Fear of Faerie: Disney and the Elitist Critics

by Lucy Rollin

Who's afraid of the fairy tale? I suggest that many people are, especially elitist scholars. I further suggest that their fear is of the religious kind—awe of the tales' power to charm, to cast a spell, to make us unreflective and accepting. This kind of fear has most recently affected the feminists, the Marxists, and, of course, Bruno Bettelheim, all of whom respond directly to the socializing power of the folk fairy tale: as surely as church, school, and the legal system, they believe, the folk fairy tale tells us to be satisfied in our world. But these scholars and critics fear something else even more: they fear Walt Disney. To these critics, Disney represents all that is dangerous about the folk fairy tale and about our society. Their rhetoric reveals their fear, and their arguments are often moral when they purport to be aesthetic.

Feminist critic Marcia Lieberman traces a direct line from Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book* (1889), the prototypical mass-marketed fairy tale collection, to Disney's tales: "Only the best-known stories, those that everyone has read or heard, indeed, those that Disney has popularized, have affected masses of children in our culture" (333). For Lieberman, Disney's power over the masses is such that the beauty contest motif, as interpreted by Disney in his versions of the tales, can do harm on a grand scale. Other feminists have been more direct in their attacks. In the *Journal of American Folklore*, Kay Stone comments that Disney heroines are not only passive but "barely alive" in a "cloying fantasy world" (44). She interviewed forty women in Winnipeg, Minneapolis, and Miami about the fairy tale heroines they most remembered, and was dismayed to find that their memories included only those passive Disneyfied

ones. Stone takes Disney to task for the "false magic" he has substituted for the "powerful fantasy" of the folk tale (44), and complains that "Walt Disney never told us" that there were spunky heroines on whom women could model themselves—she refers specifically to those in the Anglo-American tradition—whose "freedom does not always end at midnight" (50). Such arguments as Lieberman's and Stone's about Disney's choice of tales get rather circular: he chose them because they were popular, and his versions made them more popular, so more people knew them, etc.

Jane Yolen, an excellent critic as well as a fine artist, is more direct than Stone. Since Disney published his version of Cinderella, she avers, "the story in the mass market has not been the same" (302). She excoriates such mass-marketed books as Golden Press's *Walt Disney's Cinderella* because they "masquerade as literature but make as little lasting literary impression as a lollipop," because the texts are "coy and condescending," and because they present American children "with the wrong dream" (300-302). The Disney versions are "heresies of the worst kind" which "cheapen our most cherished dreams" (299). Like Stone, Yolen accuses Disney of "falsifying magic." The "true magic," she states, is the "magic inside us all—the ability to change our own lives" (299). Yolen thus claims to know the "true" meaning of the tales, and their "true" magic, and what the "right" dream for American children is, and she is terrified of those Disney lollipops which make such an ephemeral literary impression but, one presumes, such a persistent and insidious psychological one. While Jane Yolen is a talented and sensitive writer, these comments seem to be pseudo-literary criticism, using literature to press her own moral view.

In 1965, a famous personal blast at Disney was released by Frances Clarke Sayers, a librarian, storyteller, and writer of children's books. Her salvo was in response to an article by California's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Max Rafferty, in which Rafferty praised Disney as "the greatest educator of this century" and Disney products as "lone sanctuaries of decency and health." Mrs. Sayers responded in a letter to the Los Angeles TIMES and shortly thereafter in an interview with the public relations director of the Los Angeles Public Library. The resulting article is a classic in the criticism of children's literature; I summarize here only the parts of it concerned with the folk fairy tale. Every folktale Disney adapts, says Mrs. Sayers, is sacrificed to the "gimmick" of animation. Disney thus destroys the proportion and the purpose of the tales by making them too sweet, too loveable. He resembles a musician who plays a composer's music all out of key, without respect for the composer's intent. Everything is too obvious, the language too "ordinary" (119). Disney cartoons are for adults; he uses "obvious symbols of the adult world" and never "addressed himself to children once in his life—never" (122). Disney "falsified life" (Stone and Yolen say he falsifies magic) by pretending that everything is "so sweet, so saccharine, so without any conflict except the obvious one of violence"; he then "misplaces the sweetness and misplaces the violence, and the result is like soap opera, not really related to the great truths of life" (124). Disney made a great contribution to the humor of the world and was a master in his own field, Sayers acknowledges; he should have stayed in it. Sayers' comments represent the classic elitist position: a distrust of anything mass marketed for children and a confidence that one's educated personal judgement can decide what is best for others.

