

Article

“All That Was Lost Is Revealed”: Motifs and Moral Ambiguity in *Over the Garden Wall*

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Abstract: Pointedly nostalgic in both its source material and storytelling approach, *Over the Garden Wall*'s vintage aesthetic is not merely decorative, but ideological. The miniseries responds to recent postmodern fairy tale adaptations by stripping away a century of popular culture references and using motifs, not to invoke and upset increasingly familiar fairy tales, but as an artist's palette of evocative, available images. In privileging imagery and mood over lessons, *Over the Garden Wall* captures something that has become vanishingly rare in children's media: the moral ambiguity of fairy tale worlds.¹

Keywords: transmedia; artifactualization; motifs; fairy tale; television

Three drops of red blood on white snow, against an ebony window frame. Three dresses the color of the sun, the moon, and the stars in the sky. Rough hemp necklaces, swapped in the night for the gold chains of the giant's children. These familiar motifs leap to mind, not just because we know them from various versions of Snow White (ATU 709), Donkeyskin (ATU 510B), and Mollie Whuppie (ATU 327B), but also because they are rich in sensory detail, marked by vivid colors and textures. Motifs are the still, constant centers of oral narrative, pins holding together the loose weave of emergent performance. Storytellers, particularly in literary and cinematic adaptations, build detailed, emotionally complex worlds around these minimalist, memorable images, arranging motifs like a kaleidoscope to convey ever-changing social, political, and ideological values.

Fairy tales are transforming and transformative texts; like their characters, they break rules, shape-shift, and change the world. But as the canon of familiar fairy tales has narrowed, cementing much-mediated versions of the stories as singular and authoritative, fairy tales become less fluid, and motifs become less mobile. They begin to function less like building blocks of endlessly variable narratives, and more like puzzle pieces that must be put together in the right order to reach a given message or moral: Appearances can be deceiving, so be patient with your beastly lover. Don't stray from the path. You have to kiss a lot of frogs. Someday, your prince will come. Playing against these well-worn scripts, a wave of postmodern parodies—the *Shrek* franchise (2001–), *Ella Enchanted* (2004), *Happily N'Ever After* (2005), *Hoodwinked!* (2006) and so forth—struck a chord with audiences, but also helped to further the moral simplification of fairy tales, naturalizing clichés even as they subverted them.

Unlike the majority of fairy tale films and television shows of the last decade, Patrick McHale's Emmy Award-winning animated miniseries *Over the Garden Wall* (2014) does not disrupt or critique fairy tale norms. Rather than trading on the familiarity of iconic characters, images, or plot points to tell

¹ This article has been adapted and expanded from two conference papers, presented at the 2015 Western States Folklore Society meeting, and the 2016 International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, and benefited from the thoughtful comments and suggestions of audience members, discussants, and my fellow panelists.

an old story with a fresh twist, McHale instead tells an original fairy tale in a pointedly old-fashioned way. Favoring traditional hand-drawn animation, a literary and artistic pedigree that skews heavily pre-20th century, and an emphasis on narrative closure that is becoming uncommon in an increasingly serialized and sequel-driven marketplace, the miniseries is tonally and stylistically distinct from the rapid-fire reference-based humor of *Shrek* and company. Though the show's vintage aesthetic drew the most attention, *Over the Garden Wall's* nostalgia is not purely decorative, but ideological. The miniseries responds to the ironic self-awareness of recent postmodern fairy tale adaptations by stripping away a century of popular culture associations and using motifs, not as a kind of narrative shorthand, but as an artist's palette of evocative, available images. In privileging imagery and mood over lessons, *Over the Garden Wall* captures something that has become vanishingly rare in children's media: the moral ambiguity of fairy tale worlds.

