

Andrew Lang and the Colour Fairy Books

It has been remarked that the colour fairy books (1889-1910) edited by the Victorian folklorist and man of letters Andrew Lang set a pattern for fairy tale anthologies that is still very much with us today (Burne). Already in *The Blue Fairy Book* (1888) Lang established principles that over time became normative: the intended child audience, the eminence of the wonder tale, the international approach, the uniform language and style. This may seem unproblematic, but is not. As I see it, the colour fairy books are part of a colonial discourse. With the help of the colour fairy books Lang effectively colonised fairyland. More importantly perhaps, since Lang's model is still very much with us today too, this is not just an antiquarian concern.

When Lang published *The Blue Fairy Book*, a single-author or national focus would have been just as natural as the rainbow mix that he comes up with. After all, Lang himself wrote scholarly introductions to Perrault and the Brothers Grimm and many others. Furthermore, literary fairy tale writers like Andersen and Wilde (*The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, 1888) were widely published during this period. There were also plenty of newer collections of national folklore, such as Joseph Jacobs *English Fairy Tales* (1890). It is evident that the late Victorian era was a period when the ideas of what constituted a fairy tale anthology were in flux. W. B. Yeats's Irish fairy tale anthologies, of which *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) is almost contemporaneous with *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), is a case in point. Yeats's anthology was conceived with an adult audience in mind, the wonder tale is of secondary importance in it, and it has a national(ist) focus.

Of course, the concept was not entirely new. Benjamin Tabart's *Popular Fairy Tales* (1818), is one of the earliest English anthologies. Anthony Montalba's *Fairy Tales of All Nations* (1849) and Felix Summerly's *Home Treasury* (1841-9), are other examples; notably, the latter includes *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Yet the colour fairy books represented something new, mainly because of Lang himself. Andrew Lang was the first British folklore specialist to compile a fairy tale anthology for children. Brian Alderson writes that Lang brought "a sense of authority" to *The Blue Fairy Book*, and goes on to say that "hitherto most general collections of traditional tales for children had been gleaned haphazardly

from other printed sources without too much regard for their status or authenticity” (360).

Admittedly, Lang’s scholarly reputation suffered from the connection with children’s literature, and despite the scholarly introductions available in limited editions for the *Blue* and *Red Fairy Books* where Lang motivates the enterprise, he drew a lot of fire. In the preface to the *Yellow Fairy Book* he again states his case:

If children are pleased, and they are so kind as to say that they are pleased, the Editor does not care very much for what other people may say. Now, there is one gentleman who seems to think that it is not quite right to print so many fairy tales, with pictures, and to publish them in red and blue covers. He is named Mr. G. Laurence Gomme, and he is president of a learned body called the Folk Lore Society. Once a year he makes his address to his subjects, of whom the Editor is one, and Mr. Joseph Jacobs (who has published many delightful fairy tales with pretty pictures)[1] is another. Fancy, then, the dismay of Mr. Jacobs, and of the Editor, when they heard their president say that he did not think it very nice in them to publish fairy books, above all, red, green, and blue fairy books! They said that they did not see any harm in it, and they were ready to 'put themselves on their country,' and be tried by a jury of children. And, indeed, they still see no harm in what they have done; nay, like Father William in the poem, they are ready 'to do it again and again.'

Ostensibly to children, this is of course primarily a riposte in an ongoing discussion between adults of the folklore persuasion. Later critics like Richard Dorson (who called Lang’s colour fairy books “hack work”) and J. R. R. Tolkien found fault with the anthologies. However, in the general public’s eye there can be no doubt that Lang’s name ensured the quality of the work. His expertise and wide reading also made him an ideal guide to and explorer of new literatures.

