

**REVISING FAIRY TALES FOR CHILDREN:
PATRICK NESS'S *A MONSTER CALLS* AND
TERRY PRATCHETT'S *THE WEE FREE MEN***

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Abstract. *Manlove, and Andrew O'Malley, the first part of the paper historicizes the relatively recent cultural connection of children and fairy tales, specifically, the mobilization of fairy tales as vehicles for the lessons directed at the young. Against this background, in the second part of the paper, two contemporary children's fantasy novels, Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men* (2003) and Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011), are examined. The discussion of the two novels focuses on their critical attitudes towards classic fairy tales and the lessons aimed at children, which range from the promotion of unquestioning obedience and patriarchal gender stereotypes, to the normalization of social stratification and the assumption of a happy end. Pratchett and Ness, however, do not merely expose the problematic instructions of classic fairy tales; as twenty-first century fantasy and children's books authors, they also write new ones. *A Monster Calls* and *The Wee Free Men* thus both subvert and appropriate the didactic aspects of the genre, in order to educate their (young) readers on the crucial matters of life, death, grief, justice, and duty.*

Key words: *didacticism, fairy tales, Patrick Ness, Terry Pratchett, witches*

1. INTRODUCTION: FAIRY TALES, CHILDREN, AND DIDACTICISM IN HISTORY

The subject matter of this article is the ambiguous relationship with the fairy tales' didacticism which Terry Pratchett and Patrick Ness exhibit in their children's fantasy novels. On the one hand, both *The Wee Free Men* (2003) and *A Monster Calls* (2011) explicitly position themselves against the most famous classic fairy tales for children and their lessons, criticizing them for raising unrealistic hopes of a happy end and the promotion of "niceness" (Ness), as well as the overvaluation, with devastating real-life consequences, of "smug

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handsome princes and especially (...) the stupid smirking princesses” at the expense of witches (Pratchett). On the other, however, the novels do not question the educational expectations associated with the genre: quite the opposite, Pratchett and Ness honor these expectations by essentially writing new fairy tales which are intended to disseminate radically different values and role models to the audience (the audience which, as is always the case with the narratives ostensibly created for the young, includes adults as well). To examine Pratchett’s and Ness’s treatment of the best-known classic fairy tales and their children-targeting didacticism, it is necessary to first historicize the relatively recent cultural connection of children and fairy tales, i.e., the creation, through constant editing and censorship, of fairy tales specifically for the young, and their mobilization as vehicles of instruction and enculturation. The history of fairy tales and children is a fascinating one, and a very brief overview – the only one possible here – is needed to understand the significance of Pratchett’s and Ness’s contemporary revisions.

Traditionally regarded as the literary retellings of folk tales orally transmitted throughout medieval Europe, fairy tales as we know them today appear for the first time in the sixteenth century, with the publication of Giovanni Francesco Straparola’s *Pleasant Nights* (1551); in England, specifically, as Colin Manlove explains, “it is not till George Peele’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1595) that we find the clearest evidence for the existence of a body of English popular narrative, nor till the seventeenth century that we see their [i.e. fairy tales’] first appearance in chapbooks” (Manlove 1999, 10). It is worth noting, however, that in her controversial *New History of Fairy Tales* (2009), Ruth Bottigheimer problematizes this critical tradition, stating that despite “many assertions and assumptions about the unlettered populus producing fairy tales in the early modern period, documentary evidence shows the opposite, with *listening* rustics being the recipients of stories read aloud to them by the literate (104, italics in the original). This leads her to interpret “the international spread of fairy tales” by situating it “within a history of a predominantly Italian creation, French editing, and German re-editing that took place in a context of commercial mechanisms within book distribution networks” (Bottigheimer 2009, 107), rather than seeing it as the proof of the existence of some mystical common well of universal stories found across Europe.

Regardless of their complicated origins, the classic fairy tales – the ones collected and (re)written by, chronologically, Straparola, Basile, Charles Perrault, Mme D’Aulnoy, Mme Leprince de Beaumont, and the Brothers Grimm – undeniably share some common characteristics. These include motifs such as “uncanny powers of clairvoyance, abductions, spellbound sleep, doubles, curses, prophecies, and powerful charmed things” (Warner 2018, 44); the fairy tale structure (the famous “rule of three”); specific length, and a happy end (Bottigheimer 2009, 9–10). Thematically, according to Bottigheimer, classic fairy tales can be classified into *restoration fairy tales* and *rise fairy tales*. Restoration fairy tales, heirs to the much longer medieval romances, retain the aristocratic protagonists, usually princes and princesses, and a test-task-trial structure of the romances, but trim it down to three episodes (Bottigheimer 2009, 10–11). Rise fairy tales, conversely, “begin with a dirt-poor girl or boy who suffers the effects of grinding poverty and whose story continues with tests, tasks, and trials until magic brings about a marriage to royalty and a happy accession to great wealth” – “Puss in the Boots” is the best example of this type (Bottigheimer 2009, 11–12). As is already clear from this classification, due to their choice of protagonists and especially conclusions, classic fairy tales can be accused of normalizing monarchy and rigid social stratification; even if they employ a low-born or poor protagonist, moreover, they end up validating individual amassment of wealth with the help of magic and/or

through marriage – precisely the point which the English eighteenth-century educators found so problematic they effectively banished fairy tales from the middle-class nurseries and children's bedrooms. Robert Moore (1975), furthermore, draws attention to the tales' patriarchal, classist, and racist features and lessons:

