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1

Unburying Buried Fairy Tales

ADVENTURES OF A SCHOLARLY SCAVENGER



Ivan flies to conquer the tsar. (Illustrator unknown.)

ONCE UPON A TIME, when the famous scientist Albert Einstein worked at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, a tiny old woman approached him as he was walking home. She was schlepping a skinny young boy of about six who was dragging his feet.

“Meester Einstein,” she called out in a strong Central European accent. “Meester Einstein, stop your tracks and help me!”

Einstein was taken aback. He didn’t know what to do except stop.

“How can I help you?” he responded with a smile as he took out a pipe.

“Meester Einstein, stop. You shouldn’t smoke. It will kill you,” the old woman said.

Again, Einstein was taken aback, and he put away his pipe.

“Is that better?”

“Much better,” the old woman said as she drew her timid grandson toward Einstein. “Jaky, stop fiddling and listen to this great man.”

Now she turned her attention back to Einstein.

“Meester Einstein, I want you should tell me what my grandson must do to become educated like you. I want he should be a great scientist.”

Einstein didn’t hesitate with his reply. “Fairy tales. He should read fairy tales.”

“All right,” the woman replied. “But what then? What should he read after that?”

“More fairy tales,” Einstein stated bluntly. He took out his pipe and continued walking toward his home.

The old woman was silent for a moment, but then she grabbed hold of Jaky’s hand and began dragging him through the park again. Suddenly, she stopped.

“You heard, Jaky!” She pointed her finger at the frightened boy. “You heard what the great man said! Read fairy tales! Do what the man said, or God help you!”

And she whisked her grandson away.

This is a “true” tall tale, not a fairy tale. I must confess that the boy in this preposterous anecdote was me, and I have lived under Einstein’s spell ever since my momentous encounter with the great man in 1943. Or perhaps one could call the spell my grandmother’s curse. Whether spell or curse, I can’t recall not imbibing fairy tales.

They are in my blood. Ever since my grandmother made her fateful introduction, I have constantly collected fairy tales, read them, written them, studied them, and even lived them. My wife thinks I am like the golden boy of fairy tales—that is, she thinks that Lady Fortuna watches over me and changes everything I touch into gold. She also thinks that I'm a fairy-tale junkie. Addicted. For years, I have spent most of my research time at library sales, auctions, flea markets, garbage dumps, and garage sales and in secondhand bookstores, musty libraries, book stalls, movie theaters, cellars, attics, and museums. My daughter, who has tolerated my tale-telling and fairy-tale obsession since she was born, has offered to ship me off and pay for a fairy-tale detox program run by rational, stringent, down-to-earth social workers. Lately, however, she has concluded that I'm hopeless and helpless.

I may be helpless, but I'm not hopeless. The hope embedded in fairy tales has driven me throughout my life, and perhaps it is hope that drove Einstein. There is something peculiar about fairy tales, the best of fairy tales, that propels me. Moreover, I am not alone: I have learned about the complexities of life through these wonder narratives, and especially through buried treasures that I have discovered and decided to share with interested readers. But before I talk about these fairy-tale treasures, I want to theorize a bit about why we cannot do without fairy-tale narratives and art, and why my obsession with fairy tales might be a sane response to a sick world.

Recently, I have become interested in the science of the brain and its ability to store and disseminate all sorts of tales. As Jerome Bruner, the renowned psychologist, has remarked:

We live in a sea of stories, and like the fish who (according to the proverb) will be the last to discover water, we have our own difficulty grasping what it is like to swim in stories. It is not that we lack competence in creating our narrative accounts of reality—far from it. We are, if anything, too expert. Our problem, rather, is achieving consciousness of what we so easily do automatically, the ancient problem of *prise de conscience*.¹

In short, Bruner wants to understand the process of human cognition, how we tell tales to make sense of the world, and how we become aware of ourselves and our environment. As we know, human cognition is the result of mental activity of the brain (a module, a faculty, a capability) that processes experience through seeing, listening, and touching. It is knowledge based on familiarity with the environment and social relations. Cognition is formed through a process of thought embodied in individuals. The cognitive faculty of the brain is the nodal point for the gathering and exchange of information and for the application of the knowledge gathered in different situations. Cognition or cognitive processes can be natural or artificial, conscious and unconscious. The concept of cognition varies in different fields such as psychology, linguistics, philosophy, neurology, and so on. We recognize and know the world through experience, especially through the brain. As Paul Armstrong has astutely demonstrated, the brain enables us to become conscious of the meaning of stories.² We know the world through human communication based on cooperation. We do not know the world alone. We touch and are touched by other humans and by our environments.

