Bruno Bettelheim's Uses of Enchantment and Abuses of Scholarship

The late Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990) was one of a distinguished set of psychoanalysts going back to Freud himself who was not afraid to apply the insights gained from psychoanalytic practice to a wide variety of cultural materials. These individuals include Otto Rank, Ernest Jones, and Geza Roheim, among others. A common thread in their applied psychoanalytic writings is a fascination with folklore.

In 1911, Freud coauthored with mythologist Oppenheim a small but nonetheless insightful essay entitled Dreams in Folklore which was unfortunately not published until 1958. In this important paper, Freud and Oppenheim demonstrated that the symbolism of dreams which were told as part of traditional folktales corresponded exactly with so-called Freudian symbolism. Moreover, the exegeses of the dreams contained in the folktales were explicated by the folk who had no knowledge of Freudian theory. Since the tales were much older than Freud and his theories, the folk interpretations of dream symbols provided a valuable authentic confirmation of the validity of Freudian symbolism. This striking congruence of folklore data and Freudian theory has not received the attention it deserves from either folklorists or psychoanalysts.


It is in this context that I wish to consider Bruno Bettelheim's remarkable foray into the world of fairy tales. In The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, first published in 1976, Bettelheim offers both an eloquent plea for the continued telling of fairy tales to children and a series of in-depth content analyses of a dozen or so of the best known Indo-European fairy tales. The basic position so ardently advocated by Bettelheim with respect to fairy tales is more obvious from the title of the German translation of the book: Kinder
brau-chen Marchen, that is, “Children need fairy tales.” In Bettelheim's opinion, fairy tales were helpful to children “in helping them cope with the psychological problems of growing up and integrating their personalities.” In a somewhat sentimental essay in which he confesses that “Hansel and Gretel” is his favorite fairy tale, Bettelheim relates its content to events in his own childhood.

For Bettelheim, fairy tales are absolutely essential for the mental health of children. Fairy tales function much like dreams, according to Bettelheim. “As we awake refreshed from our dreams, better able to meet the tasks of reality, so the fairy story ends with the hero returning, or being returned to the real world, much better able to master life.” Just as dream deprivation research suggests that individuals prevented from dreaming during the night become emotionally disturbed, so Bettelheim argues, perhaps by analogy fairy tale deprivation will prevent children from working through the unconscious pressures in their lives. Bettelheim maintains that “fairy tales offer figures onto which the child can externalize what goes on in his mind” and that if the child is deprived of fairy tales, he may not be able to “invent stories on his own which help him to cope with life's problems.” Bettelheim also points out aptly that “by denying access to stories which implicitly tell the child that others have the same fantasies, he is left to feel that he is the only one who imagines such things. This makes his fantasies really scary.”

In Bettelheim's scheme of things, fairy tales provide a necessary forum for the playing out of interpersonal problems, for example, sibling rivalry or parent-child conflicts, but they supposedly do so without the child's being consciously aware of the fact. In his words, one should “let the fairy tale speak to his [the child's] unconscious, give body to his unconscious anxieties, and relieve them, without this ever coming to conscious awareness.” In fact, Bettelheim insists that the parent and teacher should specifically refrain from telling children anything about the possible unconscious content of fairy tales. “Fairy tales can and do serve children well, can even make an unbearable life seem worth living, as long as the child doesn't know what they mean to him psychologically.” Bettelheim is adamant on this point: “One must never 'explain' to the child the meanings of fairy tales.” He further claims that explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him destroys the story's enchantment.

Presumably then Bettelheim's essentially Freudian readings of such fairy tales as “Hansel and Gretel” (Arne-Thompson tale type 327A), “Little Red Riding Hood” (AT 333), “Jack and the Beanstalk” (AT 328), “Snow White” (AT 709), “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” “Sleeping Beauty” (AT 410), and “Cinderella” (AT 510A) are meant for parents and teachers. Bettelheim's goal appears to be to enlighten those parents and educators who unwisely seek to keep fairy tales away from children at precisely that point in children's lives when they most need them.