Bruno Bettelheim is elitist in this same way. He urges on us the "original form of the tale" (19) without ever acknowledging the difficulty—even the impossibility of his prescription. He calls popularized versions of the tales "emptyminded entertainment" (24), tacitly suggesting that those who like them are emptyminded as well. Illustrations hamper our imaginations, so we are not to look at them (28). Like Stone, he criticizes Disney's choice of tales, saying that Disney probably chose the Perrault version of the tale to film because Cinderella is insipid in that version (251). Like Yolen, Bettelheim knows the "correct" interpretation of things, for example the dwarfs in "Snow White"—a correctness which of course the Disney version obscures (210). The problems with Bettelheim's book seem to me to stem from some poor editorial decisions—among them an uncertainty about audience—that may not be entirely Bettelheim's fault. And, in its defense, I believe the book is informed by long and varied experience with all kinds of children, not just neurotic or autistic ones, and consequently by an understanding of children tempered with kindness and sympathy. The difficulty is that when a public figure such as Bettelheim begins making pronouncements about telling fairy tales to children, that figure is likely to be taken very seriously by those who are not in a position to understand the alternatives or even the issues. Bettelheim's knowing and avuncular tone and his occasional smugness obscure the real value to scholars of his long and sometimes elegant Freudian interpretations of the tales, but simultaneously persuade the non-scholarly reader that here is wisdom from on high.

Less elitist but still extremely negative is Jack Zipes' Marxist critique of Disney. Zipes traces a direct line from Perrault to Disney in the use of the fairy tale as "part and parcel of the general civilizing process in the West" (*Fairy Tales* 17) and castigates him for encouraging the "very unreflective and uncritical manner" in which we read and receive the tales today. Zipes demonstrates most persuasively that even the much-revered Grimm made significant adjustments in their retellings of the folk tales, adjustments which reflected their own society, but adds that their "finishing touches could only be topped by the prudish changes made by that twentieth-century sanitation man, Walt Disney" (*Fairy Tales* 53). To the Marxist, Disney tales are told from the point of view of the ruling class, not the oppressed class; their values indicated in the tales reflect the values of the ruling class, and thus actively discourage the contemplation of other political systems, other gender roles, other possibilities for utopia. It is in this sense that the tales are "sanitized." I find these arguments against Disney difficult to counter. Indeed, Disney versions are opiates, in that they tell us just what we want to hear. But it is elitist to assume that what we want to hear is necessarily impoverished or wrong; and whether the Disney versions are the totally subversive block to our imaginations that Zipes believes they are is at least debatable.

Film critic Richard Schickel offered one of the most cogent discussions of Disney's work in his 1968 book *The Disney Version*, although it too is dominantly negative. Of Disney's ventures into the folk fairy tale, Schickel says that Disney lacked the intelligence and the art to match the folk material with which he worked. The cartoon style could not reflect the depths inherent in "Snow White," "Cinderella," or "Sleeping Beauty." He agrees with Gilbert Seldes, who said that Disney had found a gold mine, but was practicing strip mining instead of digging deep (224). Disney was too "petit bourgeois" to find the

"imaginative intensity and depth of feeling" he needed to raise his work above mediocrity. What he produced in these filmed fairy tales was—in a deliberate pun—not true to the "animating spirit" of the folk tales themselves. Schickel feels that these limitations of Disney finally led him to the "dehumanization of art in its final extremity": the "dreadful solution" of Audio-Animatronics (337). Throughout his book, Schickel seems to me to adopt a position that marks much elitist thinking: a fascination with and a fear of the technology that makes film possible. He respects Disney's achievements in animation and in other kinds of film-making, yet criticizes him for using its potential. Schickel finally shares the elitist fear of Disney, accusing him of crudity and vulgarity while grudgingly admitting his enormous popular appeal. To Schickel, the flaws in the Disney version are the flaws in the American vision: "flaws that have crept into it over decades, and they are the flaws almost universally shared by the masses of the nation's citizens" (361). Like Max Rafferty, whose praise of Disney sprang from a disillusionment with American life in the mid-twentieth century, Schickel can find little that is good to say about the American populace. But, where Rafferty felt that Disney represented what is right about us, Schickel finds in him all that is wrong with us as well: "crassly commercial, sickeningly sentimental, crudely comic. . . . The industrial and entrepreneurial tradition that both moved and sheltered him was neither more nor less flawed than he was" (361-2). This argument is certainly valid: Disney was no more and no less than a product of this time, and if therein lies the weaknesses of his work, there must be its strengths as well.