(1) Females are poor girls or beautiful princesses who will only be rewarded if they demonstrate passivity, obedience, and submissiveness. (2) Stepmothers are always evil. (3) The best woman is the housewife. (4) Beauty is the highest value for women. (5) Males should be aggressive and shrewd. (6) Money and property are the most desirable goals in life. (7) Magic and miracles are the means by which social problems are resolved. (8) Fairy tales are implicitly racist because they often equate beauty and virtue with the colour white and ugliness with the colour black (Zipes 1986, 5–6).

A number of feminist critics, especially the second-wave ones like Andrea Dworkin, Marcia K. Lieberman, and Karen E. Rowe, also raise the argument that classic fairy tales uphold patriarchal gender ideology; the insight is succinctly and colorfully expressed by Mary Daly: "The child who is fed tales such as *Snow White* is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother/teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime ... is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot" (Haase 2004, 3). The key point, however, is that classic fairy tales, apart from Mme Leprince de Beaumont's and the Grimms', were not originally created with children in mind, not even when Charles Perrault added explicit morals to his 1697 "Tales from Past Times". Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" (1697), for instance, warns "[c]hildren, especially pretty, well-bred young ladies" that they "should never talk to strangers, for if they are foolish enough to do so, they should not be surprised if they become dinner for a greedy wolf".

Indeed, a closer look at the transformations which the story of a girl in red, a wolf, and a miraculous salvation underwent between the eleventh and the nineteenth centuries might be informative on the process of the creation of fairy tales specifically for children, and the nature of some of their lessons. The evolution of the folk tales, "Concerning the Girl Saved from the Wolf Cubs" (eleventh century) and "The Story of Grandmother" (seventeenth century), into the "Little Red Riding Hood" of Charles Perrault and the Grimms may serve as a textbook example of how fairy tales, through various acts of editing, censoring and rewriting, came to be infused by the moral messages deemed so suitable for children that by the 1830s, "the Grimms' tales were built into German elementary school curricula, with the result that by the end of the nineteenth century, first-year pupils were memorizing the simplest tales and older pupils were explicating the longer and more complex ones" (Bottigheimer 2009, 40–41).

"Concerning the Girl Saved from the Wolf Cubs" is a short story – only one paragraph – which appears in Egbert of Liege's *The Well-Laden Ship*, the collection of stories from the eleventh century.

The story I tell, the country folk know how to tell me, and it is not so much marvelous to believe as it is very true. A certain man raised a girl from the sacred font, and he gave her a tunic woven from red wool. Shrove Sunday was the holy day of this baptism. When the sun had risen, the girl now five years old set out wandering, heedless of herself and of danger. A wolf attacked her and headed for his woodland haunts; and he took her as prey to his cubs and left her to be eaten. They immediately approached her, then when

they were unable to tear her to pieces, they began to caress her head, their fierceness having been allayed. The little infant said, "Oh mice, don't rip this tunic which my godfather gave me, taking me from the font!" God, their creator, softens savage souls (Zipes 2006, 31).

This is a proper medieval tale in which the emphasis is on God's grace and power over all of creation, wolf cubs included. Apart from the red color associated with a very young girl, and her fantastic salvation, there is not much similarity between "Concerning the Girl Saved from the Wolf Cubs" and "Little Red Riding Hood". In a much later folk tale, the seventeenth-century "The Story of Grandmother" (Zipes 2006, 33-34), however, more now-familiar details emerge: the girl going to visit her grandmother with a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk; the encounter and conversation with the wolf in the forest; the wolf's killing the grandmother and waiting for the girl in the grandmother's bed. When the girl arrives, she is tricked by the wolf into drinking her late grandmother's blood ("wine") and eating pieces of her dead body ("meat"); all of this is witnessed by an extremely judgmental cat who calls the girl "slut". The girl is then asked to undress and lie down with the wolf. Unlike "Concerning the Girl Saved from the Wolf Cubs", moreover, "The Story of Grandmother" does not feature salvation via divine intervention: the girl manages to survive by tricking the wolf to let her leave the house and relieve herself in the yard. Crucially, there is no explicit moral or message in the story; the most noticeable features are the horror of the girl's unwitting cannibalism and the jarring eroticism of the questions she asks about every item of clothing she discards ("Where should I put my apron?" "Throw it into the fire, my child, you won't be needing it anymore."). Maria Tatar, who, unlike Bottigheimer, does not question the fairy tales' folk origins, comments: "It is not difficult to imagine what a skilled raconteur could do with this story to enliven the hours spent husking corn or mending tools" (Tatar 1992, 3).