But the colour fairy books did not sell just because of the magnetism of his name. The illustrations, the printing, the covers – the whole package was appealing. Brian Alderson even suggests that “the powerful attraction which the series exerted on the public was as much due to the ploy of the ‘colours’ as to any distinctive character imposed by its editor” (360). Moreover, the tales were chosen to please rather than to instruct or to convey a utopian, moralising, or religious message. Lang even took care to delete the “morals” appended to the fairy tales by Perrault. Furthermore, although *The Blue Fairy Book* to a modern reader may appear to be an eclectic “experiment” the tales were not disparate in style and themes. Between them, Lang and his wife, Leonora Lang, who did most of the translations, saw to it that the tales were steeped in the same linguistic and cultural mold – this especially true of the later books, where most of the

material was new to its readers and where, consequently, the editor had more liberty vis à vis old “accepted” translations and versions. Here’s how Lang explains the method:

The stories are not literal, or word by word translations, but have been altered in many ways to make them suitable for children. Much has been left out in places, and the narrative has been broken up into conversations, the characters telling each other how matters stand, and speaking for themselves, as children, and some older people, prefer them to do. In many tales, fairly cruel and savage deeds are done, and these have been softened down as much as possible. (Preface Orange Fairy Book)

Elsewhere Lang also admits to “guarding the interests of propriety” (Preface Rose Fairy Book). He puts it more bluntly in the limited large format edition of *The Blue Fairy Book* where he gives his reasons for not using Burton’s literal translation of the *Arabian Nights* in the following words: “there the *Märchen* have been modified and amplified to suit Oriental literary taste, which has moments of cruelty and lust, as well as hours of florid tedium” (352) Lang preferred the “dwindled ... condition” of Galland’s version, because closer to the traditional fairy tale and containing less sex and violence and ... description. But Lang wasn’t only concerned with the oriental and savage tales. It can be inferred that he regarded “Florid tedium” as a character flaw in many of the French fairy tales as well. Lang writes: “Even when abridged and stripped of their frippery Madame d’Aulnoy’s tales hardly compete with Perrault’s masterpieces” (355).

“Stripping” down, as an editorial practice could also be employed on legends and myths. In “The Terrible Head” Lang himself “reconstructed” a Greek myth into “the original nursery tale” by, chiefly, “dropping the local and personal names” (353). So, the editing consisted in taking out the sex, most of the violence, the descriptions, the local colour, the moralising elements, the indirect speech (which was turned into direct discourse), and the difficult words, which were substituted for easy ones – what else? Hard to say, but in the preface to *The Brown Fairy Book* he writes:

[Mrs. Lang] does not give them [the tales] exactly as they are told by all sorts of outlandish natives, but makes them up in the hope white people will like them, skipping the pieces which they will not like. That is how this Fairy Book was made up for your entertainment. (Preface Brown Fairy Book)

This might apply to just about any cultural content that will appear alien to British children.

Interestingly, the only two stories that retain some of their cultural and linguistic characteristics

are the two Scotch stories in *The Blue Fairy Book*. The Scotsman Andrew Lang writes apologetically:

The Scotch stories are placed at the end for Scotch children. If English people ‘hate dialect’ so much that they cannot read the Waverley novels and Burns, English children ... may be puzzled by ‘The Black Bull of Norroway,’ and ‘The Red Etin of Ireland’. Not much space, at all events, is sacrificed to the lore of the ... ‘Land o’ the Leal’” (“long” preface 357).

On the one hand then we find a large measure of control, tending towards uniformity with the (British) child in mind. On the other hand, there is a lot of freedom. And almost anything can be a fairy tale. In *The Blue Fairy Book*, as we have seen, a myth (*The Terrible Head*) is turned into a fairy tale. A literary fairy tale, such as Mme de Villeneuve’s *Beauty and the Beast* is abridged and edited to fit the fairy tale format as well. We find European and Oriental fairy tales side by side. We even find a bowdlerised version of *Gulliver’s Travels*. The inclusion of Swift’s tale has puzzled critics. It drew Tolkien’s ire (it belongs to “the class of traveller’s tales” and “it has no business in this place”), while Lancelyn Green called it “inexplicable” and “alien to anything in any of the fairy books” (81) while Eleanor de Selms calls it an “aberration” (138).

However, given Lang’s ideas about the nature of fairy tales it is not inexplicable at all. Lang saw fairy tales as the bridge between literature and anthropology. We always tell the same stories all over the world. There is no essential difference between fairy tales, literature, myths. The difference there is depends on the storyteller’s level of civilisation and culture. This means that a novel or a myth can be rendered as a fairy tale and vice versa. It should be noted too that the practice (without the theory) of including simplified versions of popular novels like *Gulliver’s Travels* in fairy tale anthologies was widespread before; publishers were not picky about the purity of genres as long as it sold. Probably, Lang’s status as an authority on folklore made it more difficult for him to be inclusive despite him having a theory to back him up. Finally, it is also true that Lang did not push his point in the later colour fairy books, either because of the negative criticism or because he found that regular folktales worked just as well.