1. Old Stories for New

The miniseries opens in medias res, as brothers Wirt (Elijah Wood) and Greg (Collin Dean) find themselves in a dark wood where the straight way is lost. In the show's most overt reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the brothers' psychopomp through the place called the Unknown is a bluebird named Beatrice (Melanie Lynskey). The brothers are stalked by a shadowy antagonist, The Beast (Samuel Ramey), and helped by a gruff Woodsman (Christopher Lloyd) who both hates the Beast and serves him. Wirt and Greg encounter a colorful cast of characters, and in each of the ten 11-minute, self-contained episodes, learn about themselves and this strange world. It isn't until the final two episodes that the full impact of the brothers' adventure is revealed: Greg and Wirt are drowning on a Halloween night gone wrong, and their struggle to return home from the Unknown is a spiritual journey back to the land of the living.

Instead of making the strange familiar, the show makes the familiar strange, offering a fairyland that is all the more uncanny for being close to home. The series locates its fairy tale world, not in the classic castles and cottages of European tradition, but in an American rural past. Scenic shots of golden maple leaves, pumpkin patches and wild turkey ensure that the "dark wood" of a mythical afterlife is readily identifiable as New England in the fall. Riverboats, log cabins, single room schoolhouses, husking bees, and a folksy, turn-of-the-century musical score underline an Americana ambiance that evokes Carl Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories*, L. Frank Baum's *Oz* books, Mark Twain's "local color" writing, and the literary legends of Washington Irving. The music, provided by LA-based nouveau-gypsy band The Petrojvic Blasting Company, is a mixture of parlor music, ragtime, folk and jazz, while the show equivalents of the angel and the devil, the Queen of the Clouds and the Beast, are both voiced by renowned opera singers (Deborah Voigt and Samuel Ramey, respectively). Like the miniseries itself, the songs are original, but "antiqued", in the manner of Susan Stewart's "distressed" genres [1]; they are designed to sound and feel like songs you already know, or almost remember.

Much of the critical reception focused on the "Grimmness" of the show, in reference to both the macabre concept, and the show's muted, autumnal color palette—particularly compared to the candy-colored, vinyl-textured digital worlds of recent children's animation. In fact, the series is most like Grimms' fairy tales, not in its tone or subject matter, but in what it seeks to accomplish. Like the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, *Over the Garden Wall* might be called a "purifying" project: an attempt to strip away decades off accumulated fairy tale scripts and uncover (or invent) an "original" story. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs describe how the modern era was characterized by practices of purification and hybridization, in which language was alternately decontextualized to free it from social and political connotations, and then recontextualized to fit an emerging model of modernity that aimed to "restore [texts] to their 'simple' 'pure', 'integral' and 'complete' form" ([2], p. 216). The Grimms' editorial practices, Bauman and Briggs explain, produced fairy tales that looked and felt authentic precisely because they blended multiple texts and voices so subtly.

Similarly, McHale's miniseries purifies fairy tale motifs of a century of popular associations² and recontextualizes them within a world of earlier, more obscure references. *Over the Garden Wall* is a love-letter to classic animation, rife with visual allusions to 19th and early 20th century artists and illustrators: In the episode "Schooltown Follies", Greg and Wirt attend school with animals in period dress, styled on the illustrations of 19th century New York children's book publishers the McLoughlin Brothers.³ "Songs of the Dark Lantern" incorporates a character modeled on Betty Boop in an homage to the pioneering animation of Max Fleischer, while the episode "Babes in the Wood", which depicts Greg traveling to Cloud City in his dreams, nods to turn-of-the-century American cartoonist Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland." The title "Babes in the Wood" itself is a reference to the traditional broadside ballad, and foreshadows the episode's plot: discouraged from their fruitless search for the way home, Wirt and Greg lie down in the snow, cover themselves with leaves, and nearly freeze to death. Greg is lifted up to Cloud City (as the "babes" are lifted bodily into heaven, in some of the softened versions of the ballad or pantomime) and meets singing "reception committee[s]" of angels and animals in a scene straight out of MGM's 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. Greg rescues his new friends by bottling the blustery villain, the North Wind, in a nearly wordless slapstick scene clearly influenced by Disney's "Silly Symphonies." But as *Salon* television critic Sonia Saraiya notes, "You don't need to know the referents in 'Over the Garden Wall' to understand the story; it draws on such deeply rooted archetypes that it feels like a lost tale produced from the depths of childhood" [3]. Viewers might take pleasure in identifying potential allusions,⁴ but the miniseries is not a puzzle-box of pop-culture asides, with "Easter eggs" for viewers to track down. In the same way that "Herder, the Grimms, Schoolcraft, and Boas [. . .] pioneered techniques of textual hybridization in which written texts came to mirror as transparently and authentically as possible a set of primordial oral, traditional texts that they purported to recontextualize," ([2], p. 312) *Over the Garden Wall* paradoxically produces a sense of originality and authenticity by the depth and variety of its literary and artistic intertexts.

