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Madame Le Prince de Beaumont and the Infantilization of the Fairy Tale

This essay argues that the *contes moraux* in Jeanne Marie Le Prince de Beaumont’s *Magasin des enfants* (1756-57) constitute a seminal moment in the association of the fairy tale with children because of their pedagogical features and their link with children as readers. By rejecting the irony typical of earlier *contes de fées*, clarifying and simplifying the ethical and didactic dimensions, highlighting the role of the fairy as pedagogue, and emphasizing the themes of domestic work and virtue, Le Prince de Beaumont creates an influential model for nineteenth- and twentieth-century iterations of the genre for children.

For most of us, the association between the fairy tale and childhood is an obvious one. Not only do many of the best known, “classic” fairy tales in the West feature children, but fairy tales constitute an enduring staple of children’s literature. This association, however, has a history. And, like all histories, it is a complicated one. If there is a tradition of reading fairy tales to children (and of having children read them), it is because that tradition was invented (to borrow Eric Hobsbawm’s expression). If, today, we readily associate the fairy tale with children and particularly with children as listeners and readers, it is because adults (writers, teachers, parents, etc.) consciously forged this link. In this essay, I will concentrate on one specific episode in the creation of this association. Jeanne Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, who inserted fourteen “contes moraux” (as she calls them) in her enormously popular *Magasin des enfants* (1756-1757), was one of the very first authors in any language to write fairy tales explicitly and unequivocally for children. I
will argue that her *contes* constitute a seminal moment in the association of the genre with children because of the pedagogical features she gives to her tales and because of the “natural” (and quasi-“magical”) association she creates between fairy tales and children.

Before turning to Le Prince de Beaumont, there are three important preliminary considerations that should be made. First of all, as Philippe Ariès demonstrated in his now classic study, and as historians and critics of children’s literature have continued to show (including the papers in this collection), notions of what constitutes childhood have changed over time. The chronological and social distinctions between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood that we embrace today were not nearly as clear in earlier periods. Furthermore, the means and goals of raising and educating children have also changed with time, and this is particularly evident in the type of fiction given to children. Fairy tales, of course, have often been at the forefront of debates about children’s literature. It is not difficult to conclude, then, that as notions of childhood have changed, so too has the understanding of the link between fairy tales and children.

Second, the field of folkloristics shows that the link between folk-tale-storytelling and children is, at most, a reductive and partial one. In studies of contemporary and historical storytelling in a variety of cultures, the audience of folktales does indeed include children. But by no means are children the sole — or even the primary — audience for such storytelling. In specific cultures at particular historical junctures, it appears that there have been tale-spinning situations for women alone, men alone, children alone, but also for mixed groups (both genders and all ages). Associating storytelling with children is, thus, only a small part of a very complex reality.

The third consideration concerns the link between storytelling and children in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, which witnessed the birth of the *conte de fées* as a published literary genre. Well before the appearance of the very first tale in 1690, there are indications

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1 Such debates are not relics of a distant past, as the controversies surrounding Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* (1977) and feminists’ indictments of “classic” fairy tales in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate. For an overview of the feminist debates concerning fairy tales, see Haase.

2 See Simonsen 34–40 for a survey of storytelling groups in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France.