



G. K. Chesterton: Fidei Defensor

G. K. Chesterton: Fairy Tale Philosopher

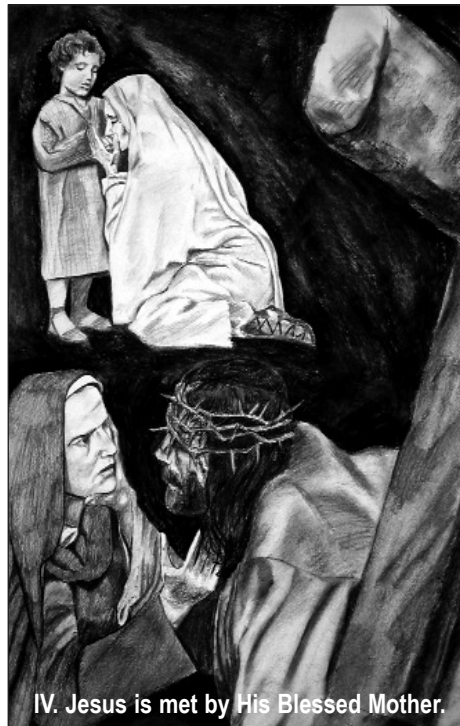
By Jennifer Overkamp

Chesterton was preoccupied with fairy tales. He wrote seven full-length articles defending them, and devoted a chapter in his spiritual autobiography, *Orthodoxy*, to emphasizing the pivotal influence they had had on his thought. The phrase “fairy tale” appears in his writing more than 500 times. In every major work of Chesterton we find fairies, knights, princesses, goblins, dragons, and similar characters in which fairy tales abound. In journalism he uses fairy tale imagery to discuss everything from hunting to neo-paganism to international relations. Nor was his interest in fairy tales temporary. His first fairy tale, “Flickerflash” (c. 1888), was penned around the time he was 14 and his play about a princess in a tower, *The Surprise* (1932), was written when he was 58. Every decade of his life has multiple references to fairy tales, both in fiction and non-fiction. We cannot understand his thought until we understand his ideas about fairy tales.

Because fairy tales were a perennial preoccupation of Chesterton’s, one can see his core beliefs about them scattered liberally throughout his work. However, his ideas are most thoroughly explained in *Orthodoxy*. In this work of apologetics we see how Chesterton dramatically expands the spiritual value of fairy tales from didactic stories to the source of a philosophy that leads to Christianity. *Orthodoxy* was written in 1908 as a response to a specific challenge. After Chesterton had published *Heretics* various critics had pointed out he had omitted to proffer his own philosophy, and instead had merely attacked other people’s ideologies, a much simpler task. Chesterton responds in his Introduction to *Orthodoxy* that it was

“perhaps incautious” to point this out “to a person only too ready to write books on the feeblest provocation.”¹ The much-loved book that resulted from this “provocation” is a series of interrelated essays which outline the thoughts which led to and which support Chesterton’s belief in Christianity.

The fourth chapter of the book, “The Ethics of Elfland”, is the clearest explanation of Chesterton’s fairy tale philosophy. He describes a process where, influenced by the mental attitudes of fairy tales, he developed what he considered to be a reasonable philosophy based on his experiences in life and then discovered that Christianity had been there first. With wry humor, he remarks, “I was always rushing out of my architectural study with plans for a new turret only to find it sitting up there in the sunlight, shining, and a thousand years old.”²



IV. Jesus is met by His Blessed Mother.

The first conviction that fairy tales sparked in Chesterton was “that this world is a wild and startling place, which might have been quite different, but which is quite delightful.”³ Here, as elsewhere in his work, his words reflect a continual sense of wonder at what he refers to in another essay as “the enigma of being alive.”⁴ He writes in *Orthodoxy*, “The sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvels of power, intellect, art, or civilization. The mere man on two legs, as such, should be felt as something more heartbreaking than any music and more startling than any caricature.”⁵ His work is soaked in this deep sense of wonder, which is the first reason he values fairy tales: “These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found out they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water.”⁶

