There is nothing in Freud or von Franz of the reassurance or solutions so prized by Bettelheim; they plunge into the depths. To my ears, Bettelheim, carefully following the early Freudian script, misses the daemonic and excessively tones down the tales; while understanding the importance of fairy tale fantasy in children's lives, he can end up seeming moralistic. Von Franz's emphasis on bisexuality and its vicissitudes broadens the scope of interpretation, striking a more modern chord, but waters down the sexual and aggressive energy.

And what about corroborative evidence? Freud, Róheim, and von Franz seek such evidence in their comparisons of multiple versions of individual tales, as well as similar tales from other cultures; they have an

encyclopedic knowledge of folk tales, fairy tales, myths, superstitions, and legends and can discuss at length multiple variants of a single fairy tale, whose existence Bettelheim ignores. The problem here, of course, is that in all cases this “evidence” is selected to corroborate a preexisting theory.

Leaving aside the question of archetypes (for which I see no scientific evidence), I propose an explanation that I think encompasses the therapeutic and the literary approaches. A fairy tale, I argue, depicts a psychic crisis resulting from trauma, followed by regression into more primitive emotional conflict, and finally a reemergence at a higher developmental level. That is, fairy tales describe a progression that all of us embark on many times over the course of life. But they provide a safe space (far away and long ago) in which primitive and split-off emotions can come alive in consciousness, then to be reexperienced, and worked through. They are therefore useful vehicles for projection. Through the use of magic, primitive fantasies involving themes like incest, cannibalism, envy, rage, and retribution can come to life and be linked to the individual patient’s or child’s personal unconscious. Multiple interpretive versions of individual tales are possible at different developmental levels, but the ultimate progression—from trauma to regression to consolidation and growth—remains much the same.

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