It is interesting that Bettelheim is dissatisfied with the story of the “Three Bears” in the light of his general overall approach—[in his review of The Uses of Enchantment appearing in The New York Times Book Review (23 May 1976), John] Updike characterizes Bettelheim's discussion of the tale as having a “rather grumpy tone.” Bettelheim observes that the story lacks some of the important features of true fairy tales—no resolution of conflict, no happy ending. Goldilocks, according to Bettelheim, does not achieve any “higher selfhood” as heroes and heroines normally do in conventional folktales. The tale actually is not included in the Aarne-Thompson Indo-European folktale canon, perhaps because its initial orality is in some doubt. It is for the most part a tale that has flourished in literary rather than folk tradition. Bettelheim is quite right when he distinguishes the oral as opposed to the written transmission process. “When a story exists only in oral tradition,” he notes, “it is largely the teller's unconscious that determines what story he relates, and what of it he remembers.” Over the course of time, it is the many such oral repetitions of a story that hone its content to achieve what Bettelheim calls the tale's classic form which appeals to a consensus unconscious of many individuals.

Bettelheim is also to be praised for his strong opposition to illustrated children's book versions of fairy tales. He argues persuasively that the illustrations tend to be distracting rather than helpful and that they direct the child's imagination away from how he or she would experience the story. A child's imagination has no limits, but professional artists' illustrations tend to impose unnecessary and unwelcome restrictions on what a dragon or a princess looks like. Bettelheim's vocal opposition to artists' illustrations of fairy tales is entirely consonant with his
overall view that fairy tales should not be explained to children. Printed illustrations are in effect an attempt to explain to the child how the characters or events of a fairy tale should be pictured. Bettelheim's criticisms of the literary rewriting of oral fairy tales were also just, especially his objections to the severe bowdlerizations of Charles Perrault.

Many of Bettelheim's readings of individual tales are exemplary. His ingenious identification of sibling rivalry in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," his discussion of the underlying oedipal theme in "Cinderella," and his brilliant analysis of "Beauty and the Beast" as a successful resolution of the oedipal conflict whereby a girl's initial attachment to her father is transferred to an animal transformed into a husband, are all cases in point. However, the undeniable merits of Bettelheim's intellectual odyssey in the world of fairy tales are badly marred by several serious mistakes.

There are two major sins in The Uses of Enchantment, one of omission and one of commission. Let us consider the sin of omission first. If one wished to write a book devoted to the psychoanalytic study of folktales, one would in theory wish to consult two sets of sources. The first would be the folkloristic treatments of the tales under consideration and the second would be previous psychoanalytic exegeses of the same tales. From his footnotes, we can easily determine that Bettelheim did examine some relevant sources, but that he failed to read many others.

Bettelheim's lack of familiarity with conventional folkloristics leads him to make a number of erroneous statements. For example, he claims "in most cultures, there is no clear line separating myth from folk or fairy tale." The fact is that almost every society distinguishes between stories that are true and stories that are fictional. A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and its human inhabitants came to be in their present form. It is set in the remote past. Folktales are fiction as signaled by an opening formula such as "Once upon a time" and they are set in no particular place or time. Bettelheim continues to blunder when he states that "German has retained the word Sage for myths, while fairy stories are called Marchen." The second part of the statement is correct, but the first part confuses myth and legend. Sage in German definitely refers to legend, not myth. This error is surprising inasmuch as Bettelheim was a native speaker of German.

In other instances, Bettelheim is simply ignorant of relevant scholarship. For example, Bettelheim remarks that polarization dominates fairy tales. “A person is either good or bad, nothing in between. One brother is stupid, the other is clever. One sister is virtuous and industrious, the others are vile and lazy. One is beautiful, the others are ugly. One parent is all good, the other evil.” Bettelheim is quite right, of course, but all this is what Danish folklorist Axel Olrik described under the rubric of the "Law of Contrast," one of what he termed epic laws which were characteristic of folk literature. Olrik carefully delineated these epic laws in the first decade of the 20th century in a classic essay which was translated into English in 1965 ["Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," in Alan Dundes's The Study of Folklore (1965)].