The best example of that paradox is Disney's imagination itself. Nurtured on the movies, it saw almost everything in terms of that medium. In his 1934 story notes for *Snow White*, he imagined the girl as "a Janet Gaynor type—14 years old," and the prince as a "Doug Fairbanks type—18 years old." The prince's horse is his understanding pal, "like Tom Mix's horse Tony." The queen should be a "mixture of Lady Macbeth and the Big Bad Wolf," and her fury should resemble Charles Laughton's in "The Barrets of Wimpole Street" (Finch 66). Bettelheim would no doubt identify this as a serious paucity of imagination caused by looking at too many pictures. But the fact is that imaginations of millions of people in the twenties and thirties were fed by the movies; adults and children went to the theatres an average of once a week, seeing a new film every time. Could Disney—or anyone—evade the power of those images? If Disney saw beauty in the narrowest possible range—WASP—was he doing any more or less than most of his contemporaries? And are we any more free of this influence today? How many torn sweatshirts and curly hairstyles did we adopt after *Flashdance*? How many crew cuts and white T-shirts are being sported today after *Top Gun*? Cultural historian Warren Susman has pointed out that our imaginations, and therefore the imaginary, are shaped by the culture which produces them: "One of the reasons we talk so persistently about the impact of media is because thinking and talking about their role, and about the role of technology generally, have become cultural characteristics. In a sense, we are hardly able *not* to think and talk about the media" (257). It is perverse of Sayers and Yolen or Stone or Bettelheim to suggest that we should not fall under the influence of these images; we do, willy nilly. Such critics seem to imply that we are morally culpable for doing so and that they themselves are free from such influences.

Disney did in a sense go the movies one better: he not only thought in terms of movies, he thought in terms of animation, of the "magical realism" that this new technique could provide (Finch 65). With the success of Mickey Mouse, Disney began to think of doing a feature film that would tap this resource further, and the fairy tale of Snow White seems to have come quite early to his mind. He saw the possibilities in the dwarfs and the animals especially, and then in the trees and brooms. Humans were more difficult to animate than these other things ("too stiff, too limited") but animals have spontaneity and "plasticity plus" (181). Disney's technique gave life to things the audience had never seen live; he gave them *human* emotions and motives and understanding. It is only a short step backwards from this kind of screen animation to the older theory of animism. Edward Tylor, sometimes called the father of anthropology, suggested this theory in 1893 and it still claims a certain respect as an important insight. It is the "deep-lying doctrine of spiritual beings; it is the groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of the savages, up to that of the civilized man" (Tylor 11). It is a universal tendency to invest inanimate things—whether natural or manmade—with emotion and motive. Human beings everywhere, Tylor believed, shared this effort to give to other things their own human powers. Disney's achievements in animation—investing trees with the power to talk and grasp, brooms with the power to sweep by themselves, animals with the power to speak and understand human language and emotions—puts us in touch with this ancient religious belief. Tylor commented that the animism of modern people is "in great measure only explicable as a developed product of the older and ruder myth" (18). Part of Walt Disney's gospel puts us in touch with our older and ruder selves, ironically through technology.

Disney is in touch in another way with "older and ruder" forms. His inclusion of animals in the fairy tales does open him to the charge of too much cuteness and does seem to have sprung from a need to use animation to its fullest possibilities, as he saw them. But in early versions of many folktales, animals often appear as helpers. Perrault versions eliminated some of this element, but in a Celtic version of "Cinderella," for example, a calf helps the maid dress for the ball and a bird warns the prince of the stepmother's treachery. "Thumbelina" and "Puss in Boots" both blend animals and humans, and in a German version of "Hansel and Gretel," a little white duck saves the children. Disney's conscious motive may have been suspect and the result an excess of lovableness, but as often happened with Disney, his instincts led him to an understanding he didn't know he had.

