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Misperceived Perceptions: Perrault's Fairy Tales and English Children's Literature

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Misperceived Perceptions: Perrault's Fairy Tales and English Children's Literature

Ruth B. Bottigheimer (bio)

The place of Charles Perrault's fairy tales in the development of English children's literature has been both misunderstood and overrated. This view of Perrault's role in children's literature has a history. In the libraries I've scoured for books written for and read by children in eighteenth-century England, Perrault's fairy tales have been more an absence than a presence. This observation, however, is not enough to support so fundamental a redefinition of the early history of English children's literature. What can—and does—support my argument is book history, whose perceptions and methodologies I use here.

Let me offer one example of how book history is able to correct misperceptions that have arisen from the way books are listed in published library catalogs. Catalogs take their data from title pages, but title pages can be misleading. For example, what if one publisher, after a year of dismal sales, sold his books to another publisher, who then inserted a new title page and sent the books newly titled but otherwise unchanged out into bookshops? The catalog would record two dates of publication for one printing. Book history, in contrast, would use its resources to identify the book's text and its title page and to recognize that only one printing had, in fact, taken place. This is not an imagined example; it actually happened with a 1764 printing of Perrault's tales.

Unraveling an eighteenth-century printing practice like the reissue of 1764/65 requires a methodology and a vocabulary uncommon in the study of children's literature. "Print runs," "sheets," and "fingerprints" all play a role in explicating the relative popularity of individual **[End Page 1]** books in the eighteenth century. The argument that follows has a slow pace, and for that I apologize. I am urging a fundamental change in long-held views, and I want to build my case carefully and persuasively.

With clockwork regularity literary anthologies and course textbooks imply, suggest, or assert that eighteenth-century English children's literature was rooted in fairy tales, specifically those of Charles Perrault. Harvey Darton, whose richly documented history of English children's literature has provided the guiding direction for countless other accounts, wrote that Perrault's tales "have been naturalized citizens of

the British nursery" since they were translated by Robert Samber in 1729 (88). In *Classics of Children's Literature*, John Griffith and Charles Frey put five of Perrault's tales—"Sleeping Beauty," "Little Red Ridinghood," "Blue Beard," "Puss in Boots," and "Cinderella"—front and center and claim that they "grew steadily in popularity" once they were translated into English (3). Little wonder that Geoffrey Summerfield could comfortably state without further proof or elaboration that "these tales of Perrault soon passed into England, and in Robert Samber's translation were frequently reprinted throughout the eighteenth century" (44). Summerfield's easy acceptance of the Perrault paradigm characterizes both lay and scholarly perceptions.

The chronology of the publishing history of Perrault's tales in England would appear to substantiate such claims. Translated by Robert Samber and published in London in 1729, those tales preceded the 1740s printings of children's books by London's Thomas Boreman, Mary Cooper, and John Newbery by a good ten to fifteen years. But this simple chronological sequence has made it all too easy for generations of literary historians to leap directly to the conclusion that Perrault's prior appearance represented a point of origin. Exploring late seventeenth- and early- to mid-eighteenth-century English children's literature presents a disturbing disjunction between scholarly claims of Perrault's precedence and the mood evident in the literature itself.

Over the past several years I have undertaken a journey of discovery to research libraries in the United States, Canada, and England. My study of hundreds of books published for children between 1670 and 1770 has led, among other things, to a sense that it is necessary to revise fundamentally the place that Perrault's fairy stories occupy in the early history of English children's literature. The history of fairies and fairy literature in England encourages...

Articles

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