It is in Charles Perrault's *Histoires et Contes du temps passé* (1697) – the collection which includes most of the fairy tales which, over the next three centuries, will become familiar to children throughout Europe ("Cinderella"; "Puss in Boots"; "The Sleeping Beauty", and "Bluebeard") – that we come across the familiar version of "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge", or "Little Red Riding Hood". Perrault, as Jack Zipes notes, adds the distinctive red cap, which does not appear in the folk tale, and omits the lascivious questions about the clothes. His tale, however, does not have a happy end. Having been devoured by the wolf, the girl with the red cap remains dead. But the tale ends with the above-mentioned explicit moral, which teaches the audience the central tenet of rape culture – that the female victim is responsible for her own rape, and that she must take care of her own safety. Because of the added moral, Jack Zipes explains, "[n]umerous critics have regarded Perrault's tales as written directly for children, but they overlook the facts that at that time there was no children's literature per se, and most writers of fairy tales were composing and reciting their tales for their peers in the literary salons" (Zipes 2007, 40). It is, nonetheless, undeniable that Perrault's version became "the literary standard-bearer for good Christian upbringing in a much more sophisticated manner than Egbert or oral storytellers" (Zipes 2006, 35), thus pointing to the future, more explicitly didactic role that fairy tales will assume in relation to children.

The other version of "Little Red Riding Hood" appears more than a hundred years later, in the first, 1812 edition of the Grimms's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Despite Wilhelm's Foreword's aggressively "associating the *Nursery and Household Tales* with the childhood

of humanity” (Bottigheimer 2009, 34), the lessons disseminated in the carefully edited tales were not pearls of primitive/timeless wisdom but quite in keeping with the brothers’ “nineteenth-century, middle-class perspective and sense of decency” (Zipes 2006, 64–65), which kept them rewriting and editing the tales over the next forty-six years. Discussing the general differences between the first and the second, 1858 edition of *Nursery and Household Tales*, Henry Carsch notes that the interventions focused mostly on the female characters as bearers of the nineteenth-century gender ideology, especially ideal femininity: “[bad] mothers were changed into step mothers, as for instance in ‘Snowwhite’, Princesses became millers’ daughters or were excluded altogether if they turned out to have borne illegitimate children” (Carsch 1969, 630). The considerable alterations the Grimms made to “Rotkäppchen” were also introduced to strengthen the nineteenth-century gender ideology and the ideology of a middle-class patriarchal family – “the mother plays a more significant role by warning Little Red Riding Hood not to stray from the path through the woods. (...) Instead of being raped to death, both grandma and granddaughter are saved by a male hunter or gamekeeper who polices the woods. Only a strong male figure can rescue a girl from herself and her lustful desires” (Zipes 2006, 36–37).

As we are outlining the history of how fairy tales came to be associated with children, both conceptually and practically, dates are important and should be noted. Perrault’s late seventeenth-century tales were not intended for children; conversely, the Grimms’ fairy tales became part of the German elementary school curricula in the 1830s. What lies in between is the long eighteenth-century (1688–1815), which in both France and England saw the creation of the concept of the child and childhood, and, consequently, the appearance of proper children’s literature, including, but not limited to, children’s fairy tales. In France, it was Mme Leprince de Beaumont who established “the literary fairy tale for children” (Zipes 2006, 49–50). As all the other eighteenth-century products intended for children, such as toys and realistic literature, these fairy tales were explicitly didactic. Originating “in a period of absolutism when French culture was setting standards of *civilité* for the rest of Europe”, the fairy tale for children “cultivate[d] a discourse on the civilization process (...) for the benefit of well-raised children. (...) Fairy tales and children’s literature were written with the purpose of socializing children to meet definite normative expectations at home and in the public sphere” (Zipes 2006, 9).

Yet “the century of pedagogy”, marked by what Lloyd deMause famously termed “the intrusive mode of child-rearing” in England proved to be particularly hostile to the newly-established closeness between children and fairy tales. Detailing the history of eighteenth-century English children’s literature – the creation which, together with Ludmila Jordanova, he sees as inseparable from the political goals of the rising middle classes and the rationalist influence of the Enlightenment – Andrew O’Malley explains, “[t]he middle-class values of utility, industry, and book-learning were becoming increasingly prevalent in children’s books” (O’Malley 2003, 17). These desirable values, however, stood at odds with the ones found in classic fairy tales, which, to the minds of critics and educators such as Sarah Trimmer, Maria Edgeworth, Thomas Day, and Dorothy Kilner, excited “both unrealistic hopes of wealth and status and irrational notions of supernatural agents (O’Malley 2003, 33). Trimmer’s words perfectly encapsulate the anxiety over the negative influences of fairy tales: “[a] moment’s consideration will surely be sufficient to convince people of the least reflection, of the danger, as well as the impropriety, of putting such books as these [fairy tales] into the hands of little children, whose minds are susceptible of every impression; and

who from the liveliness of their imaginations are apt to convert into realities whatever forcibly strikes their fancy” (O’Malley 2003, 33).