Jane Yolen and Kay Stone claim that Disney "falsifies magic." This is an odd claim in itself; one wonders how they are privileged to know what true magic is. But is is true that the magic in a Disney fairy tale looks a little confused. It ranges from teapots filling themselves to the transformation of a wicked fairy into an enormous fire-breathing dragon, from mops mopping the floor by themselves to huge boulders changing into soap bubbles. Much of this is of course in the service of animation, and while it often does little to advance plot or character, it does delight the eye. J. R. R. Tolkien commented that when we meet the centaur in a fairy tale, we can perceive both horses and men anew. He called this Recovery—the recovery of a vision that lets us wonder. When Sleeping Beauty's dress sews itself, or when an owl dances, Disney is offering us a kind of recovery too, an opportunity to see things anew.

Some Disney magic looks a lot like foolishness. The three little tea-drinking maiden-aunt fairies in *Sleeping Beauty* are helpless without their magic wands. They raise a child from infancy to age sixteen without knowing how a dress is constructed or that one must break eggs before putting them in cake batter. Their foolish quarrel over whether the dress should be red or blue finally causes the princess's jeopardy and pursues her until the very end as she dances with the prince. And there is much other unmagical foolishness. The prince falls off his horse. Two kings quarrel over their children, all the while eating, drinking, and singing. The court musician sneaks a bottle of wine under the table and consequently plays considerably off-key. All of this is good for a laugh, of course, but is there more to it? Might this kind of foolishness make the tale more accessible at a certain level? If those fairies, with all their powers, can make silly mistakes, are they not just like us? If a broom sweeps dust under the rug, if an owl would rather sleep than be awakened by a racket, if Sleeping Beauty would rather stay in her familiar cottage than go live in the cold castle, are not all these just like us? Is this false magic? Or is it channeling fairy tale elements into the homely and familiar, much as a preacher might take the homeliest example for his sermon, the better to make his point? If the magic is somehow changed, much of the relevance is more visible.

The most telling example of this technique is the plot change in *Sleeping Beauty*. The key events in the Disney version take place in a single night, the night of the princess's sixteenth birthday; the hundred-years' sleep of the folktale is reduced to just a few hours and everyone wakes to the normal world, the one they just left. It all happened as in a dream that any of us might have. Moreover, the princess met and fell in love with the prince *before* she fell asleep; she wakes to find that she will marry the one she already knows and loves, not a stranger. It is difficult to deny the comfort in these messages.

Disney is as unawed by the folk fairy tale as critics like Bettelheim and Yolen are moved by it. He is simply not afraid to make the changes he feels will satisfy him, and by implication his audience. He is willing to play with them, tinker with them, turn them into toys for his pleasure. Journalists have commented on this childlike quality in Disney himself, but none so vividly as *Time* Magazine did in a passage quoted by Schickel:

> Away he rushes with his intellectual pockets full of toads and baby bunnies and thousand-leggers, and plunges eagerly into every new thicket of ideas he comes across. Often enough he emerges in radiant triumph bearing the aesthetic equivalent of a rusty beer can or an old suspender. They are treasures to Walt and somehow his wonder and delight in the things he discovers make them treasures to millions who know how dearly come by are such things as wonder and delight. (329)

Richard Schickel adds, "The point is that he had the courage to proclaim the childlike quality of his imagination for all the world to see, and that, frankly, was more than his audiences ever did" (330). That audience has certainly taken Disney to its collective bosom for many years, because it recognizes in him its own covert childlike playfulness.

The Marxists, the feminists, and the aesthetic elitists fear the fairy tale, but much more do they fear Walt Disney. His doctrines are those of John Q. Public: "the sanctity of the family, the eventual triumph of innocence and purity over evil, and the superiority of feeling over thought." (*Newsweek* 101) These may be suspect values to the intelligentsia, but they are very much alive in popular culture. Moreover, Disney brought the wonder of technology to his audience in ways no one else has, by his contributions to animation and now by his amusement parks, which Schickel may find horrifying but which millions of people worldwide find fascinating. And, as *Newsweek* put it, he "saturated the consciousness of a nation with archetypal myths and symbols—Mickey, Donald Duck, the Big Bad Wolf, Snow White. . ."—many of these at a time when they were badly needed (101). Indeed his understanding of the needs and moods of the American people is perhaps the greatest wonder of all, for he gave them what they needed, whether it was a vision of innocence, a faith in goodness, or an exhortation to "Whistle While You Work." In Disney's hands, the values of the American public and the power of the folk fairy tale become one, making a formidable combination indeed. Perhaps the elitists have good reason for their fear.

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