In *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Michael Tomasello has written:

Individual human beings are able to create culturally significant artifacts only if they receive significant amounts of assistance from other human beings and social institutions. . . . Broadly speaking, cultural transmission is a moderately common evolutionary process that enables individual organisms to save much time and effort, not to mention risk, by exploiting the already existing knowledge and skills of conspecifics.³

By “conspecifics,” Tomasello means other human beings with whom we share a particular environment. To adapt to the environment, human beings are able to pool their cognitive resources in ways that other animal species are not, through imitative learning, instructed learning, and collaborative learning. These learning

processes begin when children are in their infancy, as early as nine months, when they realize that other human beings have intentions. Children must then contend with these intentions and learn from them. Here linguistic symbols are extremely important because they “embody the ways that previous generations have found it useful to categorize and construe the world for purposes of interpersonal communication.”⁴

As Tomasello maintains, “Language is a form of cognition; it is packaged for the purposes of interpersonal communication. Human beings want to share experience with one another and so, over time, they have created symbolic conventions for doing that. . . . Given that the major function of language is to manipulate the attention of other persons—that is, to induce them to take a certain perspective on a phenomenon—we can think of linguistic symbols and constructions as nothing other than symbolic artifacts that a child’s forbears have bequeathed to her for this purpose. In learning to use these symbolic artifacts, and thus internalizing the perspectives behind them, the child comes to conceptualize the world in the way that the creators of the artifacts did.”⁵

Tomasello’s ideas about human communication and human cognition have been influenced to a certain extent by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s highly significant book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They maintain:

A great deal of everyday, conventional language is metaphorical, and the metaphorical meanings are given by conceptual metaphorical mappings that ultimately arise from correlations in our embodied experience. . . . In short, metaphor is a natural phenomenon. Conceptual metaphor is a natural part of human thought, and linguistic metaphor is a natural part of human language. Moreover, which metaphors we have and what they mean depend on the nature of our bodies, our interactions in the physical environment, and our social and cultural practices. Every question about the nature of conceptual metaphor and its role in thought and language is an empirical question.⁶

As a narrative metaphor or metaphorical pattern, a fairy tale, like other short narratives— anecdotes, jokes, legends, myths, warning tales, and so on— stems from historically conditioned lived experience that fosters a reaction in our brains, and this experience is articulated through symbols that endow it with significance. Fairy tales are relevant because they pass on information vital for human adaptation to changing environments. I do not want to privilege the fairy tale, or more precisely, the oral wonder tale as the only type of narrative or the best means by which we communicate our experiences and learn from one another. But it does seem to me that the fairy tale offers a metaphorical means through which we can gain distance from our experiences, sort them out, and articulate or enunciate their significance for us and for other people in our environment.

Over thousands of years, fairy tales have come to form a linguistic type, a genre, a means by which we seek to understand and contend with our environment, to find our place in it. There are many types, genres, and means of narration. Our predilection for certain fairy tales reveals something about ourselves and our cultures. Every family and society in the world has developed types, genres, and communicative means that produce cultural patterns and enable people to identify themselves and grasp the world around them. Sometimes these communicative means or media have contributed to the formation of spectacles and illusions that prevent us from understanding our empirical experiences. Some critics have proposed that cultural industries have formed, and these industries systematically obfuscate or cloud our vision of the world and generate metaphors that do not lead to cognition or an understanding of how societies function. We live in a conflicted world, a world filled with conflicts, and fairy tales can be used by all of us for enlightenment or abused by small groups of powerful people who seek domination.