The fight against fairy tales was also an instance of class warfare, as fairy tales in England were associated with chapbooks and the lower classes: first literary fairy tales will be written as late as the nineteenth century. Middle-class writers’ efforts to “expunge vicious plebeian influences from the nursery environment” (O’Malley 2003, 126) became especially pronounced in the last two decades of the long eighteenth century, resulting in the banishment of fairy tales from the culture of middle-class childhood. In 1801, for instance, British children’s author and educator, Lucy Aikin, bragged about the disappearance of elves and dragons from children’s nurseries “before the wand of reason” in her Foreword to *Poetry for Children: Consisting of Short Pieces to be Committed to Memory* (Manlove 2003, 7). In 1817, Robert Bloomfield, children’s author famous for *The History of Little Davy’s New Hat* (1824), stated “the longer I live, the more convinced I am of the significance of children’s books”, yet this praise, as Colin Manlove explains, was reserved for realistic children’s fiction only. Bloomfield despised comic and fantastic works for children, advising the parents to use them only as firewood (Manlove 2003, 7). Undeniably, “in the last two decades of the [long eighteenth] century the dangers of fantasy, chapbooks, and fairy tales to the impressionable minds of middle-class youth were almost universally acknowledged by the leading pedagogues and children’s writers of the day” (O’Malley 2003, 26).

The turning point for children and fairy tales came in the 1830s. According to Jack Zipes, “[i]t was from 1830 to 1900 (...) that the fairy tale came into its own for children” (Zipes 2007, 40). The reasons for this are complex. Most obviously, during the long eighteenth century “the middle classes viewed themselves as the outsiders of English society; the reforms of the class structure and social morality they sought to effect were still unrealized, and the ideological work of pedagogy was by necessity more polemical. By the early nineteenth century, a safe place for fantasy was emerging within a middle-class ideology and pedagogy” (O’Malley 2003, 137). The Romantics’ valuation of the imagination, and their massive contribution to the creation of the modern concept of childhood (Kennedy 2006, 44–62) also need to be taken into consideration, just like the “preoccupation with the elfin peoples” (Silver 1999, 4) which was evident in popular English culture ever since the 1830s, as Silver’s study demonstrates. Thus, the connection between children and fairy tales is neither very long, nor natural: it is clearly the product of wider socioeconomic and cultural shifts. Nor is the general educational thrust of the texts intended for children lost in the seemingly more tolerant Victorian age: despite the glorification of the moral and spiritual effects of fairy tales one finds in Dickens, MacDonald, Ruskin, and, later, Chesterton (Sandner 2004, 57–73), both the classic fairy tales, now deemed acceptable for middle-class children, and the Victorian ones, written by Christina Rossetti, Mary De Morgan, Margaret Gatty, Juliana Horatia Ewing, and Mary Louisa Molesworth, among others, still promote patriarchal gender ideology and the norms of good behavior, i.e., curbing one’s appetite, taking care of personal hygiene and possessions such as toys, being kind to animals and polite to the socially inferior, and always obeying the authority of one’s parents (according to Manlove 2003, 19–27) – what Patrick Ness derisively terms “niceness” through the mouth of the monster who has far more important lessons to teach.

In the twentieth century, the connection between children and fantasy in general – just like the low cultural status of fantasy, which has a much longer history – had become so naturalized that before 1969 “the description ‘fantasy,’ with respect to literary works, was usually only applied to a variety of children’s fiction, the implication being that the folly

of fantasizing was something that adults ought to put away with other childish things” (Stableford 2005, 35). Contemporary western cultures of childhood, dominated by the entertainment industry and corporations such as Disney, are flooded by fantastic films, literature, cartoons, and various tie-ins such as toys, games, clothes, stationary etc. Fairy tales are still very much present, though most children (and adults) now consume them in their filmed versions: “fairy tales are still arguably the most powerfully formative tales of childhood and permeate mass media for children and adults” (Tatar 1999, xi). Ruth Bottigheimer adds another perspective which helps explain the fairy tales’ continual appeal: “[f]airy tales, which speak in a language well understood in the modern world, remain relevant because they allude to deep hopes for material improvement, because they present illusions of happiness to come, and because they provide social paradigms that overlap nearly perfectly with daydreams of a better life” (Bottigheimer 2009, 13). It is precisely the formative-educational power and the seductiveness of fairy tales that is both criticized and harnessed by Ness and Pratchett in their contemporary fantasy novels.

2. “YOU THINK I HAVE COME WALKING OUT OF TIME AND EARTH ITSELF
TO TEACH YOU A LESSON IN NICENESS?” *A MONSTER CALLS*

In Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls* (2011) a tree monster starts visiting Conor O’Malley, the boy whose mother is terminally ill. While the monster is clearly “the focus of abjected fear, anxiety and guilt” (Shildrick 2002, 20), he is also a much-needed teacher and a healer, who involves Conor in an exchange game reminiscent of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – he will tell Connor three tales in exchange for Connor’s “truth”, which he knows Conor is “most afraid of”.

And when I have finished my three stories, the monster said, as if Conor hadn’t spoken, you will tell me a fourth.