Similarly, Bettelheim wrestles with the possible significance of the number three in fairy tales. This corresponds to what Olrik called the "Law of Three." Bettelheim is well aware of the conventional Freudian interpretation of the number three as standing for the male genitals (penis plus two testicles), but he seems to prefer the non-Freudian reading of three as symbolizing two parents plus a child, thus explaining why the child can so readily identify with that number. However, the occurrence of tripartition as an all pervasive form of "three-determined" thought in Western culture generally—that is, outside of the immediate world of fairy tales—would tend to weaken his argument.

Since Bettelheim does not pretend to be a folklorist, one can understand why he might have missed several key folkloristic sources. What is less easy to forgive is his failure to read earlier psychoanalytic studies of the tales he selected for analysis. While Bettelheim does admit in a footnote that a few fairy tales had been previously discussed psychoanalytically, there is nary a mention of many of the most important pioneering studies, for example, Franz Ricklin's pathbreaking Wishfulfillment and Symbolism in Fairy Tales, first published in German in 1908, or the many essays by Geza Roheim, perhaps the only psychoanalyst who began his career as a folklorist.
Bettelheim's neglect of Roheim is especially egregious as Roheim wrote whole essays on many of the tales Bettelheim chose to analyze, for example, “Hansel and Gretel” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” It is not that Bettelheim necessarily would have agreed with Roheim's interpretation of a particular tale, but only that it is a standard academic credo that one begins one’s own research where previous investigators have ended theirs.

Bettelheim's discussion of the latent content of “Jack and the Beanstalk” (AT 328) is typical. First of all, he makes no reference whatever to previous psychoanalytic interpretations of the tale. Most of what Bettelheim has to say about the tale from a psychoanalytic perspective had already been noted by earlier analysts. On the other hand, his suggestion that the detail of the good cow, Milk White, suddenly stopping to give milk might represent a symbolic maternal expulsion from an infantile oral paradise (in which weaning abruptly begins) is brilliant. Far less persuasive is his strange contention that the hiding of Jack by the ogre's wife in her oven symbolizes oral regression. The oven from a Freudian perspective is a pretty standard womb symbol—cf. to have a “bun in the oven” is a folk metaphor for pregnancy. Jack's hiding in the ogre's wife's oven is either a return to the womb or an act of overt aggression against the threatening father-figure ogre by entering the mother-figure's genital area. Bettelheim also fails to discuss the cutting down of the beanstalk in terms of castration symbolism, and although he is cognizant of the masturbatory overtones of the tale, he does not comment on the possible symbolic implications of Jack's stealing the magical harp that plays by itself in this context. The upshot of all this is that Bettelheim's analysis is surely insightful, but his scholarship is sloppy. He certainly should have read what other psychoanalysts had to say about the same tale. Had he done so, his own analysis might have been much more comprehensive and complete.

In those instances where Bettelheim's interpretation of a fairy tale differs markedly from earlier ones, it is especially annoying for the sophisticated reader not to have the benefit of Bettelheim's criticism of the earlier analyses. For example, comparison reveals that Bettelheim and Roheim came to vastly different psychoanalytic readings of the same fairy tale. Bettelheim sees the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” in oedipal terms. Little Red Riding Hood’s “danger is her budding sexuality, for which she is not yet emotionally mature enough” and the tale “deals with the daughter's unconscious wish to be seduced by her father (the wolf).” Bettelheim specifically rejects any oral aggressive element in the tale stating baldly that Little Red Riding Hood “has outgrown her oral fixation” and that she “no longer has any destructive desires.” This interpretation may be contrasted to Roheim's earlier one in which he argues that the tale is about infantile oral aggression. [Roheim writes in “Fairy Tale and Dream,” The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child 8 (1953):] “Aggression is combined with regression and it follows that the idea of being swallowed, being eaten, is the talio aspect of this aggression. The cannibal child creates a cannibal mother.” In Roheim's defense, it is true that the oral versions of the tale found in Asia: China, Japan, and Korea, as well as in Europe (France and Italy), the heroine does eat the flesh of her grandmother, a detail obviously omitted from the sanitized versions of the tale to be found in Perrault and Grimm. In the majority of the oral French versions, the wolf having killed the grandmother puts her blood in a container and her flesh on a plate. When Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her grandmother's cottage, she complains of being hungry and thirsty. The wolf in disguise invites her to eat and drink what is in the cupboard. When she does so, the wolf, or in some versions a passing cat or bird, chastises the girl by saying “You are eating the flesh of your grandmother and you are drinking the blood of your grandmother.” From a Roheimian perspective, eating the flesh and blood of one's (grand)mother is clearly an act of oral aggression. In one explicit French text from Valencay, reported in 1893, a mysterious voice sings to Little Red Riding Hood: “Tu manges de ma titine” which might be rendered in English as “You are eating my grandmother” [Eugene Rolland, “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge,” Melusine 6 (1892-93)]. This kind of textual evidence would certainly tend to corroborate Roheim's reading of the tale and to give pause to anyone advocating Bettelheim's claim that Little Red Riding Hood no longer has any destructive desires.

