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## Preface to the Special Issue on "Jack Zipes and the Sociohistorical Study of Fairy Tales"

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PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON  
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As this special issue of *Marvels & Tales* goes to press, a groundbreaking work of fairy-tale scholarship that introduced the sociohistorical study of fairy tales to English-speaking scholars is being republished in a revised and expanded edition. That work is Jack Zipes’s *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. First published in 1979, *Breaking the Magic Spell* challenged readers to evaluate the “magic” of fairy tales critically, “to grasp the socio-historical forces” (xi) that shaped the tales, and thereby not only to understand their utopian roots and emancipatory potential, but also to lay bare the false magic and deceptive allure of tales created by the culture industry. *Breaking the Magic Spell* was in every respect a social and political project, one influenced, as Zipes himself points out, by “the influence of the student and anti-war movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, the resurgence of interest in Marxism, and [his] own study of the Frankfurt School [. . .]” (ix). That an expanded edition of the book should be published over two decades later speaks to its impact, its continuing relevance, and the role of Jack Zipes’s “radical theories” in the field of fairy-tale studies.

Jack Zipes, of course, has never been alone in advocating a sociohistorical understanding of folktales and fairy tales. In the same year that *Breaking the Magic Spell* first appeared, Lutz Röhrich published *Märchen und Wirklichkeit*—translated in 1991 as *Folktales and Reality*—a major study of the manifold relationships between the folktale and human reality. Zipes’s book had also been preceded by Rudolf Schenda’s research on the reception of popular texts in sociohistorical contexts (*Volk ohne Buch* [1970] and *Die Lesestoffe der kleinen Leute* [1976]), and by Linda Dégh’s investigation of the storyteller’s art as a sociocultural interaction in *Märchen, Erzähler und*

*Erzählgemeinschaft* (1962), which was translated in 1969 as *Folktales and Society*. As important as these works of international folktale scholarship were at the time of their publication, scholars—especially American scholars who were unable to read German—went without the benefit of their insights (and still do in the case of Schenda's books). Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that so many readers embraced Bruno Bettelheim's ahistorical psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales published in 1976. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, an American Germanist who has put her own stamp on the sociohistorical study of fairy tales,<sup>1</sup> worked to correct this state of affairs by publishing, in 1986, *Fairy Tales and Society*, a pivotal collection of essays "explor[ing] the interpenetration of fairy tales and society" and aiming "to acquaint both the scholarly and the lay fairy tale-reading public with contemporary German research" (xii–xiii).

In this context, one of Zipes's contributions has been his dissemination of sociohistorical scholarship from abroad, which has facilitated the globalizing of fairy-tale studies. At the core of his approach to fairy tales stands the work of "the Frankfurt School, in particular the works of Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Jürgen Habermas, coupled with the unusual philosophical works of Ernst Bloch" (Zipes, *Breaking* ix). In addition, Zipes has consistently referenced and adapted the critical perspectives of those German scholars who, beginning in the 1970s and '80s, mounted a critical re-assessment of the fairy tale and of children's literature (Haase 128). As Zipes writes, "The major accomplishment of these critical works has been the elaboration of socio-historical methods with which one can analyze the contents and forms of the tales in light of their ideological meanings and functions within the specific German and the general Western socialization process."<sup>2</sup> The sociohistorical methods developed by these German scholars found their way into Anglo-American fairy-tale criticism initially through the works of Jack Zipes. Subsequently Zipes developed his own influential theories of the genre's production and reception, and established the critical framework to begin mapping a social history of the fairy tale in the West—from the oral tradition to visual culture.

Zipes's critique of the fairy tale within the socialization process and his understanding of the genre's utopian potential in society are shaped in good part by the idea that the literary fairy tale has its origins in the oral tradition. Not all contemporary scholars subscribe to this view of oral tradition's primacy; and Zipes's work certainly does not completely dismiss the role of the printed word in the complex early history of the fairy tale. Yet his interest in the history of the fairy tale and in "exploring the interconnections between the oral folk tale, the literary fairy tale, and the fairy tale as film" (Zipes, *Happily* ix) have required that the conventional boundaries between

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the disciplines of folklore and literary studies be breached. This interdisciplinary movement has also been encouraged, of course, by larger trends within the academy, notably the development towards cultural studies. And a crossdisciplinary conversation among folklorists and literary scholars had also been urgently suggested on more than one occasion by folklorist Alan Dundes (16–20), who correctly maintained that each could learn from the other's methods. The subdiscipline that *Marvels & Tales* is devoted to—the field of fairy-tale studies—is in large measure a product of the new work generated by the concentrated efforts scholars have made to connect the study of the oral folktale with the study of the literary fairy tale in a more informed, systematic, and comprehensive manner. Zipes's contribution to the establishment of fairy-tale studies in this sense, then, has been to provide an interdisciplinary model of sociohistorical and cultural analysis that explains and illuminates the fairy tale in all its manifestations throughout history. The influential work in which this method became dramatically evident was *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*. First published in 1983, *Trials and Tribulations* included over thirty versions of the Red Riding Hood tale from diverse cultures and historical periods. Although most of these were literary variants, Zipes drew on oral versions of the tale as well. Moreover, he utilized not only the interpretive tools of the literary critic, but also the comparative methods, categories, and scholarship of the folklorist to illuminate in a very compelling way the sociocultural history of the tale.

As intimated by *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, a project aiming at a comprehensive history of the fairy tale, even if limited to the West, must extend across national boundaries. In this too Zipes has shown the way—not only in his critical studies of fairy tales from different cultural contexts, but also in his indispensable translations and anthologies. From his important translation of Grimms' tales and his anthology of classic French fairy tales to his compilations of Victorian fairy tales and Anglo-American feminist tales, to his monumental Norton Critical Edition of European tales from Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm (to name just a selected few), Zipes has produced a wealth of texts, framed in critical sociohistorical light, that have influenced both the study and teaching of fairy tales.<sup>3</sup> No doubt more sociohistorical work on the fairy tale in cross-cultural contexts will ensue from yet another of Zipes's important projects: a series—for which he serves as series editor—reprinting collections of international folktales and fairy tales from the golden age of folklore scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

This brief preface to this special issue of *Marvels & Tales* does not intend to be a comprehensive critical assessment of Zipes's work. What this

issue of *Marvels & Tales* does intend is to acknowledge the contributions that Jack Zipes has made by offering a selection of critical and creative projects that embody the perspectives and potential generated by the sociohistorical study of fairy tales. The editors are grateful to those individuals who have contributed to this issue. Jack Zipes has influenced, encouraged, and mentored scholars, artists, storytellers, creative writers, and teachers from around the globe. Accordingly, there are many whose work could have and should have been included in this special issue, but because of space limitations could not be. The contributions published here represent the work of many more also working to break the magic spell.

In the preface to the new edition of *Breaking the Magic Spell*, Zipes looks back on his original work and expresses the concern “that this radical approach—to get at the root of things—is not practiced enough in our day and age [. . .]” (x). His impatience with the rate of change notwithstanding, it is difficult to imagine what the state of fairy-tale scholarship would be like today without the work of Jack Zipes.

#### Notes

1. See Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls*.
2. Zipes, *Brothers Grimm* 88. Some of the German scholars he cites in this context are Apel; Bausinger; Doderer; Richter and Merkel.
3. See Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm; Beauties; Victorian Fairy Tales; Don't Bet on the Prince; and Great Fairy Tale Tradition*.
4. The series is published as the ABC-CLIO Classic Folk and Fairy Tale series.

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