Conor squirmed in the monster’s hand. “I’m no good at stories.”

You will tell me a fourth, the monster repeated, and it will be the truth.

“The truth?”

Not just any truth. Your truth.

“O-kay,” Conor said, “but you said I’d be scared before the end of all this, and that doesn’t sound scary at all.”

You know that is not true, the monster said. You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O’Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of (Ness 2015, 51–52, italics in the original).

While the stories that the monster tells the boy employ the familiar trappings of classic fairy tales (old kings, young and naïve princes, duplicitous witches, kingdoms in peril, monsters, miracle cures etc.), they so consistently defy both Conor’s and the reader’s expectations of fairy tales, their lessons, and especially their endings, that they can almost be termed “anti-fairy tales”. Thus, the first tale, about an evil witch queen, a good prince, and his fiancée, an innocent farmer’s daughter who is mysteriously murdered, ends with the revelation that “the good prince was a murderer and the evil queen wasn’t a witch after all” (Ness 2015, 83). Conor, presumably brought up on classic fairy tales with their black and white characters and clear distinction between good and evil, voices his confusion:

“I don’t understand. Who’s the good guy here?”

There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between.

Conor shook his head. “That’s a terrible story. And a cheat.”

It is a true story, the monster said. Many things that are true feel like a cheat. Kingdoms get the princes they deserve, farmers’ daughters die for no reason, and sometimes witches merit saving. Quite often, actually. You’d be surprised” (Ness 2015, 84, italics in the original).

As opposed to classic fairy tales for children, thus, there is no “happily ever after”; more disturbingly, the prince maintains his deception and is crowned king. The death of the innocent farmer’s daughter is acknowledged to have happened “for no reason”, but there is neither trial, nor extrajudicial revenge/justice.

The death of the innocent features even more heavily in the monster’s second tale. Ostensibly about “a man who thought only of himself” and got “punished very, very badly” (Ness 2015, 124) for it, the story recounts how the nineteenth-century “kind” and “enlightened” parson refused to allow a greedy and unpleasant local apothecary to cut down the yew tree growing in his parsonage and use it to make healing potions; he preached against the apothecary and turned the parishioners away from him as well. Once his two little daughters got sick, however, the parson changed his mind and begged the apothecary for cure: “*You may have the yew tree,*” *the parson said. “I will preach sermons in your favour. I will send my parishioners to you for their every ailment. You may have anything you like, if you would only save my daughters”* (Ness 2015, 131, italics in the original). It is the parson’s absolute willingness to “give up everything [he] believed in” (Ness 2015, 131) to save his daughters which dooms the girls: the apothecary refuses to help, and they die. The monster, who is present in all the tales both as a witness and a participant, reveals he destroyed the parson’s house, too. When Conor is understandably angered at this conclusion, as well, the monster explains: “*He [the apothecary] was greedy and rude and bitter, but he was still a healer. The parson, though, what was he? He was nothing. Belief is half of all healing. Belief in the cure, belief in the future that awaits. And here was a man who lived on belief, but who sacrificed it at the first challenge, right when he needed it most. He believed selfishly and fearfully. And it took the lives of his daughters*” (Ness 2015, 135, italics in the original).

The monster’s third tale is about “an invisible man (...) who had grown tired of being unseen” (Ness 2015, 175). The monster’s telling this story fantastically overlaps with Conor beating up his school bully, Harry, who has been ignoring him since Conor’s mother got sick. Conor misses the bullying as he believes that he deserves punishment: because Harry made him feel invisible, Conor beats him up so much that the boy ends up in hospital. But, when the time comes for Conor to honor his part of the deal and tell his truth, he understands that the monster was right when he warned him that “*there are harder things than being invisible*” (Ness 2015, 183, italics in the original). Conor’s truth is about anticipatory grief, and the conflicted emotions which anyone who has ever loved a terminally ill person goes through: “I can’t stand it any more!” he cried out as the fire raged around him. “I can’t stand knowing that she’ll go! I just want it to be over! I want it to be finished!” (Ness 2015, 220). Because this is the truth, or a part of it anyway, Conor, inevitably, feels immense guilt. But the monster teaches him an important lesson: “*You were merely wishing for the end of pain (...) Your own pain. An end to how it isolated you. It is the most human wish of all*” (Ness 2015, 223, italics in the original).

In this last conversation between the monster and Conor, the monster reveals the didactic goal of his (anti) fairy tales: they were meant to teach a young boy the moral, intellectual, and emotional complexity of human beings:

Because humans are complicated beasts, the monster said. How can a queen be both a good witch and a bad witch? How can a prince be a murderer and a saviour? How can an apothecary be evil-tempered but right-thinking? How can a parson be wrong-thinking but good-hearted? How can invisible men make themselves more lonely by being seen?

"I don't know," Conor shrugged, exhausted. "Your stories never made any sense to me."

The answer is that it does not matter what you think, the monster said, because your mind will contradict itself a hundred times each day. You wanted her to go at the same time you were desperate for me to save her. Your mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary. And your mind will punish you for believing both.