There are other mistakes and omissions. It is bad enough that Bettelheim claims the story of Oedipus is a myth—Bettelheim calls it “that paradigmatic myth of psychoanalysis,” a common enough error among psychoanalysts who are unaware of the fact that the story is a standard Indo-European folktale (AT 931)—but he goes on to exclaim “how different are the ways the fairy tale and this classic myth present oedipal relations and their consequences.” The tale of Oedipus actually reflects a fair amount of wishful thinking insofar as a young male kills
his father and marries his mother! Moreover, in the oral versions of the folktale (as opposed to the better-known literary adaptation by Sophocles), there are marvelous details which could provide grist for the psychoanalytic mill. For example, the hero often kills his father in the hero's mother's garden or orchard where the hero is standing watch at night. Killing an intruder at night who attempts to enter the mother's "garden" is an extraordinarily revealing element of the standard Oedipus folktale. In any event, Bettelheim in his own attempt to analyze the plot is totally oblivious of any of the huge mass of scholarship devoted to Oedipus including the superb paper by George Devereux, "Why Oedipus Killed Laius," that first appeared in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis in 1953, and the stunning psychoanalytic study of Greek mythology in general, The Glory of Hera, by Philip D. Slater in 1968.

There is little point in documenting Bettelheim's failure to consult relevant scholarship for each of the tales he considers. One further example can stand for all. Bettelheim references neither folklorist nor psychoanalyst in his discussion of "Snow White." He does mention [J. F. Grant Duff's "Schneewutchen: Versuch einer psychoanalytischen Deutung," Imago 20 (1934)] elsewhere in a footnote but he evidently did not read the standard folkloristic studies by [Ernst Boklen, Schneewittchenstudien (1910), and Max Luthi, Schneewittchen. So leben sie noch hevle; Betrachtungan zum Volksmarchen (1969)] or the psychological interpretations by [A. N. Foxe, "Terrorization of the Libido and Snow White" in Psychoanalytic Review 27 (1940), and A. S. Macquisten and R. W. Pickford, "Psychological Aspects of the Fantasy of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" in Psychoanalytic Review 29 (1942)].

Other outright errors could be mentioned. "Cupid and Psyche" is not a myth as Bettelheim claims, but a standard version of a widespread fairy tale, namely AT 425A, "The Monster (Animal) as Bridegroom." Perrault did not invent the glass slipper motif in "Cinderella", it is a traditional motif that has nothing whatever to do with an alleged homonymic relationship between "verre" [glass] and "vair" [fur], a spurious explication de texte which indeed only reaffirms the symbolism of the slipper as female genital.

Had Bettelheim read more of the relevant scholarship, he might have put it to good use. For example, he could have profited from a reading of Vladimir Propp's 1928 Morphology of the Folktale which has been available in English translation since 1958. Propp's 31-element syntagmatic structural scheme purportedly delineates the basic underlying sequential structure of all Russian (and perhaps Indo-European) fairy tales (Aarne-Thompson tale types 300-749). Bettelheim in the course of his analysis of "Brother and Sister" (AT 450) observes: "The story also suggests the two great upheavals in life: leaving the parental home, and creating one's own family." Propp's first element or function is: "One of the Members of a Family Absents Himself from Home" while the final, thirty-first function is: "The Hero is Married and Ascends the Throne." The point is that what Bettelheim noticed in one particular tale is to be found in all fairy tales. Moreover, the Proppian model would also lend credence to Bettelheim's oedipal remark made with respect to the tale of "Two Brothers" (AT 303) that "we must free ourselves of our oedipal attachments" and "we can do so most successfully by establishing an independent existence away from our parental home."

