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Real Toads in Imaginary Gardens: Nursery Tales on the Frontier

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Eastern and obscure in origin, pagan, Hellenic, biblical, Islamic, traveling from ancient Greece, Egypt, Persia, India, and Baghdad, to Italy, France, Germany, and Great Britain, like accidental tourists the nursery tales arrived in the eighteenth century on the American shore. What they were called determined how they were preserved, studied, and valued: myths, fables, “popular antiquities,” fairytales, and, after 1847, folktales. Somewhere along the way, they entered the nursery, chosen, unaccountably, by adults to recite to children before they went to sleep. Primarily oral, anonymous, collective, and bearing signatures of the culture, class, occupation, locality, and language that produced them, nursery tales are often studied as if they were folktales. They are, in fact, especially in America, a separate genre. To Herder, who initiated the study of folktales in 1778, and to his followers, they were repositories of language, national spirit, local customs or rituals, images of a society in its infancy.¹

In the American setting, however, removed from the original languages, local traditions, and national character that they supposedly preserved, the tales lost their value as folktales and entered a new life cycle as nursery tales – familiar oral narratives told primarily by adults to children.² Translated, adapted, assimilating fairytales, fables, and myths, sometimes published and then restored to the oral communities, nursery tales were enriched by every setting and society in which they had been told. While they offer none of the insight into the language, customs, and rituals of colonial life that folktales provide, they document an emotional history of life on the edge, by the sea, in the woods, the boundary or liminal territories all children both literally and metaphorically inhabit and that the adults who raised them entered when they came to what they called the New World.³
Although they share many characteristics of folktales, and are often adapted to the nursery, fairy tales have a different genealogy and brought a curious contribution to American life. Written in France to amuse the court or teach aristocrats the virtues of civilité, along with folktales, they entered the nurseries and colonized Europe at the same time as Europeans were colonizing America: Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* appeared in 1697, Galland’s translation of “The Arabian Nights,” as *Les Mille et Une Nuits* in 10 volumes during 1704–17, and other familiar tales by courtesans such as Mme. D’Aulnoy or Mme. De Beaumont, author of the most familiar version of “Beauty and the Beast.” Their tales were collected in inexpensive chapbooks, distributed by peddlers all over Europe, appropriated in turn by new storytellers whose adaptations returned them to the folk tradition. The princes and princesses, the woodcutters, weavers, and ogres in “Cinderella,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “Rapunzel,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “Puss in Boots,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Bluebeard,” and all their many variations, came to England, and later to the colonies, with merchants, tutors, and domestic servants. Some were collected as souvenirs by the British who had gone abroad for their educational tours or to learn languages. And some were dispersed by the French themselves when they found refuge from religious persecution in Germany, Scandinavia, Holland and England.

The nature and function of fairytales, however, were shaped by the indigenous cultural forms they encountered in their travels, many of which had circulated in the oral communities for several hundred years before they were published. The fairytales were largely about mating, magic, female power, property, supernatural interventions, bestiality transformed or recovered, and subtle tests of quality or rank. However different from the heroic tales, they came from the same sources, were collected in the same ways, and addressed the same audience: Macpherson’s fabricated Ossianic poems, published between 1760 and 1763, which he claimed to have collected in the Scottish highlands, and Bishop Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), a highly contrived but more authentic collection of poems and metrical romances. They inspired Herder, philosopher, philologist, and historian, to collect native poetry, published as *Volksleider*, 1778–9, which, like the Ossianic poems and *Reliques*, he believed represented the pure spirit of Germany, preserved among the lower classes. In turn, Herder inspired a whole generation of writers and collectors who were looking for evidence of historical evolution in the narrative traditions of the isolated German villages.