In Chesterton’s view one doesn’t step through a portal to get to fairyland; rather, one comes to a realization that one has been there all along. With that idea of remembering, Chesterton erases the boundary between everyday life and fairyland: “Every man has forgotten who he is. . . . All that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instance we remember that we forget.”⁷ Similar quotes appear in *The New Jerusalem* and *The Everlasting Man*, and in the essay “The Fairy Tale” he makes explicit the idea that remembering means remem-

bering that one is in fairy land: "I was sitting the other day on a heap of stones in the isle of Thanet, when I remembered that I had forgotten. Not a straw had stirred; not a bird had spoken; but my blood ran cold, and I knew at once that I was in fairyland."⁸

If the boundary between real life and fairyland is a matter of awareness and not of geography, it is reasonable that Chesterton calmly discusses the real world in terms of magic: "The only words that ever satisfied me as describing Nature are the terms used in the fairy books, 'charm,' 'spell,' 'enchantment.' They express the arbitrariness of the fact and its mystery. A tree grows fruit because it is a magic tree. Water runs downhill because it is bewitched. The sun shines because it is bewitched." He adds: "I deny altogether that this is fantastic or even mystical."⁹

The wonder and delight caused by inhabiting a magical world, Chesterton writes, led to lasting gratitude for existence in such a universe. When Chesterton was a teenager he wrote a letter to a friend, opposing pessimism by noting, "You should never look a gift universe in the mouth."¹⁰ Years later he wrote that he never quite abandoned religion, even in his darkest and most confused years, clinging to it with "one thin thread of thanks."¹¹ As he writes in *Orthodoxy*:

The test of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Could I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?¹²

Eventually this gratitude led Chesterton to consider the existence of God. As he put it, "I had always believed that the world involved magic: now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician."¹³ This idea of God as a magician was also connected to the idea of God as an artist: "I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and a meaning must have someone to mean it. There was

something personal in the world, as in a work of art."¹⁴

Gratitude engendered an obedience that was still closely connected with wonder, as Chesterton explains in what he calls his second conviction born of fairy tales, that "before this wildness and delight one may well be modest and submit to the queerest limitations of so queer a kindness."¹⁵ This theme is repeated throughout the chapter. In one of his most famous quotations, Chesterton argues that "the proper form of thanks . . . is some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them." He adds, "We owed, also, an obedience to whatever made us."¹⁶ Obedience is possible, and indeed, wise, in this wild and delightful world. There are rules in fairyland. Chesterton notes that "fairy godmothers seem at least as strict as other godmothers. Cinderella received a coach out of Wonderland and a coachman out of nowhere, but she received a command—which might've come out of Brixton—that she should be back by twelve."¹⁷ Chesterton writes that, brought up on fairy tales, he was not surprised that life, too, had rules and consequences.

Such, it seems, was the joy of man, either in elfland or on earth; the happiness depended on *not doing something* which you could at any moment do and which, very often, it was not obvious why you should not do. Now the point here is that to *me* this did not seem unjust. If the miller's third son said to the fairy, "Explain why I must not stand on my head in the fairy palace," the other might fairly reply, "Well, if it comes to that, explain the fairy palace." If Cinderella says, "How is it that I must leave the ball at twelve?" her godmother might answer, "How is it that you are going there till twelve?"¹⁸

In a world of wonder, Chesterton writes that he "did not feel disposed to resist any rule merely because it was mysterious. Estates are sometimes held by foolish forms, the breaking of a stick or the payment of a

peppercorn: I was willing to hold the huge estate of earth and heaven by any such feudal fantasy. It could not well be wilder than the fact that I was allowed to hold it all."¹⁹ When we turn from considering *Orthodoxy* to looking at Chesterton's other writing we discover that fairy tales consistently hold center stage in his perspective of the human drama. In fact, he goes so far as to insist that a fairy tale motif contains his entire moral universe. Chesterton argues that fairy tales sum up the four possible human responses to moral challenges:

Through all my own dreams, especially waking dreams, there run and caper and collide only four characters, who seem to sum up the four ultimate types of our existence. These four characters are: St. George and the dragon, and the Princess offered to the dragon, and the Princess's father, who was (if I remember right) the King of Egypt. You have everything in those figures: active virtue destroying evil; passive virtue enduring evil; ignorance or convention permitting evil; and Evil.²⁰

Fairy tales also reflect human existence because they generally involve a quest and a battle, which happen to be exactly what life itself involves. Fairy tales remind the reader of this moral truth: life is a battle of deadly seriousness. Chesterton writes that he believes "that the simplified and symbolic version of life, which depicts it, under the image of love and war, as a quest with a prize (especially a princess), is nevertheless a true version of life; that it is an enlightening symbol and a legitimate simplification."²¹