2. Singular Storytelling in a Transmedia Market

Of course, the miniseries is not a literary text approximating an oral tradition, but a televisual narrative nostalgic for an earlier era of media consumption. Just as the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* emerged from the rise of modernity—the "rough storm" that sweeps through the harvest and makes traditional oral literature feel rare and precious—*Over the Garden Wall* is a reaction to both the most recent wave of postmodern fairy tales, and to what some media studies scholars [5,6] are calling the post-television era. As a stand-alone miniseries, *Over the Garden Wall* feels quaint or even twee to audiences accustomed to fairy tale adaptations spun off, serialized, syndicated and merchandized. *Guardian* reviewer Brian Moylan observes wryly that, "between its aesthetic and the Americana invoked by the original songs, it's like this cartoon was made for those who buy artisanal pickles at the Brooklyn flea market. It has that same sort of fetishisation of the past that many who know the meaning of the word hipster do as well" [7]. Many critics remarked on the "artisanal" or "small-batch" nature of the show;⁵ McHale explains in an interview with various journalists that, "It's sort of a difficult show to make. The amount of musical variety, and we're using real instruments for all the music, not synths; the backgrounds are so complicated; and the animation quality we wanted

² Even the modern frame story is ambiguously set, with no pop-cultural references to help viewers determine whether Wirt and Greg are children of 2014, or 1984. A mix-tape plays a prominent role, but Wirt's crush tells him she doesn't have a tape player, perhaps because Wirt (like his creators) is prone to somewhat anachronistic forms of self-expression.

³ "Lullaby in Frogland" paints "McLoughlin Bros" on the side of a riverboat, in one of the few examples of influence explicitly acknowledged within the show itself. Most of the allusions I (and others) discuss are referenced in interviews, or on McHale's Twitter and Tumblr feeds.

⁴ See in particular the four-part series beginning with "'By the Milk-Light of Moon': Myths and Meanings of 'Over the Garden Wall'" by io9 user alliterater [4].

⁵ For a breakdown of the cultural politics behind the critical reception of the show, see Erin Horáková's review in *Strange Horizons* [8].

it to be a little bit higher, and that's just not something that we can really sustain for a long ongoing series" [9]. With its vintage aesthetic and well-digested references, the miniseries is a wistful attempt to preserve, not just a particular kind of story, but a kind of storytelling.

Over the Garden Wall is a traditionally broadcast, family-oriented television miniseries in an era of open-ended, multiplatform digital narratives. McHale originally conceived *Over the Garden Wall* as a holiday "special", something of an anachronism in a world where DVR and Netflix has made the idea of audiences tuning in together obsolete. Scant weeks earlier, various news sources [10] had announced the end of an era—the last remaining network to air Saturday morning cartoons had rearranged their programming, ending a weekend tradition that held strong from the 60s through the 90s. With the advances of digital streaming, as well as more narrowly defined target ages and demographics, Saturday morning cartoons became obsolete; anything can be watched any time now. But with its Halloween-themed story and richly drawn fall color palette, *Over the Garden Wall* drew meaning from its timeslot, such that subsequent viewings on other platforms feel like encore performances. The series originally aired two eleven-minute episodes a night over 5 nights, from November 3rd through the 7th of 2014. Though available as a digital download through iTunes and Amazon, the release date and staggered broadcast schedule acted as a small rebellion against the death of "event television".