He also found out that the non-European material worked very well. With the exception of the tales from the *Arabian Nights*, *The Blue* and *Red Fairy Books* are exclusively European in content, but as the series progresses “Lang moved from the known to the lesser known” (de

Selms 139). *The Yellow Fairy Book* (1894) contains three American Indian tales and one Chinese. *The Brown Fairy Book* (1904) has American Indian and African tales. From the *Yellow Fairy Book* through *The Orange Fairy Book* (1906) the number of countries represented averaged ten.

With the exception of the few one-author sources and in the case of the French tales in the two first anthologies, all of the tales were taken from folklore collections. But folklore is not the same thing as fairy tale, and it is noteworthy that he includes so few fairy tales proper, that is, *Märchen* or wonder tales. Many of the tales in *The Blue Fairy Book* for instance belong to other folk genres, like the story of “Dick Whittington” (legend) or “Why the Sea is Salt” (explanatory fiction), others like the “Yellow Dwarf,” with its tragic ending and Romantic bursts of passion belong more to the literary realm. It has been estimated that in the whole suite only about a third of the stories are wonder tales. This is still considerable compared to the meagre output in for example Yeats’s anthology, but nevertheless surprising given that so many of the “core fairy tales” (to use Tom Shippey’s term) of our culture are associated with it – *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Rumpelstilzkin*, *Hansel and Grettel*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Goldilocks*, *Little Thumb*, *Blue Beard*, *Jack the Giant Killer*. Indeed *The Blue Fairy Book* more than any other anthology paved the way for the institutionalisation of these tales – and of the wonder tale – within our culture.

In this context it is interesting to examine later editions of the *Blue Fairy Book*. In both Mary Gould Davis American edition from 1947 and in Brian Alderson’s edition 1975 the tales that do not fit the picture have been taken out, for example Gulliver, and “The Terrible Head” as well as the tales from the *Arabian Nights* (that is, the non-aryan tales as Eleanor Selms puts it). This purification is disturbing and unwarranted. In a preface to one of the other colour fairy books Mary Gould Davis reveals her editorial practice as based on popularity: the tales that have been omitted “have been systematically ‘skipped’ by two generations of children and storytellers.” But she does not say how she knows which stories are popular (or why even Lang’s prefaces have been tampered with). Brian Alderson, on the other hand has rearranged and (in some cases) retranslated the stories, deleted a number of them, and provided scholarly information on the ones that are left so that: “the changes made may bring the book a little more into harmony with the kind of volume looked for by critics like Gomme and Tolkien” (361). It is a curiously

unsatisfying product. And in the case of both of these editors you get the impression that all is not told.

But just as later editors of the colour fairy books can be contested, Lang's own motives and ideas for his anthology project are worth scrutinizing, steeped as he was in Victorian notions of civilisation and the cultural use of storytelling. One notable source of inspiration was Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), the founding document of British anthropology. According to Tylor

primitive cultures were regarded as the fossilized survivals of earlier evolutionary stages. In his ascent Western man was believed to have moved through certain metamorphoses, the types of which could still be seen at large in other, less developed societies. The biological struggle for survival, in other words, offered an allegory of social development. (Boehmer 85)

The savage, then, belongs to a period of human infancy – an idea that predates Tylor – at least from the time of the conquest of the Americas (see Pagden 117) – but which was systematised by him. Unsurprisingly, in literature, the native is frequently represented as comic and childlike, while, conversely, the child is described as a savage. In *Empire's Children* Daphne Kutzer has shown how the native is represented as childlike in Hugh Lofting's books about Doctor Dolittle. She writes: "Imperialism exists as subtext not only in domestic fiction of the Edwardian era, but in fantasy fiction as well, where again its appearance seems unlikely" (79). I would suggest that such subtexts are traceable even further back, to the Victorian era, and that it is not only present in fantasy fiction but in, for example, the colour fairy books.

In his introductions and prefaces to the colour fairy books and in some of his other writings, Lang frequently makes the connection between adult savage and civilised child. In the scholarly introduction to *The Blue Fairy Book* he writes: "The children to whom and for whom they are told represent the young age of man" (349).

