

## INTRODUCTION

Attached, almost as an afterthought, to the end of Mircea Eliade's book *Myth and Reality*<sup>1</sup> is a highly stimulating essay entitled "Myths and Fairy Tales." First published as a review of a book that dealt with the relationship of the fairy tale to the heroic legend and myth,<sup>2</sup> Eliade's essay was concerned not only with demonstrating the differences between myth and fairy tale but also with elaborating their extraordinary symbiotic connection.

It is well known that Eliade, one of the great scholars of religion and myth, believed that "myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings.' In other words, myth tells us how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution."<sup>3</sup> Since myth narrates the deeds of supernatural beings, it sets examples for human beings that enable them to codify and order their lives. By enacting and incorporating myths in their daily lives, humans are able to have a genuine religious experience. Indeed, it is through recalling and bringing back the gods of the past into the present that one becomes their contemporary and at the same time is transported into primordial or sacred time. This transportation

is also a connection, for a mortal can gain a sense of his or her origins and feel the process of history in the present and time as divine.

In contrast to the myth—and here Eliade often conflates the genre of the oral folk tale with the literary fairy tale—he argues that “we never find in folk tales an accurate memory of a particular stage of culture; cultural styles and historical cycles are telescoped in them. All that remains is the structure of an exemplary behavior.”<sup>4</sup> However, this does not mean that oral folk tales and literary fairy tales are desacralized narratives. On the contrary—and this is Eliade’s important point—they continue to convey mythic notions and motifs that are camouflaged. In one key passage of his essay, Eliade states that, “though in the West the tale has long since become a literature of diversion (for children and peasants) or of escape (for city dwellers), it still presents the structure of an infinitely serious and responsible adventure, for in the last analysis it is reducible to an initiatory scenario: again and again we find initiatory ordeals (battles with the monster, apparently insurmountable obstacles, riddles to be solved, impossible tasks, etc.), the descent to Hades or the ascent to Heaven (or—what amounts to the same thing—death and resurrection), marrying the princess.”<sup>5</sup> All of this becomes camouflaged, according to Eliade, when the tale abandons its clear religious “initiatory” responsibility, but appropriates the scenario and certain motifs, and one of the intriguing questions for folklorists and those scholars interested in myths and fairy tales is to determine why and when all this took place.

Eliade believes it may have occurred when the traditional rites and secrets of cults were no longer practiced and when it was no longer taboo to reveal and tell the “mysteries” of the religious practices. Whatever the case may be, it is clear to Eliade that the myth preceded the folk and fairy tale and that it had a more sacred function in communities and societies than the secular narratives.

Of course, there have been great debates among scholars about whether the myth preceded the oral folk tale and whether it is a higher form of art because it encompasses the religious experience of people. But this debate is not what interests me with regard to Eliade’s essay, rather it is the manner in which he almost equates the religious myth with the secular fairy tale. That is, he tends to regard the folk tale as the profane conveyor of the religious experience. “The tale takes up and continues ‘initiation’ on the level of the imaginary,” he says. “All unwittingly, and indeed believing that he is merely amusing himself or escaping, the man of modern societies still benefits from the imaginary initiation supplied by tales. That being so, one may wonder if the fairy tale did not very early become an ‘easy doublet’ for the initiation myth and rites, if it did not have the role of re-creating the ‘initiatory ordeals’ on the plane of imagination and dream.”<sup>6</sup>

The fairy tale or, to be more specific, the folk tale, as an “easy doublet for the initiation myth.” That is an astonishing idea. It could mean that, from the beginning, individual imaginations were countering the codified myths of a tribe or society that celebrated the power of gods with other “non-authoritative” tales of their own that called upon and transformed the supernatural into magical and mysterious forces which could change their lives. Certainly, myths and folk tales blended very early in the oral tradition, and in many modern oral and literary narratives it is very difficult to tell them apart. They seem to be invested with an extraordinary mystical power so that we collapse the distinctions and feel compelled to return to them time and again for counsel and guidance, for hope that there is some divine order and sense to a chaotic world.

Myths and fairy tales seem to know something that we do not know. They also appear to hold our attention, to keep us in their sway, to enchant our lives. We keep returning to them for answers. We use them in diverse ways as

private sacred myths or as public commercial advertisements to sell something. We refer to myths and fairy tales as lies by saying, "oh, that's just a fairy tale," or "that's just myth." But these lies are often the lies that govern our lives.

Over the centuries we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives. Consciously and unconsciously we weave the narratives of myth and folk tale into our daily existence. During one period in our history, the Enlightenment, it seemed that we people of reason were about to disenchant the world and get rid of all the old myths and religions that enfeebled our minds so that we could see clearly and act rationally to create a world of equality and liberty. But, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer noted in their most significant contribution to critical theory, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we simply replaced archaic myths with a new myth of our own based on the conviction that our own civilized reason had the true power to improve the living and working conditions of all human beings; it was not the power of the gods that would help humankind. It was the rising bourgeoisie that spoke out in the name of all human beings while really speaking in its own interests, and these interests are the myths that pervade our lives today.

But these myths are not new, nor are they just myths, for they are also fairy tales. These myths and fairy tales are historically and culturally coded, and their ideological impact is great. Somehow they have become codified, authoritative, and canonical. We talk of classical myths and classical fairy tales. They seem to have been with us for centuries, for eternity, but we neglect the manner in which we created gods and magic to hold our experiences and lives intact.

Perhaps that is "natural." I mean we need standards, order, models. As Freud pointed out in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, culture cannot exist without repression and sublimation, and it is within the civilizing process that we establish the rules by which we live. We seek to make these

Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tale as Myth*.

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rules stick and become eternal. We classify and categorize to establish types and values. We weed out, modify, and purify, seeking the classical statement or form. We want to make our lives classic, and we construe roles for ourselves through classical models and narratives. They are all around us in Barbie dolls and fairy tales.

that we are all part of a universal community, that we are all striving for the same happiness, that there are certain dreams and wishes which are irrefutable, that a particular type of behavior will produce guaranteed results, like living happily ever after with lots of gold in a marvelous castle, *our* castle and fortress that will forever protect us from inimical and unpredictable forces of the outside world. We need only have faith and believe in the classical fairy tale, just as we are expected to have faith and believe in the American flag as we swear the pledge of allegiance.

The fairy tale is myth. That is, the classical fairy tale has undergone a process of mythicization. Any fairy tale in our society, if it seeks to become natural and eternal, must become myth. Only innovative fairy tales are antimythical, re-