While other programs embrace the participatory potential of transmedia storytelling, anchoring strands of narrative worlds across a wide swath of platforms, "*Over the Garden Wall* feels like a small, carefully crafted world that might disappear as soon as the episode ends" [3]. Henry Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as the distribution of a work of media across multiple platforms, each of which tells part of the story or offers a different perspective on a single ongoing text, such that "to fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels" ([11], p. 21). Since *Over the Garden Wall* has had a rich afterlife through fanfiction and fanart, as well as a limited-issue graphic novel, it is not exempt from what Jenkins calls "convergence culture" [11]. But nevertheless, it remains staunchly, committedly low-fi. When asked in a *Nerdist* podcast [12] about continuing the story, McHale makes it clear that "it's a self-contained story, with a definite end." The idea of a narrative that *ends* has begun to feel unexpectedly retro. A recent article for the *Guardian* ("Unfinished business: How Disney and Marvel killed happy ever afters" [13]) laments that the feedback loop of online fandoms has kept beloved film characters from riding off into the sunset; stories can never be satisfactorily resolved as long as they are still profitable. "What has changed", Nicholas Barber argues, "is that viewers are no longer being given—to quote Frank Kermode or Julian Barnes—the sense of an ending [. . .] to many of us, that fairytale fantasy was one of cinema's most attractive aspects." While sequels, spin-offs and novelizations are nothing new, storytelling in a transmedial moment can render a text inescapable; each platform begins where the others leave off until the narrative world rises three-dimensionally around us.

Perhaps Jenkins' "hunter-gatherers", viewers picking up the pieces of a discontinuous narrative, are a natural extension of the viewing habits fostered by fairy tale pastiche, in which fans take pleasure in skillfully tracking fairy tale characters and motifs scattered across increasingly overlapping narratives. *Over the Garden Wall* is both original (not retelling any recognizable fairy tales), and self-contained (not explicitly incorporating or commenting on fairy tales beyond itself), qualities that have become unusual during the rise of what we might call the fairy tale "expanded universe". This style of narrative unites a variety of literary and cultural traditions under a single umbrella and tries to reconcile the complicated web of relationships this produces—characteristic examples are Bill Willingham's graphic novel series *Fables*, ABC's *Once Upon a Time*, or the Hallmark miniseries *The 10th Kingdom*. In *Fables*, for instance, narrative economy collapses any and every Prince Charming into one philandering prince, while the Snow White of ATU 709 must also be the sister of Rose Red in ATU 426. Similarly, in *Once Upon a Time*, Rumpelstiltskin is sufficiently beastly to stand in for Belle's love interest. Conversely, *Over the Garden Wall* is its own world, free of any reference to recognizable characters or specific story arcs. Like their audiences, 21st century fairy tales occupy

a world that is becoming both larger and smaller: Cinderella isn't confined to her own tale type anymore, but she also can't leave her castle without tripping over Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, or Rumpelstiltskin. The scattering of plot points and story arcs across media platforms, though practically making a narrative larger, can have the effect of making the world feel smaller, crowded with stories we now know too well. The miniseries' singular, self-contained format is one answer to the sprawling, open-ended narratives of the web, which are endlessly refreshable in a way that both excites and exhausts.

3. The Incredible Shrinking Fairy Tale Canon

The pre-20th century aesthetic cultivated by McHale's miniseries evokes an old fairy tale recovered or restored, an appealing prospect to audiences convinced that the fairy tale genre has been thoroughly measured and mapped. As the opening narration intones, "Somewhere, lost in the clouded annals of history lies a place that few have seen—a mysterious place, called the Unknown, where long-forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the wood" [14]. The appeal of "reveal[ing]" stories "lost" or "long-forgotten" proved as potent in 2012 as in 1812: when a cache of stories from 19th century folklorist Franz Xaver von Schönwerth was discovered in an archive in Germany, the idea of authentic fairy tales lost for centuries struck a chord with the public and began trending on Twitter [15]. It fell to scholars to temper the excitement with reminders that we are not actually lacking in obscure fairy tales (and these particular fairy tales were not completely unfamiliar). In an interview for fan site *The Mary Sue* [16], Maria Tatar points out, "Our fairy-tale repertoire is not as expansive as it could be. At times it feels as if we ferociously repeat the same stories: "Cinderella", "Snow White", "Little Red Riding Hood", "Sleeping Beauty", and "Jack and the Beanstalk". When each year sees multiple film treatments of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, it may seem as though we have exhausted our fairy tale canon, when it has instead been artificially narrowed by the popular and commercial desire to hear the same stories over and over again.

