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From the Spoken to the Written:

The Changing Cultural Role of Folk and Fairy Tales

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[That] other world…gets into our heads and becomes necessary – a world of suns and moons and forests, of princesses and goose girls, of old men and women, benign and malign, of talking birds and flying horses, magic roses and magic puddings, turnips and pigs, impenetrable castles and petrification, glass mountains and glass coffins, poisonous apples and blinding thorns, ogres and imps, spindles and spun gold, tasks and prohibitions, danger and comfort (for the good people) after it. It is very odd – when you come to think of it – that human beings in all sorts of societies, ancient and modern, have needed these untrue stories…There is neither explanation nor teaching in the true wonder tale.

Byatt, 2004

Why do human societies tell and preserve folk and fairy tales? The diversity, fluidity, and sometimes apparently contrary versions of these tales, told and retold, written and rewritten, fragmented by memory and misremembered into new tales, seem to confound any attempts at offering a comprehensive answer to this question. Modern interpreters have adopted widely diverging approaches in their analyses of the content, structure, and symbolism of folk and fairy tales, in their various efforts to unearth the "real meaning" hidden beneath the surface, or to account for the persistence of folk and fairy tales over many centuries. Psychoanalytic approaches, for example, suggest an almost utilitarian role for such tales, proposing that they offer individuals or groups symbolic representations of personal conflicts. One well-known proponent of this school is Bruno Bettelheim, who suggests that fairy tales function as a tool for "master[ing] the psychological problems of growing up" and "fostering…personality development" (6, 12). Sociological interpretations meanwhile posit that tales are best understood as text – that their ongoing function is to communicate shared values within a group, or to contribute to social stability or to promote and maintain the social status quo. Exemplifying this approach are numerous feminist critiques of folk and fairy tales such as that offered by Marcia

Lieberman, who argues that "millions of women must surely have formed their psychological self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behaviour would be rewarded, and of the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favourite fairy tales" (Stone 396). A third approach to investigating the meaning of folk and fairy tales is the historic, in which interpreters seek the Ur-text of folk and fairy tales, arguing that their meaning can only be understood through discerning their original historical context. In a discussion of the presentation of beasts and monsters in European folk and fairy tales, for example, Marina Warner seeks the original setting for "fear of beasts," and argues that "the threat of animals was a real and frightening one in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (416).

While these and other approaches may indeed offer insight into *some* tales or groups of tales, the hypotheses they generate can often be challenged with counter-examples of tales that do not fit the given classificatory framework. The problem with such approaches to investigating the social or cultural roles of folk and fairy tales may be the overwhelming interpretive focus on their *content*, while the more important cultural role or function of tales might rather derive from the acts of their *(re)telling* or *transmission*.

Furthermore, if the different models of *telling* tales has been most important in shaping their cultural role, how did the transcription of folk and fairy tales – the shift from oral to written – change this role? This paper explores the cultural roles of tale-telling, and how these roles may have been transformed by the transcription of folk and fairy tales into "literature," with reference to Paul Connerton's ideas of habit-memory and collective identity, Benedict Anderson's writing on the rise of print capitalism, and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and the power of language.

From one perspective, oral tale-telling can be viewed as a form of ritual performance. AS Byatt captures the essence of such performativity in her novel *Possession*, in journal entries (356) made by a young Breton woman, who writes of the peasant housekeeper, Gode:

> *Gode's stories, even more than my father's, depend on the outer dark and the closeness, indoors, of tellers and listeners…when she tells, she will raise her hands, or throw back her head, or shake her shawl, and long tattered shadows race across the ceiling…Gode's telling is a play with all these things, with the firelight and the gesturing shadows and the streamers of light and dark – she brings all their movements together as I imagine the leader of an orchestra may.*

The *telling* of tales is, by necessity, a social and collective activity, one that requires both tellers and listeners – unlike the reading of written tales, which can take place "in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull" (Anderson 35). In discussing the cultural role of oral tale-telling, it is useful to consider how Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on cultural production seem to be relevant to the "literary art" of folk and fairy tales. Consistent with the recognition of tale-telling as a social activity, Bourdieu opposes theories of the production of "art" that position individual creativity at the heart of the enterprise (Jenkins). Regarding language (which presumably includes literature and narrative), Bourdieu also argues that the simple utterance of words does not automatically imbue those words with power and meaning (what Austin had called "illocutionary force") (1991); rather, he emphasizes the importance of the social context of artistic production and of language in creating meaning, pointing out that cultural production must produce not only "the object itself in its materiality" (here, the tale) "but also the value of this object" (Bourdieu 1993, 164). Rather than simply creating fixed "story products", oral tale-telling (and, importantly, *re*telling) was a form of ritual performance or ritual discourse that functioned to construct and reproduce, as Bourdieu suggests, "a universe of belief" (1993, 164) – a culture.