In my own life, I have been both a scholar of fairy tales and an opportunistic scavenger. According to the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, a scavenger in 1503 was “an officer whose duty was to take

(to ‘scavage’), that is, to take tolls and later to keep the streets clean. It was a person whose employment was to clean streets by scraping or sweeping together and removing dirt. One who collects filth; one who does dirty work. A scavenger is also a collector of junk and one who labors for the removal of public evils.”⁷ Some philosophers have claimed that we can learn more about a society by collecting and studying its refuse than by collecting and studying its fine art and accomplishments. There is a great deal of truth to that proposition, and I like to consider myself as a scavenger who unearths discarded and forgotten tales that speak to crucial questions of human struggles and social conflicts. I like to collect buried tales that contain gems filled with hope and that illuminate a path to a better world. Ever since I was young, I have been an excavator as well as a scavenger—digging for inspiring tales that shed light on the human condition and penetrate the illusions of the society of the spectacle. Like a fairy-tale hero, quite often the little underdog, I have learned to grab hold of opportunities and make the most of them. Addicted as I am, I follow each and every clue to link the fairy tales to one another and to the lives of forgotten storytellers and artists—people and tales living on the edge of societies, in the nooks and crannies. I travel widely, learn different languages, meet all kinds of people, and their creations excite my curiosity and keep me wondering about serendipity in my life—how we all need serendipity.

My scholarly work has always stemmed from the side of me that has questioned what I am doing and why. Fortunately, this critical side has led me to appreciate and analyze the virtues of the discarded, the marginal, and the dispossessed that, for me, are buried treasures.

My scavenger and excavation work began in earnest in the late 1970s, when I was writing a critical study called *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. Around that time, I read and was revolted by Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment*, which really should be called the misuses of enchantment, and sheds light on the weaknesses of psychology and psychiatry.

My exposure to Bettelheim, and also to Freud, led me to conduct storytelling in public schools to test his and my own theories of how children relate to fairy tales. Aside from exploring how children react to, comprehend, and use traditional fairy tales, I wanted to introduce children to variants of the classical tales and compare their different perspectives on these tales. The storytelling project also led me to a research project: to gather as many versions and variants of “Little Red Riding Hood” as I could to see whether Bettelheim’s pseudo-Freudian interpretation of the tale—which, for him, represented a simplistic oedipal conflict—held any water compared to my approach, which viewed the tale as one about rape, in which girls are explicitly declared responsible for their own violation. In this case, it is important to bear in mind that Perrault ended his “classical” version of the tale by insisting that little girls who invite wolves into their parlors deserve what they get!

My scavenging and excavating eventually led me to produce *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1983), in which I published thirty-five different versions of the tale type from the seven hundred or more that I had collected and continue to collect.⁸ Important for me in my comparative study were the buried treasures—that is, the neglected fairy tales that demonstrated different modes of storytelling and suggested alternatives to Red Riding Hood’s struggle with her violator. Two of the tales that struck me most, especially because I used them in my role as storyteller with children and adults, were Catherine Storr’s “Little Polly Riding Hood” (1955) and Gianni Rodari’s “Little Green Riding Hood” (1973). Both had been unknown to me and the American reading public, as were a good many other “Red Riding Hood” versions published in my book.

Catherine Storr (1913–2001) is not well known in North America. She worked as a psychologist from 1948 until 1962 and then devoted herself full-time to writing while also working as an editor for Penguin Books. A prodigious writer, she was an early feminist and wrote four popular books in the UK about Polly and the

wolf, beginning with *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf* (1955) and concluding with *Last Stories of Polly and the Wolf* (1990). All her fairy tales in these volumes are innovative revisions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” and they follow the same plot line by demonstrating how brilliantly Polly escapes the predatory wolf. It is because the wolf follows the plot laid out by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm that he stumbles and reveals himself as a buffoon. Storr’s play with narrative conventions and cultural expectations transforms the tales into subtle learning games that show how anachronistic views of gender and domination are not applicable in today’s real world. I was so fond of “Little Polly Riding Hood” that I republished it in my collection *The Outspoken Princess and the Gentle Knight* (1994), which was illustrated by the wonderfully subversive Canadian artist Stéphane Poulin. Incidentally, this book contained unique fairy tales, more treasures by Ernest Hemingway, Jack Sendak, Richard Schickel, John Gardner, Lloyd Alexander, and A. S. Byatt among others.