As the fairy tales we tell become more standardized and less varied, the definition of "fairy tale" continues to shrink, to fit within this moving target. The critical charge of popular "twisted" fairy tales takes for granted that the genre being humorously exploded is static and natural. In other words, it presumes and even invents the canon it critiques, a process Susan Stewart called "artifactualization": "there is no natural form here, but a set of documents shaped by the expectations that led to their artifactualization in the first place" ([1], p. 106). In order for a parody to work, the new twist has to reproduce the earlier text, often with a narrative efficiency that simplifies and naturalizes it. Though films like Dreamworks' *Shrek* and (Disney's answer to *Shrek*), *Enchanted* (2007) received critical praise for subverting staid fairy tale conventions, Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder suggest that both films ultimately conform to more rules than they break:

[W]hile the parodied rescue scenes [of *Shrek*] draw on a satirical demystification of fairy tale formulas and motifs already active in popular culture, the effect is merely humorous and transient because the alliance of fairy tale and romance still ends up shaping the stories' closure and emotional power ([17], p. 31).

The image of a prince rushing to rescue a princess in a tower is humorously deconstructed in the opening frames of each film, but every fresh iteration of the joke further reinforces the narrowing scope of the fairy tale canon.

As our stock of familiar stories shrinks, the work those stories do is distributed more heavily on a small number of highly visible motifs, which act as a means of simplifying and packaging stories. Jeana Jorgensen has described the fragmentation and recombination of familiar motifs as "fairy tale pastiche", particularly in commercials in which advertisers use a lost slipper or red hood to efficiently invoke a fairy tale and its associated meanings [18]. Building on this, Cristina Bacchilega connects the parodic use of fairy tales to the iconicity of well-known motifs, observing, "what is new here, as I see it, is not the reproduction of isolated fairy tale symbols and images in new contexts, but that

their reutilization in branding ‘new’ products often rests on the marketability of mixing and parodying these iconic bits” ([19], p. 111). These are motifs that can never be experienced on their own terms, their meaning is always “in the second degree” [20], less a part of the story we consume than asides, reminders of what texts to read this new story *through* or *against*.

Decontextualizing motifs from familiar narrative arcs and their burden of associations, *Over the Garden Wall* is free to break fairy tales down to their constituent elements and assemble a new story. *Over the Garden Wall* is rich in familiar fairy tale motifs used in unfamiliar ways: in the opening sequence, Greg leaves a trail of candy to mark their path, like the trail of breadcrumbs (R135.1) in Hansel and Gretel (ATU 327, also 431). In another episode, Wirt and Greg take shelter from a storm in the home of a witch, who declares she can smell them when she comes home, in the manner of the Giant of ATU 328A, Jack and the Beanstalk. Greg is a “wise fool” who challenges the Beast by completing a series of impossible tasks: he brings the Beast the golden comb and silver thread demanded—a honeycomb and a spiderweb—and uses forced perspective to catch the sun in a china cup (motif H1023.22). Like the Ferryman of ATU 460/461, the Woodsman is compelled to cut down the mysterious Edelwood trees to keep his lantern lit, and can only be free of his burden if he finds another to take his place (motif H1292.8). The Beast, we eventually learn, keeps his soul outside of his body, as in ATU 302, the Giant Without a Heart. But the fairy tale motifs are never entirely what they appear, frustrating or foiling expectations about the internal logic of fairy tales. In the first episode, Greg frees a bird caught in a branch and is rewarded with her help (motif B364.1), but the struggle was staged by Beatrice herself, who plays off the children’s knowledge of fairy tale rules to lead them into a trap. Greg accomplishes all of the Beast’s impossible tasks, but they are only a pretext to distract him from the growing cold—it was never a victory. “I beat the Beast”, he tells his brother weakly, while the Edelwood tree grows around him.