From the simplest perspective, the ritualistic nature of tale-telling is suggested by historical records that connect instances of story-telling with the marking of particular celebrations or times of year. Byatt illustrates this in *Possession*, for example, by explicitly linking the (re)telling of a particular genre of Breton Celtic tales to the "Black Month" (November). The ritualistic nature of even nightly domestic story-telling can be inferred from Lukes' definition of ritual, which characterizes it as "rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance" (291).

Why might the performative and ritualistic features of tale-telling be important? Connerton argues that performative rites – including ritual speech acts – contribute to the construction of social or collective memory: the collective habit-memory of a group. Habit-memory is not "historical memory" (the remembering of a series of historical events), nor is it "cognitive memory" (the conscious remembering of facts, data, or knowledge). Instead, it is characterized as an almost unconscious and socially-embedded ability to reproduce a certain kind of "performance". Thus, performative ritual itself is a kind of re-remembering, an important re-enactment of the ritual *itself,* and not necessarily, if ever, a re-enactment of a prototypic or historic event. Similarly, the performance of oral story-telling might be considered to be a re-enactment of past story-telling, and not necessarily the repeat transmission of a specialized message carried in the content details of the tale itself.

Some of the features that are shared by different kinds of performative ritual contribute to their mnemonic effect, tying together memory, history, and shared knowledge. The performative utterances that Connerton identifies in, for example, religious rituals, such as the liturgy of Catholic mass, are also identifiable motifs in folk and fairy tales: curses, blessings, and oaths

(58). Also important is the stylistic formalism of the *language* of ritual performance. In both religious ritual and folk and fairy tales, the choice of words, syntax and style is markedly more restricted than in everyday language. Certain phrases or word combinations, and certain linkages between phrases or ideas, have a high preference ("Once upon a time"… "they all lived happily ever after"). Indeed, Connerton explicitly notes the existence of these linguistic features in a large body of oral world literatures and cites research that has demonstrated the importance of these features as mnemonic devices (60).

Interestingly, Connerton also stresses the importance of the *body* in ritual performance, one of the elements that often sets oral tale-telling apart from the detached reading of written tales. In addition to the spoken word, Connerton argues that performative meaning is also "encoded in set postures, gestures and movements" (59). In this light, the tale-telling practices of Byatt's Gode, above, can be seen not simply as dramatic illustration for the sake of entertainment, but as an integral part of the ritual performance of story-telling in which meaning and memory are embodied as well as uttered.

Most significant with reference to culture and the shaping of communal memory is the reality of oral story-telling as a ritual performance that emphasizes continuity with the past: as ritual re-enactment of past tellings. The myriad and changeable content elements of folk and fairy tales – by inference, the multiple possibilities offered in oral retellings – can, in Connerton's view, be understood to function as a "reservoir of meanings" that are available for use and reuse, sometimes to give completely different meanings that are not susceptible to systematic interpretation. What is important, he argues, is that ritual is in itself a "celebration of recurrence," performance for the sheer collective pleasure and power of re-enacting, re-embodying collective memory. In this light, we can understand performative oral story-telling as playing a

collectivizing, unifying cultural function; through ritual retellings of stories, animated by the body, embedded by the rhythms of formalized language, tale-telling allows groups to understand that "we are the people who know/tell *these* stories."

Returning to Bourdieu, who writes, "the social world is accumulated history" (1986, 241), we might also consider that oral story-telling historically contributed to the development of cultural capital in group members: that is, (re)production of (shared) "dispositions, behaviour, habits, good taste, savoir faire and attitudes" that become fundamentally embodied in the individual as a habitus (Andres 122). Relevant to the notion of participation in ritual story-telling is Bourdieu's contention that cultural capital is acquired unconsciously, and acquired early, by direct transmission, usually from family or immediate community members. Story-tellers, as the embodiment and transmitters of cultural capital, actively contributed to the production and reproduction of the cultural capital of a group (family, village, community): "the set of actually usable resources and powers….that distinguish the major classes of conditions of existence" (Andres 121).