"But how do you fight it?" Conor asked, his voice rough. "How do you fight all the different stuff inside?"

By speaking the truth, the monster said. As you spoke it just now (Ness 2015, 223-4, italics in the original).

At the end of the novel, following the monster's final lesson – "*You do not write your life with words (...) You write it with actions. What you think is not important. It is only important what you do*" (Ness 2015, 225) – Conor goes to say goodbye to his mother, dying in hospital. He tells her the truth, too, which is as frightening as the one about wanting the whole process to be over: "I don't want you to go" (Ness 2015, 236).

3. "MRS SNAPPERLY HAD DIED BECAUSE OF STORIES": TERRY PRATCHETT'S *THE WEE FREE MEN*

In Terry Pratchett's novel *Hogfather* (1996) one comes across the following dialogue between Death (whose words are always rendered in capital letters) and his granddaughter Susan:

"All right," said Susan. "I'm not stupid. You're saying humans need...fantasies to make life bearable."

REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

"Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little—

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES.

"So we can believe the big ones?"

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

"They're not the same at all!"

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET—Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

"Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what's the point—"

MY POINT EXACTLY (Pratchett 1999, 183-4).

The belief in the humanizing and educational role of fantasy voiced by Death is exemplified by *The Wee Free Men* (2003), the first in Pratchett's series of five children's and young adult novels following the growth and development of the witch called Tiffany Aching. Yet *The Wee Free Men* also explores the dark side of the edifying power of fantasy – especially classic fairy tales. Helping humans believe in, and attempt to realize in practice, abstract concepts like “justice, mercy, duty” is only one side of the coin. The other is that classic fairy tales, which feature in *The Wee Free Men* as the collection *The Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales*, are the source of problematic role models and downright lethal assumptions. Humorously and accurately judged by the criteria of intelligence and logic, the qualities embodied in the nine-year-old cheese-maker and a future witch, Tiffany Aching, fairy tales are found to be deeply unsatisfactory:

Tiffany lit the candle, made herself comfortable, and looked at the book of Faerie Tales. The moon gibbous'd at her through the crescent-shaped hole cut in the door. She'd never really liked the book. It seemed to her that it tried to tell her what to do and what to think. Don't stray from the path, don't open that door, but hate the wicked witch because she is wicked. Oh, and believe that shoe size is a good way of choosing a wife. A lot of the stories were highly suspicious, in her opinion. There was the one that ended when the two good children pushed the wicked witch into her own oven. Tiffany had worried about that after all that trouble with Mrs Snapperly. Stories like this stopped people thinking properly, she was sure. She'd read that one and thought, Excuse me? No one has an oven big enough to get a whole person in, and what made the children think they could just walk around eating people's houses in any case? And why does some boy too stupid to know a cow is worth a lot more than five beans have the right to murder a giant and steal all his gold? Not to mention commit an act of ecological vandalism? And some girl who can't tell the difference between a wolf and her grandmother must either have been as dense as teak or come from an extremely ugly family (Pratchett 2017, 55).

Not only are fairy tales illogical, inimical to “sound reasoning”, and thus conducive to irrational behavior, they are also politically suspect in that they directly link appearance with morality, and are emphatically concerned only with the wealthy and the privileged: “[s]tories are not, on the whole, interested in swineherds who remain swineherds and poor and humble shoemakers whose destiny is to die slightly poorer and much humbler” (Pratchett 2002, 288). Tiffany, however, is a critical reader who resists the superficial attractiveness of the princes; being highly intelligent, poor, and brown-haired, moreover, she finds herself inevitably drawn to the characters of witches rather than the princesses who alienate her:

Anyway, she preferred the witches to the smug handsome princes and especially to the stupid smirking princesses, who didn't have the sense of a beetle. They had lovely golden hair, too, and Tiffany didn't. Her hair was brown, plain brown. Her mother called it chestnut, or sometimes auburn, but Tiffany knew it was brown, brown, brown, just like her eyes. Brown as earth. And did the book have any adventures for people who had brown eyes and brown hair? No, no, no . . . it was the blond people with blue eyes and the redheads with green eyes who got the stories. If you had brown hair you were probably just a servant or a woodcutter or something. Or a dairymaid (Pratchett 2017, 30).

But the most terrible indictment against the classic fairy tales and their powerful didacticism – telling people “what to do and what to think” and, at the same time, “stopp[ing] people

thinking properly” by linking outward appearance with virtue – is to be found in the story of Mrs Snapperly, “a sick old lady who was no use to anyone and smelled a bit and looked odd because she had no teeth” (Pratchett 2017, 40). The old woman, who also read books, had a cat, and lived alone in the cottage at the edge of the forest, was virtually put to death only because she “looked like a witch in a story” (Pratchett 2017, 40). Her fellow villagers, already taught by the fairy tales how to treat witches – “[o]gres, giants, witches, and dragons are put to flight or killed” (Storr 1986, 64) – burn down Mrs Snapperly’s cottage and books, and kill her old cat, believing she’s a witch and thus responsible for the disappearance of their Baron’s young son, Roland. Several months later, during the winter, Mrs Snapperly dies from prolonged starvation and exposure. Tiffany, who witnessed the transformation of ordinary people into an angry mob, and later buried the old woman’s cat, is deeply bothered by the demonstrated power of fairy tales: “The stories weren’t real. But Mrs Snapperly had died because of stories” (Pratchett 2017, 55). Combined with the lack of critical thinking on the part of Mrs Snapperly’s community members, fairy tales are downright lethal.