Gianni Rodari’s approach in “Little Green Riding Hood” is somewhat different from Storr’s, although he, too, wished to stimulate children to play with words and thus with alternatives in their own worlds. “Little Green Riding Hood” reads as follows:

Once upon a time there was a little girl called Little Yellow Riding Hood.

“No! Red Riding Hood!”

“Oh yes, Red Riding Hood. Well, her mother called her one day and said: ‘Listen, Little Green Riding Hood—’”

“No! Red!”

“Oh, yes! Red. I want you to go to your aunt Diomira and take her a bunch of these potatoes.”

“No! You should say: ‘Go to Grandma and take her these cakes.’”

“All right. So the little girl went into the woods and met a giraffe.”

“You’re confusing everything! She met a wolf, not a giraffe!”

“And the wolf asked her: ‘What’s six times eight?’”

“Not at all! The wolf asked her where she was going.”

“You’re right. And Little Black Riding Hood replied—”

“It was Little Red Riding Hood. Red, red, red!!!”

“Yes, indeed, and she replied: ‘I’m going to the market to buy some tomatoes.’”

“Not in your wildest dreams! She said: ‘I’m going to my grandma who’s sick, but I don’t know my way any longer.’”

“Of course! And the horse said—”

“What horse? It was a wolf.”

“Certainly. And this is what it said: ‘Take the 75 tram, get out at the main square, turn right, and you’ll find three steps with three quarters on them. Leave the steps where they are, but pick up the three quarters, and buy yourself a pack of chewing gum.’”

“Grandpa, you really don’t know how to tell stories. You always make mistakes. But all the same, I wouldn’t mind buying some chewing gum.”

“All right. Here’s the money.”

And her grandpa turned back to read his newspaper.

Rodari, the foremost writer for children in Italy in the twentieth century, more famous and more gifted than Carlo Collodi (1826–1890), believed that we don’t just learn, but also invent and create, from our mistakes. He articulated his profound ideas in a book called *Grammatica della fantasia* (1973), which I translated as *The Grammar of Fantasy* in 1996. Rodari, who had joined the Italian Resistance during World War II, was an avid pacifist, and his ideas and methods have had a profound influence on my work.

Rodari’s perspective was very close to that of the 1920s socialists, anarchists, and communists who wrote the tales I collected as *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*.⁹ Most of the tales were explicitly written for children to raise and challenge their political consciousness, and none had ever been translated into English before. Some of the writers, such as Kurt Schwitters and Béla

Balázs, were well known, as were illustrators George Grosz and John Heartfield. To give a flavor of the book, here is one short tale by the woefully neglected Danish author Carl Ewald (1856–1908).

A Fairy Tale about God and Kings

Once upon a time the people became so sick and tired of their kings that they decided to send some deputies to God to ask for his help against their monarchs.

The deputies arrived at the gates of heaven and were allowed to enter heaven in turn. But when the speaker of the group presented their case, God shook his head in surprise and said, “I don’t understand one word you’ve said. I never gave you kings.”

The entire group began to yell in confusion that the earth was full of kings, all of whom declared that they ruled with God’s blessings.

“I don’t know a thing about this!” God responded. “I created you all equal. I made you in my image. Good-bye!”

So ended the audience with God. But the deputies sat down in front of the gates of heaven and shed bitter tears. When God learned about this, he took pity on them and let them enter heaven again. Then he summoned an archangel and said, “Get the book in which I listed all of the plagues that were to fall upon human beings if they sinned, and check to see whether I wrote anything about kings there.”

The book was very thick, so the angel needed an entire day to complete his task. In the evening, when he was finished, he reported to the Lord that he had found nothing. So the deputies were led before God, who declared, “I don’t know a thing about kings. Good-bye!”