If the reproduction of cultural capital and maintenance of collective memory brought about by the telling of folk and fairy tales relied upon embodied performance, ritual speech acts and repetitive oral transmission of fluid oral narratives, what was the cultural impact of fixing specific forms of tales into written text? Was the cultural role of folk and fairy tales altered by the act of writing them down? Is something lost in the transition from performance to "literature," as AS Byatt seems to suggest?:

> *I can't write down Gode's way of telling things. My father has from time to time encouraged her to tell him tales which he has tried to take down verbatim, keeping the rhythms of her speech, adding nothing and taking nothing away. But the life goes out of her words on the page, no matter how faithful he is. He said once to me, after such an experiment, that he saw now why the ancient Druids*

> *believed that the spoken word was the breath of life and that writing was a form of death.*
>
> (1990, 355)

In the Introduction to their anthology, *Folk & Fairy Tales*, Hallett and Karasek note that in transcription, tales are often modified and stylized, because spoken language differs from the written; that the writers and collectors of tales become "intermediaries" who necessarily leave a personal imprint on each transposition; that written tales are often revised for new and different audiences (or markets); and that they accrue changes influenced by literary and societal fashions of the moment. While these authors concern themselves with how the *tales themselves* are altered by the act of writing, and characterize written-down folk tales as "fragments of psychic history" (xvii), what is more relevant here is to explore how the transcription of folk and fairy tales may have changed the *cultural role* of such tales.

To some extent, the transcribing of oral tales might be seen as an attempt to capture for posterity (or for the benefit of others) the culture of preliterate oral societies. The evolution of the *idea* and *value* of "culture" over time is exemplified by the linguistic paradox in which high society urban dwellers have come to be seen as "cultivated", while the tillers of the land – the reproducers of cultural capital through oral tales – have not. Nevertheless, some writers have suggested that a nostalgic "race memory" may lurk behind "civilized" society's fascination with the cultural products of their illiterate predecessors (Eagleton). Indeed, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm initially seem to have been motivated to assemble their collection of transcribed folk and fairy tales by a romantic and nationalistic search for the "authentic culture" of the illiterate German Volk, and by a notion that "the true spirit of the people was to be found not in palaces or even cities, but in the countryside, far away from urban sophistication" (Hallet and Karasek

xviii). Latterly, however, the Grimms – and later collectors of folk and fairy tales – revised their anthologies with an eye to the newly emerging market for children's literature and folk tales.

Benedict Anderson would likely argue that such transcribers and collectors effectively co-opted and commodified folk and fairy tales in the service of modern nation-building, allowing the insatiable capitalist markets of print-capitalism to transform oral tales into mass-produced industrial goods. His theories of print as a new form of economic capital offer some interesting insights into the "big" structures and power struggles of evolving nation-states. Print, he suggests, gave a new fixity to language, and created a unified language of exchange: a medium through which speakers of diverse dialects could begin to communicate more effectively. Print capitalism also created new language "power hierarchies," as particular dialects and languages came to dominate the print market. A purely economic theory fails, however, to illuminate how the transcribing of oral stories may have altered their role and function in the social world. As Bourdieu explains (1986), economic theory reduces the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchanges and the maximization of profit – and implicitly defines all other forms of exchange (such as the telling of stories) as "disinterested," relegating cultural or artistic practices to the category of "purposeless." Bourdieu instead argues that an accurate assessment of the structure of the social world demands the development of a "new economy of practices" which *must* include practices that "are not…socially recognized as economic" (1986, 47). In the social spaces (or "fields of exchange") in which humans struggle, power and position are not simply determined by economic capital, he explains, but also depend on cultural capital and on social capital: "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of …relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1986, 51).

The process of transcription – the taking of a written snapshot of an oral tale – first objectified this cultural capital as a "cultural object," and then converted it into economic capital (profit for transcribers, printers and sellers), as printed tales were sold in the market of commodities. As materialized commodified objects, tales are lifted out of their cultural context, and detached from their culturally embodied state – the community – and instead enter the collection of "cultural goods" belonging to what Anderson calls a "community of anonymity" (35).