For Chesterton, the truth of good literature comes from this focus on life as a quest with battles: "And it is, I think, the abstract truth that any literature that represents our life as dangerous and startling is truer than any literature that represents it as dubious and languid. For life is a fight and is not a conversation."²² Chesterton often connects ethical behavior and fairy tale battles, such as in this quote from an essay on politics: "There are plenty of inhuman monsters in the modern world. . . . The only real difference between fairy tale and modern fact is

this: that in the fairy tales the monsters are fought. That is one of the very many superiorities of fairy tales.”²³

Chesterton goes even further and argues not only that we should fight monsters because life is like a fairy tale, but asserts that the fairy tale is a fundamentally religious and ubiquitous one. The elements of “deepest reality” and “essential religion” are collected in one outline of a classic tale: “that Man is sent forth by an authority that is good, like King Arthur or a fairy godmother, into a world that is wonderful, but contains dangers and temptations, like dragons and wizards; that he is sent upon a quest or trial; that is, that he is judged by the same authority that sent him forth. That is the story at the heart of all healthy life and literature.”²⁴ Once again Chesterton argues that fairy tale images can best depict the moral structure of the universe.

Fairy tales are also uniquely valuable to Chesterton because they are the intersection of two crucial elements of life for him: wonder and democracy. Wonder already has been discussed in detail, as it is an essential part of Chesterton’s philosophy and a primary reason for the importance he places on fairy tales. Democracy is an equally vital idea for Chesterton. For him the word goes beyond politics to represent instead a fundamental belief in the value and sanity of the ordinary person. The practical upshot of this belief is that the ordinary person should rule himself: “In short, the democratic faith is this: that the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves—the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state. This is democracy; and in this I have always believed.”²⁵

Chesterton is interested in what is common and therefore fairy tales resonate with his ideology because they are common in multiple ways. They are told by the common folk, they are full of common sense, and they involve common things.²⁶ He writes, “Fairy tales are as normal as milk or bread. Civilization changes; but fairy tales never change. Some of the details of the fairy tale may seem odd to us; but its spirit

is the spirit of folk-lore; and folk-lore is, in strict translation, the German for common sense. . . . The fairy tale means extraordinary things as seen by ordinary people.”²⁷ This commonness is why, Chesterton tells us, “the old fairy tale makes the hero a normal human boy.”²⁸ The common folk tale has a hero from among the common folk. This is also why Chesterton refers to fairy tales as “the oldest and gravest and most universal kind of human literature.”²⁹ There is always some element of the ordinary in a fairy tale. A princess may be present, true, but she has to kiss a frog. A prince may go on an adventure, but the adventure happens in the woods. Most fairy tales involve woodcutters, fishermen, shoemakers, and other ordinary folk as characters, often as protagonists. Fairy tales are also common when considered from a historical perspective:

Even in the mere matter of physical fact the fairy tales are much more of a picture of the permanent life of the great mass of mankind than most realistic fiction. . . . Fairy tales deal with that life in fields and huts and palaces, the simple relations with the ox and with the king which actually are the experience of the greatest number of men for the greatest number of centuries. The real farmer in most real places really does send his three sons out to seek their fortune; he knows uncommonly well that they will not get it from him.³⁰

Some reflection on this idea shows that Chesterton is right. Even the items which are

enchanted in fairy tales are quite ordinary. A fairy tale might tell of a poisoned apple or a magic ring or a flying horse, but apples, rings, and horses are all everyday items. A reader does not need to know about hydrostatics or theoretical mathematics or recent discoveries in linguistics to be able to understand fairy tales; they really are democratic.

A true democrat, at least one with a modicum of optimism, must also believe in the sanity of ordinary folk, and that common sense is, in fact, common. This idea appears repeatedly in Chesterton’s work in connection with fairy tales. In his essay “The Dragon’s Grandmother” Chesterton describes himself putting down a modern psychological novel and picking up Grimm instead because, “Here at least, here at last, one could find a little common sense.”³¹ He argues that the modern novel demonstrates all that is wrong with modern fiction because modern fiction fails to value the sanity of the common person.