In his analysis of "Hansel and Gretel," Bettelheim might have benefited from the knowledge that in the original tale collected by the Grimm brothers, the character who sends the children to the woods is not the children's stepmother, but their actual mother. It was only in the fourth edition of the tales that the mother was changed by the Grimms to stepmother, precisely the kinds of meddling change deplored by Bettelheim, a change that tends to obscure the content of oral tales.

Thus far we have spoken only of Bettelheim's sin of omission, his failure to cite pertinent scholarship in folklore and psychoanalysis. But it is, unfortunately, Bettelheim's sin of commission that is more serious. Bettelheim did do some reading of sources in preparation for writing The Uses of Enchantment and it is his treatment of these sources that constitutes his second sin.

It is not surprising to find parallels between Bettelheim's book and earlier writings on the same subject. For example, Bettelheim attempted to distinguish between myth and folktale. "An even more significant difference
between these two kinds of story is the ending, which in myths is nearly always tragic, while always happy in fairy tales." More than 35 years earlier, Roheim wrote, "A folktale is a narrative with a happy end, a myth is a tragedy" ["Myth and Folk-Tale," *American Imago* 2 (1941)]. Roheim is not cited at all by Bettelheim so this may be merely a matter of great minds thinking alike. The same holds for Bettelheim's remarks on projection or what I have elsewhere termed "projective inversion." In his discussion of "Snow White," Bettelheim remarks: "the wish to be rid of the parent arouses great guilt.... So in a reversal which eliminates the guilt feeling, this wish, too, is projected onto the parent. Thus in fairy tales there are parents who try to rid themselves of their child." This passage may be compared to a pioneering statement made by Otto Rank in his *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* more than half a century before: "The fictitious romance is the excuse, as it were, for the hostile feelings which the child harbors against his father, and which in this fiction are projected against the father.... The child simply gets rid of the father in the neurotic romance, while in the myth the father endeavors to lose the child." I am not contending that Bettelheim consciously or unconsciously borrowed anything from Otto Rank, but only that Rank deserves credit for the insight seemingly articulated for the first time by Bettelheim.

One of the earlier books written on the psychoanalytic study of fairy tales was Julius E. Heuscher's *A Psychiatric Study of Fairy Tales: Their Origin, Meaning and Usefulness*, published in 1963. Although [James W. Heisig in his "Bruno Bettelheim and the Fairy Tales," *Children's Literature* 6 (1977)] wrongly chastizes Bettelheim for not mentioning this book, Bettelheim did refer to the book *en passant* in a footnote. A cursory comparison reveals that the order of the fairy tales discussed in both Heuscher's book and Bettelheim's book is similar. Heuscher discusses "Hansel and Gretel"; "Little Red Riding Hood"; "Snow White"; and "Briar Rose" ("The Sleeping Beauty") in succession. Bettelheim discusses "Hansel and Gretel"; "Little Red Riding Hood"; "Jack and the Beanstalk"; "Snow White"; "Goldilocks and the Three Bears"; and "The Sleeping Beauty." Except for the insertion of "Jack and the Beanstalk" and the tale of Goldilocks, the sequence of discussions is identical. Is this just coincidence?

One critic took Bettelheim to task for borrowing material from Heuscher's book without acknowledgment [Joan W. Blos, "The Emperor's Clothes," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 24 (1978)]. One example unearthed by this author:

> Hansel and his sister Gretel appear successful at first. But the frustrations at home continue. The mother seems to be more shrewd in her plans for rejecting the children ... [Heuscher]

> The children's successful return home does not solve anything.... The frustrations continue, and the mother becomes more shrewd in her plans for getting rid of the children. [Bettelheim]

It is sad to report that there are many examples of such borrowing from Heuscher and others without any indication of sources. The following examples were not reported by previous critics.

In Heuscher's discussion of "Snow White," we find the following passage:

> Not wishing to deprive any one too much, she eats just a little from each of the seven plates and drinks just a drop from each glass (how different from Hansel and Gretel who, rather disrespectfully, start eating the gingerbread house).