If we accept Bourdieu's argument, however, that cultural and social capital cannot be simply converted into economic capital without loss of the "specific efficacy of the other types of capital" (1986, 54), it becomes clear that what is lost in the conversion of oral tales into commodified cultural goods ("literature") is their specific *cultural* efficacy. Details of a telling may be captured, but the embodied ritual and performative cultural functions are lost. As a body of literature, folk and fairy stories no longer function as deep and fluid reservoirs of meaning for their communities of origin. Tellings are increasingly restricted to the details of a fixed text (and to those texts that "sell well" in the markets); interpretations, though there may be more than one, emerge as squabbles between academics; popular meaning is increasingly fixed by further profit-driven objectification, for example, the conversion of tales into mass-market Disney animations.

Do written-down snapshots of ancient tales perform a new cultural role? Interestingly, Anderson suggests that print-capitalism and the resulting broad dissemination of printed ideas and shared stories in vernacular languages perform a *new* kind of culture-unifying or collectivizing function. Print, he argues, allows the development of "new ideas of simultaneity," new "ways of linking fraternity," and the creation of ideas of "imagined community." Anderson even suggests that the widespread reading of common printed texts can even be viewed as a new ritual, one of mass consumption and collective imagining (35). (Anderson writes here with

reference to the daily reading of newspapers, but surely the repetition and replication of written tales might be considered to have a similar function.)

Connerton adds that such modern "celebrations of recurrence" might actually function as "compensatory strategies," a palliative in the face of conditions of modernity that valorize economic development, unending modernization and change, and that deny the existence of value in "life as a structure of celebrated recurrence" (64). In other words, written tales, stripped of their richness as they may be, might indeed be evidence of that sneaking race memory to which Eagleton alludes – a cultural touchstone for a barely-remembered communal past.

While Anderson emphasizes the role of print capitalism in the development of "imagined community," however, he spends little time discussing the reality that only the literate were and are permitted to join this community: a first step in restricting access to cultural and social capital. Similarly, Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of remembering that linguistic relations are intimately embedded in relations of power (Andres). Linguistic competence – not simply literacy, but also an intimate knowledge of the forms, style and content of a group's literature – offers privilege in struggles for cultural, social and economic capital (Jenkins 97). Byatt goes as far as to suggest that fairy tales contribute to the shaping of a "narrative grammar of the mind" (2004).

Perhaps more important for consideration of the cultural products of a (dominant) cultural group, Bourdieu (1986) argues that a group reproduces and maintains its social capital through an ongoing investment in social relationships through processes of exchanges. Exchanges, he argues, "transform the things exchanged into signs of mutual recognition and, through the mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, reproduces the group" (52), defining and defending its boundaries. I propose that written and literary tales have become

symbolic objects of cultural exchange, differentiating the learnéd and the cultured from the illiterati, and reinforcing the social capital of the dominant group. With this framework, it becomes easier to understand, for example, how more modern literary tales such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1872) carry within them cultural cross-references that define the reader's social position and group membership (or lack thereof). In-group readers intuitively recognize their myriad allusions and references to other texts and tales: elements of the group's cultural corpus. For the out-group, the uninitiated, extensive explanation is required, evidenced by the twenty-five pages of explanatory notes appended to a recent edition (1998). Bourdieu reminds us "…one might think that reading a text is the same as understanding it, that is, discovering its secret. However, not every text is meant to be understood in this way…an analysis of the [primary] sources needs to be done: for what social use was this text written?" (Reeser and Spalding 671).

In conclusion, then, the "civilized" literary versions of folk and fairy tales (and more recent literary tales whose authorship and dates of publication are known) now play a new sociocultural role that is, nevertheless, still independent of the actual content details of the tales themselves. The reading of tales may represent, as Anderson suggests, a new form of ritual that unites an imagined community; it may represent an unspoken yearning to emphasize continuity with the past, as Connerton offers. Ironically, however, the reading and sharing of written tales may play a role that is almost the mirror-image of the role played by their oral precursors: this time not a unifying role that constructs collective identity and reproduces cultural capital, but a gate-keeping role that regulates social capital and restricts membership of the dominant group.

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