The poor deputies became so desperate that God took pity on them once again. And again he summoned the angel and said to him, “Get the books in which I’ve recorded everything human beings must suffer for their foolish prayers so that they

might learn that my teachings are wiser than theirs. Check to see whether I wrote anything about kings there.”

And the angel did as he was commanded. However, he had to read twelve thick books. It took him twelve days to finish the work. And he found nothing. So God granted the deputies an audience for the last time and said, “You’ll have to return home without fulfilling your mission. There’s nothing I can do for you. Kings are your own invention, and if you’re sick and tired of them, then you must find your own way to get rid of them.”¹⁰

I later decided to translate and edit a volume of Kurt Schwitters’s fairy tales called *Lucky Hans and Other Merz Fairy Tales* (2009) because the remarkable Schwitters, known primarily as one of the most gifted Dadaist painters of the 1920s and 1930s, also wrote unusual fairy tales that were surrealist and carnivalesque. All the tales were superbly illustrated by the painter/artist Irvine Peacock, who, like Grosz, captured the temper of the 1920s with scurrilous humor. Irony was the hallmark of Schwitters’s works, and he also wrote and illustrated three experimental and ironic fairy tales for children between 1922 and 1924.

All I need is a trace or some artifact to send me on an excavation mission. One spark was provided by a literary agent who asked whether I would be interested in translating Sibylle von Olfers’s *Etwas von den Wurzelkindern* (Something about the Mandrakes), a 1906 fairy-tale picture book that was popular in Germany but had never received its due recognition in the UK or North America. Upon reading it, I discovered it to be a marvelous book about the relationship of children to nature, as good as, if not better than, *Goodnight Moon*, and I translated it in 2007. This collaboration was unusual because the illustrations are taken from a quilt by Sieglinde Schoen Smith, and the new title, *Mother Earth and Her Children: A Quilted Fairy Tale*, indicates the way I interpreted a tender tale written for children at the beginning of the twentieth century.

More recently, my work on two fairy-tale film books led to some stunning discoveries as I traced the sources of the films to fairy-tale texts—sometimes in translation, sometimes in English—often accompanied by provocative illustrations. Three film adaptations of fairy tales that compelled me to excavate the source materials in one form or another are *The Humpbacked Horse* (1976) directed by the Russian Ivan Ivanov-Vano, *King Lavra* (1948) directed by the Czech Karel Zeman, and *The Fifty-First Dragon* (1954) directed by the American Peter Burness.

The Humpbacked Horse was the first Russian animated feature ever produced, and it was a popular success when it appeared in 1947 and was later remade in 1976. The film's story has deep roots not only in the Russian folk and literary tradition but also in many other cultures. Known by folklorists as tale type ATU 530 "The Clever Horse,"¹¹ hundreds if not thousands of oral and literary versions and variants exist worldwide. Typically, the plot is based on a combination of tales: "The Godchild of the King and the Unfaithful Companion," "The Golden-Haired Maiden," and "The Clever Horse." A peasant boy, often the youngest of three brothers, goes on a search for a godfather or king. He manages to obtain a magic horse by performing a valorous deed. Along the way, he picks up a glimmering feather or a golden hair against the horse's wishes. When he eventually arrives at the king's court, he is appointed stable boy because he is the only one who can really control the horses. A jealous court official or servant wants to get rid of the peasant boy, who has become a favorite of the king, and falsely reports that the boy boasted he could find the bird that had lost the flaming feather, bring the king a golden-haired maiden to become his bride, and perform other impossible tasks. Despite the immense difficulties of the tasks, the peasant boy accomplishes them with the help of the magic horse. When the princess is captured, she is unwilling to marry the king unless he or the peasant boy is tested by fire, boiling water/milk, or the guillotine. The king demands that the boy submit to the test first, and the magic horse

prevents the boy from being killed. Then the king must prove that he is as valorous as the peasant boy by completing the tests. He fails, however. The princess marries the peasant boy, or the magic horse turns into a princess and weds him.