In keeping with Pratchett’s ambivalent attitude to fairy tales, however, *The Goode Child’s Booke* still proves useful – this is where Tiffany finds information on a low-level monster, Jenny Green-Teeth, whose appearance in Tiffany’s world is the first sign of the “incursion” set in motion by the Fairy Queen (Always skeptical of fairy tales, Tiffany first checks the dimensions of the monster provided by the book using soup plates.). In a gentle parody of fantasy tropes, Pratchett then has the nine-year-old girl defeat the monster with a cast iron frying pan, “the one that could cook breakfast for half a dozen people all at once” (Pratchett 2017, 12). On another, non-parodic level, the greater part of the novel represents a long, counter-fairy tale about the life-saving values of solidarity and the collective fight against corrupt authorities. These values are affirmed in the protracted struggle of Tiffany and her allies, the Nac Mac Feegles, to rescue both Roland and Tiffany’s younger brother from the Mac Feegles’ former master, the child-abducting Fairy Queen, and her parasitic realm. The Nac Mac Feegles, the titular “wee free men”, offer another instance of Pratchett’s subverting popular fantasy tropes: they are fairies themselves (“pictsies”), yet they are depicted as decidedly unglamorous. As opposed to Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother, Carlo Collodi’s Blue Fairy, or Barrie’s (and Disney’s) Tinkerbell, the Nac Mac Feegles are tiny, dirty, loud, aggressive, and covered in blue tattoos so much that they appear wholly blue. Even more subversively in the context of the children’s novel, the Nac Mac Feegles are outspoken anarchists – “Nae quin! Nae king! Nae laird! Nae master! *We willna be fooled again!*” (Pratchett 2017, 83, italics in the original) – and live happily as equals in underground communes guided by their “wise woman”, *kelda*.

Pratchett’s most significant revision of the classic fairy tales, nonetheless, is to be found in the novel’s rehabilitation of witches – not toothless cat-owning old women accused of witchcraft like Mrs Snapperly, but the proper ones. This is a feat which is not unique to *The Wee Free Men*, but is found throughout the Discworld and Tiffany Aching series. Pratchett’s witches remain essentially “the embodiment of the oppositional” (Howe 2014, 12) and “women (...) out of step with their society” (Howe 2014, 13), but, as M. Isabel Santaulària i Capdevila argues, Pratchett rewrites them as moral teachers who preach and practice the ethics of care, especially in relation to the elderly, the sick and the disabled, the dying, and the impoverished (Santaulària i Capdevila 2018, 59-75). Since their society, with which they are “out of step”, consists of people capable of both casual and deliberate violence, as evidenced by the “noncriminal putting to death” (Derrida quoted in Wolfe 2003, 7) of an old woman and her cat, elderly witches like Nanny Ogg and Esme Weatherwax, as well as Tiffany herself, take it upon

themselves to improve them. “Acting as a combination of family doctors, midwives, social workers, guards and psychologists” (Santaulària i Capdevila 2018, 63), in the novel after novel Pratchett’s witches “fulfill /This labour, by slow prudence to make mild/A rugged people, and thro’ soft degrees/Subdue them to the useful and the good” as Tennyson’s Ulysses says (in the poem, though, Ulysses runs away from such labour). Crucially, in the novel after novel, the witches, including Tiffany, “establish a pattern of care and involve those around them to also lend a helping hand” (Santaulària i Capdevila 2018, 69), thus repeatedly affirming the values of solidarity and mutual aid. In *The Wee Free Men*, specifically, it is after Mrs Snapperly’s death that Tiffany decides she would become a witch, “[s]o that sort of thing doesn’t happen again” (Pratchett 2017, 40). Instead of being frightened out of the idea by what she has witnessed, the nine-year-old demonstrates immense intellectual and moral independence, courage, and commitment to justice. It is this commitment that is shared by all of Pratchett’s witches: “they see injustice as their reason for existing” (Santaulària i Capdevila 2018, 68).