However much these nations differ about trifles, they all agree in liking fairy tales. The reason, no doubt, is that *men were much like children in their minds long ago*, long, long ago, and so before they took to writing newspapers, and sermons, and novels, and long poems, they told each other stories, such as you read in the fairy books. They believed that witches could turn people into beasts, that beasts could speak, that magic rings could make their owners invisible, and all

the other wonders in the stories. Then, *as the world became grown-up*, the fairy tales which were not written down would have been quite forgotten but that the old grannies remembered them, and told them to the little grandchildren: and when they, in their turn, became grannies, they remembered them, and told them also --- These fairy tales are the oldest stories in the world, and as they were first made by *men who were childlike* for their own amusement (Preface Green Fairy Book, my emphases)

Civilised adults may still be able to appreciate fairy tales but only if they can “remember how they once were children” (Preface Green Fairy Book). There is hope even for the scholar: “I trust that one may have studied fairy tales both scientifically and in a literary way, without losing the heart of childhood, as far as those best of childish things are concerned” (350). Nevertheless, the dichotomies: adult – child and civilised – savage are unshakeable. Actually, the ability to cross the cultural divide is surely a sign of the highest form of breeding. Only a superior being can enjoy childish things without himself becoming childish, just as an “old gentlemen” has the capacity to read oriental tales without becoming an oriental; Lang characteristically writes about some of the omissions made in his *Arabian Nights*, that they are “pieces only suitable for Arabs and old gentlemen” (preface *The Arabian Nights*).

The point I am making is not that Lang is a racist. Strictly speaking, he is not, although I would be less sure about some of his later editors and publishers. Lang believed all people go through the same phases from child/savage to adult gentleman. He is a cultural supremacist though; there is no doubt in his mind that the culture he represents is better and more advanced than anything that has come before. He can say things like “Lapps are a people not fond of soap and water, and very much given to art magic” (Preface Brown Fairy Book), or, about the Australian Aborigines, that these

merry little black fellows ... have no lessons except in tracking and catching birds, beasts, fishes, lizards, and snakes, all of which they eat. But when they grow up to be big boys and girls, they are cruelly cut about with stone knives and frightened with sham bogies all for their good' their parents say and I think they would rather go to school, if they had their choice, and take their chance of being birched and bullied.

Lang very clearly subscribes to a civilising process. “All sorts of outlandish natives” tell tales; they would, of course, which proves Lang’s idea about the universality of the fairy tale. But as we have seen the tales are cleaned up and appropriated for the use of the white British child.¹ With

the expansion of the British Empire the demand for tales from different parts of the world grew enormously. We can see that in other genres as well: missionary tales, boy's books. The colour fairy books catered to this need. The exotic touches add to the pleasure of the reading. Moreover, the reader is reassured that all over the globe people are basically the same, and – after proper editing – all like the same kind of stories. This means that the culture endorsed by the west and given expression in Lang's fairy tale project appears to be global, natural, given, not just an insular affair, for Brits only. At the same time the cultural difference is hammered home. Adult savages cannot hope to do better than white children, culturally. Lang gives himself the copyright to the word and the world. Unknowingly, Lang became the folklorist of empire. The Grimms used German folktales to create a foundation for the German nation and people. Lang used the idea universality of the folktale, adapted the diverse materials he found to the specific cultural needs of his audience. This led to an appropriation of the folk tale, as I see it. The culture industry continues this process of appropriation. More controversially perhaps, one can ask whether it is at all possible to compile multicultural fairy tale anthologies, even today, without somehow committing an act of appropriation culturally, aesthetically and politically?

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Mary Gould Davis americanises Lang’s allusions to the British child. In the preface to *the Crimson Fairy Book* the text goes: The Editor's business is to hunt for collections of these stories told by peasant or savage grandmothers in many climes, from New Caledonia to Zululand; from the frozen snows of the Polar regions to Greece, or Spain, or Italy, or far Lochaber. When the tales are found they are adapted to the needs of [British] children [by various hands, the Editor doing little beyond guarding the interests of propriety, and toning down to mild reproofs the tortures inflicted on wicked stepmothers, and other naughty characters.] Square brackets indicate cuts made by Mary Gould Davis.