. . . [F]airy tales in their essence are quite solid and straightforward; but . . . this everlasting fiction about modern life is in its nature essentially incredible. Folk-lore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming. The problem of the fairy tale is what will a healthy man do with a fantastic world? The problem of the modern novel is—what will a madman do with a dull world? In the fairy tales the cosmos



V. The Cross is laid upon Simon of Cyrene.

goes mad; but the hero does not go mad. In the modern novels the hero is mad before the book begins, and suffers from the harsh steadiness and cruel sanity of the cosmos.³²

Chesterton repeatedly asserts that “fairyl-land is nothing but the sunny country of common sense.”³³ He consistently connects fairy tales both with common sense and with the ordinary person.

With Chesterton’s regard for the ordinary person, he is naturally annoyed when their literature is disregarded. This unfortunate attitude is not just snobbish, it is foolish because whoever holds it will miss a valuable source of truth: “But a tradition is generally a truth; so long as the tradition is sufficiently popular; and even if it is almost vulgar.”³⁴ This elevation of the ordinary and the traditional is so pervasive in Chesterton that he extends it to the ordinary items of home and hearth. This reverence for common things also connects back to his idea of democracy.

That kitchen chair may truly be called (as they say in the colleges) the Chair of Philosophy. I stride up and down the room, rejoicing in the divine meaning of chairs. I wave away, with wild gestures, that merely dingy and spiteful democracy which consists in declaring that every throne is only a chair. The true democracy consists in declaring that every chair is a throne.³⁵

Chesterton views this imaginative re-seeing of common objects as a fundamental aspect of a fundamental genre. To see again the excitement of domesticity and the fun of furniture means to see the world as it really is.

The experience of seeing again is an important one for Chesterton, who goes so far as to argue that it is necessary to save civilization. He asserts: “I’m confident that there is no future for the modern world, unless it can understand that it has not merely to seek what is more and more exciting, but rather the yet more exciting business of discovering the excitement in things that are called dull.”³⁶

What are the practical consequences of

this philosophy? How would adopting Chesterton’s fairy tale philosophy affect our everyday lives? Among the many practical implications, I will point out the two most important. First, we can be more aware of our magical world that is filled with inexplicable and beautiful things. Second, we must never forget our quest. We can never have an ordinary day because we are in fairyl-land fighting dragons. As Chesterton put it: “A man in fairyl-land goes forth to seek his fortune as a man on earth goes out to save his soul. The excitement vastly improves the landscape.”³⁷

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
4. Chesterton, “A Fairy Tale” (1906), *Lunacy and Letters* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 104.
5. *Orthodoxy*, p. 52.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
8. “A Fairy Tale”, pp. 103–104.
9. *Orthodoxy*, p. 58.
10. As quoted in Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), p. 50.
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12. *Orthodoxy*, p. 60.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
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21. “The Attack on Romanticism” ([*Illustrated London News*. 18 Apr. 1931]

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22. “Fiction As Food” (*The Spice of Life*. Beaconsfield: Darwen Finlayson, Ltd., 1967), p. 36.

23. “Plain-Speaking in Elections, Art, and Artists” ([*Illustrated London News*. 3 Feb 1906] *Collected Works*. Vol. 27. Ed. Lawrence J. Clipper. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), pp. 119–20.

24. “A Symposium on Religion” ([*Illustrated London News*. 3 Oct 1925] *The Collected Works*. Vol. 33. Ed. Lawrence J. Clipper. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), p. 638.

25. *Orthodoxy*, p. 52.

26. In quotes cited earlier, “common sense” had seemed to be something that causes people to forget that we are in a wonderful world. Here, Chesterton argues that “common sense” is valuable. This apparent contradiction highlights the paradox of Chesterton’s view of the fairy tale. Common sense is sometimes a hindrance and sometimes a treasure, and fairy tales repress or provide it, presumably as the situation warrants.

27. “Education by Fairy Tales” ([*Illustrated London News*. 2 Dec. 1905.] *Collected Works*. Vol. 27. Ed. Lawrence J. Clipper. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), p. 72.

28. *Orthodoxy*, p. 20.

29. “Education by Fairy Tales”, p. 73.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

31. “The Dragon’s Grandmother” (*Tremendous Trifles*. 1907. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909), p. 123.

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33. *Orthodoxy*, p. 54.

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35. “On Being Moved” (1909), *Lunacy and Letters* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 17.

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37. “The End of the Tale” (*Daily News*. 4 Mar. 1911), p. 605.