The ethics of care preached and practiced by Pratchett’s witches focuses almost exclusively on humans; very rarely does it involve nonhuman animals. Yet *The Wee Free Men* introduces another wise old woman who teaches Tiffany, and the readers, that people, in fact, have duty to all life – Tiffany’s late grandmother, Granny Aching, who may or may not have been a witch herself. This lonely and silent shepherdess was known to have “never lost a lamb” because “[s]he wouldn’t go to bed while a lamb was lost, however bad the weather...” (Pratchett 2017, 54): her dedication to animals’ wellbeing is sharply contrasted with the people who stone an old cat to death, believing him to be the witch’s familiar. Granny Aching’s fantasy animal welfarism does not exclude the use of animals for food and clothing, nor does it question human supremacy; nevertheless, she insists it is human responsibility to take good care of the creatures in their power: “We are as gods to the beasts o’ the field, my jiggit. We order the time o’ their birth and the time o’ their death. Between times, we ha’ a duty” (Pratchett 2017, 61). Granny’s notion of duty extends to people as well, as evidenced by her intervening with the Baron in the case of Miss Female Infant Robinson, a marginalized, lonely old woman who stole a baby and might have ended up like Mrs Snapperly had it not been for Granny Aching. As opposed to the effect classic fairy tales produce on her, Tiffany finds strength, inspiration, hope, and the proper role model in her grandmother. “‘Granny Aching would have done something about monsters in our river,’ said Tiffany, ignoring that. ‘Even if they are out of books.’ And she’d have done something about what happened to old Mrs Snapperly, she added to herself. She’d have spoken up, and people would have listened . . . They always listened when Granny spoke up. *Speak up for those who don’t have voices*, she always said” (Pratchett 2017, 35, italics in the original).

4. “I CAN TEACH YOU A LESSON YOU WON’T FORGET IN A HURRY”: CONCLUSION

Since its inception in the eighteenth century, English children’s literature has been characterized by pervasive didacticism, as well as the contradictory attitudes to fantasy and its usefulness as a didactic tool. As contemporary children’s fantasy authors, Patrick Ness and Terry Pratchett write in, and against this tradition, contributing “to the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by (...) encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change” (Reynolds 2007, 1). More specifically, both their novels raise objections to the classic fairy tales’ lessons and role models intended for young readers, in addition to offering alternative ones. Ness

creates the figure of the monster who despises “niceness” and consistently subverts the expectations of “happily ever after” in his anti-fairy tales. The “eternal Green Man” (Ness 2015, 50), nonetheless, voices Ness’s conviction that the stories told the young are of vital importance, as long as they are “true”, i.e., not evading the moral, intellectual, and emotional complexity of human beings, and the occasionally tragic and painful nature of their lives. In *A Monster Calls*, it is three such stories that ultimately empower the protagonist to face not only his anticipatory grief, but also the life-shattering fact of his mother’s death. In *The Wee Free Men*, Pratchett references classic fairy tales, which are found to be deficient in sound reason and logic, as well as filled with harmful class politics, gender stereotypes, and the stereotypes of witches, in which classism, sexism, and ageism powerfully converge. Like Ness, Pratchett understands the life-making and life-destroying power of stories: in the first Tiffany Aching novel, classic fairy tales, combined with the lack of critical thinking, bring about the death of an old woman and her cat. On the other hand, *The Wee Free Men* also offers a series of hopeful, counter fairy tales – about the girl who single-handedly defeats the river monster; about the girl and blue anarchist fairies who stand up to the Fairy Queen herself, and save countless lives in the process; about the witches preaching and practicing the ethics of care, and, finally, about the old woman who preferred silence but nonetheless spoke up in defense of both the human and the nonhuman downtrodden. *A Monster Calls* and *The Wee Free Men*, therefore, simultaneously subvert and appropriate the didactic aspects of children’s fairy tale, in order to educate their (young) readers on the crucial matters of life, death, grief, justice, and duty; they disseminate more humane values and radically different role models to their intended, as well as the unintended, audience.

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REVIDIRANJE BAJKI ZA DECU U ROMANIMA SEDAM MINUTA POSLE PONOĆI PATRIKA NESA I MALI SLOBODNI LJUDI TERIJA PRAČETA

U prvom delu rada istorizuje se relativno skorašnja kulturna povezanost dece i bajki, odnosno upotreba bajki u svrhe obrazovanja mladih slušalaca i čitalaca, uz oslanjanje na uvide Džeka Zajpsa, Rut Botighajmer, Marije Tatar, Kolina Menlova i Endrua O'Malija. Drugi deo rada razmatra dva savremena dečja fantastična romana, Mali slobodni ljudi (2003) Terija Pračeta i Sedam minuta posle ponoći (2011) Patrika Nesa, u ovom kontekstu. Razmatranje romana fokusira se na njihove kritičke stavove prema klasičnim bajkama i poukama namenjenim deci, koje se kreću od promovisanja neupitne poslušnosti i patrijarhalnih rodnih stereotipa, do normalizacije klasno podeljenog društva i pretpostavki o srećnom kraju. Ipak, Pračet i Nes se ne zadržavaju na kritici višestruko problematičnih uputstava klasičnih bajki; kao autori fantastike i knjiga za decu dvadeset prvog veka, oni praktično pišu i nove bajke. Sedam minuta posle ponoći i Mali slobodni ljudi tako istovremeno podrivaju i prisvajaju didaktičke aspekte žanra, kako bi svoje (mlade) čitaoce obrazovali o ključnim pitanjima života, smrti, žaljenja, pravde i dužnosti.

Ključne reči: *bajke, didaktičnost, Patrik Nes, Teri Pračet, veštice*