Conversely, in the version of fairy tale canon condensed and artifactualized through repeated remediation (especially on the part of Disney, which is now incestuously mining its own already narrow canon in an ambitious slate of upcoming live action remakes), a kiss breaks a spell, kindness to animals is rewarded, and witches bearing gifts should not be trusted. Meanwhile, stories of disenchantment through decapitation (motif D711) as in Madame D’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat” or Andrew Lang’s “The Seven Foals”, have fallen out of vogue for some reason. In some versions of ATU 425, burning the beast’s skin restores his human form (D793.2); in other versions it backfires and throws the lovers further apart. Some witches take your children for stealing from their gardens (ATU 310), but in some stories the order is reversed—the witch in Tatterhood (ATU 711) tells the queen what to eat to conceive a desperately wanted child. In fact, fairy tale rules are less widely agreed upon than recent pop culture adaptations might lead viewers to expect. Describing his functions for the wonder-tale, Vladimir Propp reminded us that, though Interdiction and Violation are paired functions, “A command often plays the role of an interdiction. If children are urged to go out into the field or into the forest, the fulfillment of this command has the same consequences as does violation of an interdiction not to go out into the forest or out into the field” ([21], p. 27). Structurally, this is perfectly sound, but for the social or psychological analyses according to which fairy tales are often interpreted, the idea that obeying the rules and breaking the rules are all the same troubles tidy assertions about the moral agenda of fairy tales.

4. The Shock Effect of Beauty

As a small number of fairy tales are adapted, expanded, reworked and interwoven, familiar motifs become a means to invoke a set of canonical fairy tale rules and codes to push back against. But as John Frow notes, “Texts—even the simplest and most formulaic—do not *belong* to genres but are, rather, uses of them” (qtd. in [17], p. 27). McHale treats the genre, not as a box to break out of, but as a toolset of evocative, available images with which to build new stories. *Over the Garden Wall*’s success lies in its recognition of what makes fairy tales so mobile and resilient: morals are culturally and historically contingent, but the emotional and sensory impact of blood on snow, death trapped

in a sack, or a comb that becomes an impenetrable forest can be recontextualized to serve a number of narrative roles. In prioritizing mood, tone, and imagery to achieve a vintage aesthetic, McHale echoes the approach of 18th and 19th century scholars who used a text's poetic force, particularly its capacity to seize the imagination, as a measure of age and authenticity. By this (ideologically loaded) metric, a genuine work of folk narrative or poetry would be "emotional, vivid, figurative, spontaneous, without artifice" ([2], p. 147). In the same vein, *Over the Garden Wall* uses fairy tale motifs, not to invoke and upset familiar stories, but in the way oral narrators use them, as resonant images—what Max Lüthi [22] called the "shock effect of beauty".

The notion of fairy tales as fundamentally lessons, buried in poetry, has been spurred by the popular success of psychological interpretations of fairy tales—Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian approach in *The Uses of Enchantment*, the Jungian analyses of Joseph Campbell in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* and Clarissa Pinkola Estés in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. But it makes equal sense to read from the other direction and say that fairy tales are fundamentally poetry, buried in lessons. Fairy tales can be made to incite action, instill values, or invite judgment, but before they can do any of those things, they must strike on the mind. Lüthi's analysis of "Beauty and its Shock Effect" observes that fairy tales model the powerful, narrative-driving impact of beauty for readers, who are caught in the beauty of the story just as the characters within the story are enchanted—literally stricken dumb or dead—by a portrait of a beautiful princess: "[The fairy tale] describes not beauty but its effect, and in accord with its characteristic inclination to the extreme, represents this effect as a sort of magic" ([22], p. 3). Thinking back on their early childhood reading experiences, Maria Tatar's students "find it challenging to try to show what children learn from the lesson that they identify in [Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Princess and the Pea']" only agreeing that it is about "sensitivity"—the focus is on the embodied sensation of the pea, bruising the princess' flesh through the layers of featherbeds ([23], p. 78). Describing the sensory immersion that makes early reading experiences so powerful, Tatar notes that, "the authors of children's books stockpile arsenals of beauty and horror to construct 'peak experiences,'" that maintain their hold on readers well into adulthood ([23], p. 12). The imagery of fairy tales is minimalist but memorable, spare and sparkling, dipped in blood or gold.