The great flexibility of “The Clever Horse” tale type’s structure, which allows the narrator to use a variety of recognizable motifs, has sparked the imagination of many authors. In 1834, the Russian poet Pyotr Pavolich Yershov (1815–1869) adapted an oral tale and combined it with another Russian folk tale, “Prince Ivan, Firebird and the Grey Wolf,” to form his fascinating poem “The Humpbacked Horse,” which became famous in his day and is still considered a classical fairy-tale poem in Russia, even though it has been “relegated” to the realm of children’s literature.¹² During the nineteenth century, the poem was considered somewhat seditious because it ridicules the tsar, and for a time, it could be published only with certain sections omitted. Arthur Saint-Léon used the poem as the basis of a ballet with music by Cesare Pugni for the Imperial Ballet in 1864, and it has been performed by different companies up through the twenty-first century.

Clearly, “The Humpbacked Horse” is deeply rooted in Russian culture, and thus it was not by chance that Ivanov-Vano (1900–1987) decided to animate it and emphasize its Russian heritage. In the process, he made some important changes, effacing the Christian references, depicting the tsar as a blundering buffoon, and exaggerating the role of chamberlain as vindictive villain. The poem, which Yershov wrote in charming but elevated Russian verse, is transformed in comic-strip style to appeal to young people and is filled with traditional Russian medieval architecture, design, and ornaments to evoke an idyllic past. An interesting English translation of Yershov’s poem with illustrations by Nikolai Kochergin published in 1976 offers another traditional Russian perspective on a tale worth telling.

Yet the Czechs have never been outdone by the Russians. Karel Zeman (1910–1989), along with marvelous illustrator and puppeteer Jirí Trnka (1812–1869), was regarded as one of the great Czech

pioneers of animation, and among his fascinating animation and live-action films is *King Lavra* (*Král Lavra*). It is not by chance that Zeman chose to animate the satirical poem “King Lavra,” written by Karel Havlicek Borovsky (1821–1856), a teacher and journalist exiled from Czechoslovakia at one point because of his political stance. Dedicated to the liberal national cause of the Czechs, Borovsky was critical of the Russians and the Czech ruling classes; his poem basically mocked them as jackasses. Zeman’s adaptation follows the broad outlines of Borovsky’s work while making it even more satirical. The narrative concerns a king with donkey ears: ashamed of them, he grows his hair very long. Since he needs a haircut every now and then, he orders a barber to come to the palace. Since each barber who comes inevitably discovers the donkey ears, the king has him beheaded. After his executioner has chopped off nine heads, King Lavra orders yet another barber to give him a haircut. Fortunately, this young barber is working on the executioner’s hair when the king’s order is sent. The barber quickly ties up the executioner, and after he goes to the king and gives him the haircut, the king cannot have him executed. The king makes the barber swear that he will never tell a soul about the donkey ears. The barber agrees and is given a medal. However, the young man is haunted by the truth and tells the secret to some green twines growing in a field. Later, after some musicians come to the court and there is a celebration, one of the twines that has become a string makes a sound like a donkey, and the king’s ears pop out from beneath his crown. Immediately, the king hides under the table. To his surprise, his wealthy party guests clap and pander to him. The king realizes that he need not be ashamed of his ears and returns to the feast at the table. However, he bans the folk musicians, who set off into the countryside. The king wants to include the young barber in the feast and as part of his retinue, but the barber discards his medal of honor and runs off to join the musicians.

Zeman’s stop-motion film uses wooden puppets that have tube-like arms and legs, perhaps made from pipe cleaners. They move

brilliantly to classical music throughout the film, and there is absolutely no dialogue. The music determines the rhythms of the puppets' gestures and movements. The facial expressions reveal their thoughts. In America, the tale was adapted and illustrated by Marjorie Auerbach in 1964. If one compares her illustrations with shots from the film, we can see that she was somewhat influenced by Zeman. However, she changed the story so that there is a happy ending. Zeman was much more radical and refused to make compromises with kings—something all the Disney-like American films are glad to do. Zeman implies that the barbers are suffering the fate of those good people who do not resist tyranny. He makes a mockery of authoritarianism, and although the king remains in power at the end, he has been exposed as a jackass, as are the sycophants who applaud him. All this is insufferable for the young barber. Unwilling to collaborate, he joins the folk musicians in the final image, a signal of resistance.