In Bettelheim's discussion of the same title, we find the following passage:

> though very hungry, she eats just a little from each of the seven plates, and drinks just a drop from each of the seven glasses, so as to rob none of them too much. (How different from Hansel and Gretel, the orally fixated children, who disrespectfully and voraciously eat up the gingerbread house!)

It should be noted that it is not just a matter of occasional borrowings of random passages, but a wholesale borrowing of key ideas. For example, one of the important pieces of advice that Bettelheim gives throughout his book is not to explain fairy tales to children. With that in mind, let us consider the following passage from Heuscher:
While one must never “explain” the fairy tales to the child, the narrator’s understanding of their meaning is very important. It furthers the sensitivity for selecting those stories which are most appropriate in various phases of children’s development and for stressing those themes which may be therapeutic for specific psychological difficulties.

Compare this passage with the following one from Bettelheim:

One must never “explain” to the child the meanings of fairy tales. However, the narrator’s understanding of the fairy tale’s message to the child’s preconscious mind is important.... It furthers the adult's sensitivity to selection of those stories which are most appropriate to the child’s state of development, and to the specific psychological difficulties he is confronted with at the moment.

This is not coincidence. There can be no doubt about the genetic relationship existing between these two passages (and there are others). The parallels extend even to the placing of “explain” inside quotation marks. If an undergraduate were to turn in a research paper with this sort of borrowing without any attribution, he or she would almost certainly be accused of plagiarism, normally grounds for failing the class if not for actual dismissal from the college or university.

All this is not to say that Bettelheim's book is not infinitely superior to Heuscher's, which is a confusing mix of Freudian, Jungian, and anthroposophical theories. But that isn't the point. It is perfectly all right for one writer to borrow from an earlier one, but when one does so, one is expected to give proper credit to the earlier writer. Bettelheim's description of the symbolism of the glass slipper combined with an analysis of finger-ring symbolism in wedding ritual was singled out for comment by one reviewer who suggested that “Only a True Believer, washed in the blood of Freud, will buy this” [Anthony Arthur, “The Uses of Bettelheim’s The Uses of Enchantment,” Language Arts 55 (1978)], but in fact the identical account appeared almost verbatim nearly ten years earlier than Bettelheim's book in a commentary to an essay in a psychoanalytic journal which Bettelheim briefly mentions. Again, Bettelheim failed to give credit to the earlier source from which he borrowed both the idea and the wording of it.

How then do we finally assess the contribution of Bettelheim's The Uses of Enchantment? There is little doubt that Bettelheim's book has brought Freudian readings of fairy tales to the attention of the general public. His readings on the whole are plausible if not always entirely persuasive. For the academy and that large segment of the public that tends to dismiss Freudian arguments out of hand, Bettelheim's book has had an important impact. Not only do fairy tales get a fair hearing, but the unique insights available through psychoanalytic reasoning are presented to the public in a most palatable form. To be sure, not everyone is pleased to see Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, and Little Red Riding Hood reclining on the analyst's couch and there remain a host of conservative academics unalterably opposed to anything remotely psychoanalytic.

One of America's foremost fairy-tale scholars, Jack Zipes, enumerates a number of severe criticisms of Bettelheim's treatment of fairy tales. According to Zipes, Bettelheim is overly authoritarian—in claiming that he knows how children unconsciously understand the tales, he is overly moralistic, and he ignores social and class differences when he assumes that all children will understand a fairy tale in the same way.

There is no doubt that Bettelheim's book has made psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales accessible to a wide audience, taking the subject matter off the dusty library shelves lined with esoteric folklore and psychiatric periodicals and placing his genuine insights in the light of common knowledge. The vast majority of the readers of The Uses of Enchantment will not be aware of Bettelheim's sins of omission and commission. They will simply be informed, enlightened, and delighted. It is only the very few scholars familiar with the whole history of the psychoanalytic interpretation of fairy tales who will be disappointed or puzzled by Bettelheim's faults—which seem so unnecessary for a man of his stature and reputation. Whether it was a matter of laziness or outright intellectual dishonesty, Bettelheim's legitimate and worthwhile contribution in The Uses of Enchantment is permanently marred by his failure to observe conventional academic etiquette. (pp. 74-81)