If the "beauty" of princes and princesses, forests of gold and silver, slippers of fur and mountains of glass seems more reminiscent of rarified courtly tales than a folk narrative aesthetic, we can focus instead on the shock. Carl Lindahl's study of North American Jack tales finds that "beauty" in the traditional sense is less significant in mountain Märchen than violence: it is the intimate, visceral details of the story that form the template for oral storytelling. Lindahl cautions against privileging the study of structure over the poetic force of fairy tale imagery, noting that,

The power with which Märchen images impress visual memories upon their listeners should lead us to question the idea that these tales survive solely because of their perfectly memorable structures. There is substantial evidence to the contrary. Rather than memorizing plots, tellers "see" their stories in their minds' eyes, hanging their memories of the tale on one or more spectacular images ([24], p. 85).

Similarly, Harold Scheub's study of oral narrative in southern Africa argues that analyses of storytelling have historically focused too abstractly on stories' morals, or too myopically on structuring, organizing and categorizing folk narrative, while neglecting the role of poetic features like image and rhythm. He writes, "the first ingredient of story, its basic building block, is image, most importantly fantasy image, which becomes a means of evoking emotions at the same time that it becomes a critical way of organizing those emotions" ([25], p. 29). Fairy tales can be used to convey messages and moral stances, but they are remembered as a series of rich colors and sharp contrasts, as thrills of excitement or horror. McHale's miniseries is assembled from narrative arcs kept deliberately brief and strange; the story seems to exist as a framework for the imagery, rather than the reverse.

5. Against Interpretation

Over the Garden Wall is a miniseries that knows how to hang the story on “spectacular” imagery, arguably at the expense of narrative coherence and characterization. Critiques of the show find that the miniseries is more concerned with surface than substance. *The New York Times* notes that “the stories are perilously thin”, while *Variety’s* review suggests that the show’s rarified aesthetic trumps its plot: “there’s less interest in how they complete their journey home than in just savoring the imagery of getting there, which should appeal to a rather narrow and refined palate” [26,27]. But the slight, enigmatic quality of the narrative is not a flaw, but a strategy. Fittingly, the show is driven by dream-logic: characters drop in and out of the brothers’ journey, monstrous enemies often turn out to be friends in disguise, animals speak or sing unexpectedly, time and distance are vague. In what some critics viewed as weak storytelling or poor characterization, Wirt and Greg have little agency in their story. They react to this strange world, but rarely make decisions that drive the narrative, and when they do, the perspective often shifts to make that decision meaningless. In “Mad Love”, for instance, Greg and Wirt (but mostly Beatrice) spend an episode attempting to rob a rich tea baron to pay their steamboat fare.⁶ When Quincy Endicott gives them the money freely, Greg flings the coins into a fountain because, as he explains bitterly, “[he’s] got no sense[/cents]” [14]. In “The Ringing of the Bell”, Wirt tries to rescue a maiden from what he thinks is a cannibalistic witch, only to find (in an Angela Carter-esque twist) that it is the girl who is the monster. Acting as audience stand-in (particularly for the child viewers), Greg spells it out: “For some reason, I thought that old lady was the people-eater. But it was Lorna all along! It just goes to show you stuff” [14]. Typical for Greg, whose childish non-sequiturs provide much of the program’s humor, it’s a funny statement because it isn’t clear what it does “go to show you”. The episode thwarts the expected moral—that appearances can be deceiving—because in the end, there are no heroes or villains. Lorna is an innocent monster, Auntie Whispers is a loving jailer, and Wirt’s young hero is largely irrelevant to either of their stories. In a review for the speculative fiction magazine *Strange Horizons*, Erin Horáková argues that the show’s minimalist plots and moral opacity are key to the series’ appeal: “*Over the Garden Wall* posits that set answers are themselves poor things to pin your hopes on and let guide your actions: the Woodsman’s false lanterns” [8]. Beyond a certain mood or feeling, it’s difficult to know what message to take away from these spare, vivid stories—which is, I would argue, the point.