The Fifty-First Dragon, a UPA cartoon, was also a short film of resistance based on a fairy tale of resistance. Directed by Pete Burness (1904–1969) in 1954, it continued the UPA's "antiviolent" and subtle carnivalesque fairy-tale program. (It is important to bear in mind that these films were produced during the McCarthy witch hunt, anticommunist hearings, and the Cold War.) Written by the gifted journalist Heywood Broun (1888–1939) in 1919, soon after World War I, and published in the *New York Tribune*, "The Fifty-First Dragon" begins as follows:

Of all the pupils at knight school Gawaine le Coeur-Hardy was among the least promising. He was tall and sturdy, but his instructors soon discovered that he lacked spirit. He would hide in the woods when the jousting class was called, although his companions and members of the faculty sought to appeal to his better nature by shouting to him to come out and break his neck like a man. Even when they told him that the lances were padded, the horses no more than ponies and the field unusually soft for late autumn, Gawaine refused to grow enthusiastic. The

Headmaster and the Assistant Professor of Pleasance were discussing the case one spring afternoon and the Assistant Professor could see no remedy but expulsion.

“No,” said the Headmaster, as he looked at the purple hills which ringed the school, “I think I’ll train him to slay dragons.”¹³

Indeed, Gawaine, a mild-mannered and not very bright knight, learns the magic word “Rumplesnitz” to give him confidence, and he becomes an expert killer. He slaughters fifty dragons until he learns that the magic word is not magical at all, and then he becomes fearful. Nevertheless, the Headmaster drags him to the forest so that he will kill his fifty-first dragon, and from that day on, he is never seen again. Though it is clear that he died from fright and that a dragon devoured him, the Headmaster conceals the truth and honors him as a hero.

The drawings in this UPA cartoon are characteristically sparse and depict the major characters and dragons with very little background. The narrator, who recounts Gawaine’s transformation, maintains an “objective” subtle tone, as Gawaine becomes a hideous if not craven killer. In unthinkingly serving the school as a killer knight, he becomes a victim of its manipulative practices and is unaware that his glory is false. Although Broun, a socialist, wrote his tale as a commentary on the treatment of American soldiers during World War I, the UPA animators certainly had the Korean War in mind. In 1968, Ed Emberley (b. 1931), one of America’s finest artists, produced an illustrated version of Broun’s work, undoubtedly to comment on the senselessness of the Vietnam War.

Many of the films based on oral and literary fairy tales deal with tyranny and war. The twentieth century began with an explosion and expansion of wars that have continued into the twenty-first century; endless wars, big and small, on every continent. These wars bring immense distress and darkness with them. Of course, there have been conflicts and wars ever since humans began creating weapons, whether to survive or to exercise power for domination. But as civilization has “progressed,” the wars have become more

brutal and barbarian and the effects of efficient weapons and tactics even greater. There is practically no way to prevent these wars, even though most people would prefer not to experience them. Resistance seems almost futile, and if there is recourse, it appears that our only hope is to record and contest warmongers through narratives of many different kinds, to spread tales of resistance.

Fairy tales have never shied away from wars and have posed questions about abusive power, injustice, and exploitation. The very best of them are concerned with profound human struggles and seek to provide hope despite the darkness that surrounds their very creation and production. At the very basis of all fairy tales is the urge to shed light on conflicts that keep tearing at our souls, not to mention tearing up bodies. The worst of fairy-tale films belong to the society of the spectacle and generate illusions that divert us from what we need most: a bit of compassion, illumination, and hope. Compassion for our troubled compatriots, illumination about the causes of our conflicts, hope that we may enjoy epiphanies that deepen the meaning of our lives. The best of fairy tales are, in my opinion, all about compassion, illumination, and hope. What other reason than this do I need to pursue my work as scholarly scavenger?

I N D E X

Note: Page numbers in *italic type* indicate illustrations.

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