Essentially, *Over the Garden Wall* is faulted for the same psychologically thin, visually lush, morally ambiguous approach to storytelling that characterizes the folk narrative traditions it draws from. In a review for the *New Yorker*, Maria Tatar praises fantasy writer Philip Pullman’s 2012 translation of the Grimms as “sheer story that, in the end, leaves the work of finding messages and decoding morals entirely up to us” [28]. Tatar sees Pullman’s retelling as a response to the 200 years of popular and scholarly interpretations that have grown up around the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* like Sleeping Beauty’s briars: “Left cold by Freudian, Jungian, or Marxist readings of fairy tales as well as by feminist critiques and any of the usual orthodoxies, Pullman longs for what the poet James Merrill calls an ‘unseasoned telling’—purged of dross, untainted by an overlay of piety, politics, or prudery”. Tatar, of course, has spent a career unearthing the piety and politics beneath the Grimms’ ‘unseasoned tellings’, but nevertheless recognizes in Pullman’s nostalgic approach a kinship to the Grimms’ own 19th century editorial practices. The “charged imagery” of fairy tales work best when their work is “elliptical, as the text works on us in its own silent, secret way” [28]. Similarly, the allusive, underdetermined morals of *Over the Garden Wall* allow viewers breathing room to experience the fairy tale on their own terms, rather than being instructed in how to read or use it. Ultimately, the miniseries reminds us that fairy tales do not “mean” anything on their own. What fairy tales do or say, the specific morals or social messages imparted by the stories, are less significant (and less durable) than *how* they

⁶ The fare is 2 pennies, traditionally placed on the eyelids of the dead, foreshadowing the series reveal and the limbo-like nature of the Unknown.

say it: via the evocative, emotionally-laden motifs invested with fresh meaning by each storyteller and audience.

6. Conclusions

It is only when we are on the cusp of a new medium that we truly recognize the constraints and possibilities of the old—a kind of televisual estrangement. *Over the Garden Wall* is a story that, for all its vintage aesthetic, reflects a very contemporary anxiety about the kinds of stories, and venues of storytelling, being transformed beyond recognition by new media. As Donald Haase observes, “Whatever the paradigm shift in communication, the folktale becomes a vehicle through which the impact of this shift is observed and assessed” ([29], p. 222). McHale’s fairy tale, aesthetically and formally, becomes a vehicle for commentary on the increasingly permeable, open-ended nature of both the post-television era, and postmodern fairy tale adaptations themselves. In response to the reduction and simplification of the fairy tale canon, which saw a small number of stories become more well-trodden and entangled, McHale crafts and curates a deliberately small world, less encumbered by the baggage of popular retellings and interpretations. Decontextualizing fairy tale motifs from the layers of associations that have made them recognizable and marketable allows motifs to function on their own terms, as the minimalist, memorable images that make fairy tales so powerful and protean. Though the cultivated quaintness of the miniseries might be dismissed as nostalgia for its own sake, *Over the Garden Wall*’s 19th century storybook visuals are more than superficial; they are a reflection of the show’s investment in recovering or restoring a fairy tale world less predetermined and more morally opaque. *Over the Garden Wall* is a new story doing an old job, an original fairy tale that promises that, as the theme says, “all that was lost is revealed”.

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