

The promotion of moral values through  
Victorian children's stories:  
Charles Dickens's 'Frauds on the Fairies'  
(1853) and a 'Robinson Crusoe' nursery  
wallpaper design (1875-1900)

*ELERI  
RYLEY*

*This essay considers an article by Charles Dickens on the alteration of fairy tales alongside a nursery wallpaper design depicting scenes from the Robinson Crusoe story. In doing so, it explores the use of stories to promote particular values to children in the Victorian period, and the ways in which 'classic' children's stories could be repeatedly adapted and reinterpreted.*

In October 1853, Charles Dickens published an article in his weekly journal, *Household Words*, in response to a new edition of the fairy tale *Hop-o'-my-Thumb* produced by the illustrator George Cruikshank. In his article, Dickens vehemently protested against what he saw as the unwarranted appropriation and alteration of fairy stories for the purpose of promoting particular moral values to children. Dickens's article reflects a debate which had begun several decades earlier over the place of didacticism in children's literature. Alongside fairy tales, Dickens discusses the Robinson Crusoe story, which is portrayed in a nursery wallpaper design dating from the final quarter of the nineteenth century. While the wallpaper does not demonstrate the kind of overtly moralising adaptation that was lampooned by Dickens, it nonetheless provides an example of the selective and modified use of a 'children's' story. Consideration of the wallpaper alongside the article reveals much about the status of childhood in Victorian culture and the use of stories to promote values to children, as well as raising questions about who 'owns' children's literature. Stories – whether or not they were explicitly didactic – could be used to convey messages to children about how they should behave and how they should view the world. Dickens argues that classic children's stories should be kept in a 'pure' form, but this overlooks both

the value judgement inherent in the designation of any story as suitable for children, and the way in which such stories are part of a constant process of adaptation and reinterpretation, by both adults and children.

Dickens's article, 'Frauds on the Fairies', criticises the 'editing' by Cruikshank of a fairy story for the purpose of 'propagating the doctrines of Total Abstinence, Prohibition of the sale of spirituous liquors, Free Trade, and Popular Education.'<sup>1</sup> The issue, claims Dickens, is not the rightness of the doctrines themselves – 'it makes', he says, 'not the least difference to our objection whether we agree or disagree with our worthy friend [...] in the opinions he interpolates' – but rather the alteration of a fairy tale for the purpose of promoting values of any kind. The article parodies such moralising adaptations by offering the reader a rewritten version of the Cinderella story, infused with temperance messaging and other comically incongruous elements. For Dickens, fairy tales are a refuge for the imagination, which must be protected above all in a 'utilitarian age.' To do so, he argues, one should preserve them 'in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact.' This challenges the 'utilitarian' elevation of facts as superior to fantasy stories, by suggesting that the latter should be afforded the same status, in part

<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Frauds on the Fairies', *Household Words*, Vol. 8, No. 184 (1 October 1853), pp. 97–100

because of the very ‘extravagance’ that marks them as opposite to factual literature. The insertion of the writer’s own opinions (in this case, Cruikshank’s) into such stories is likened to a ‘Whole Hog’ driven into the ‘fairy flower garden.’ Fairy tales, in Dickens’s characterisation, have a purity, and potential fragility, akin to that of childhood itself, and to alter them by inserting morals that are not contained in the original version is to destroy their worth.

Dickens celebrates fairy tales as feeding the imagination of children, by ‘captivating a million of young fancies’. This, and his rejection of didacticism in children’s literature, reflects views expressed by Romantic writers earlier in the century. As children’s literature developed as a genre in the eighteenth century, instruction played a prominent role, but it was often combined with entertainment. John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744), frequently cited as marking the beginning of mass publishing specifically for children,<sup>2</sup> used stories and even an accompanying toy as a tool for teaching children acceptable ways to behave, while texts such as Sarah Trimmer’s *Fabulous Histories* (1786) combined fantasy with moral instruction.

However, several Romantic writers saw didactic literature for children as diametrically opposed to the kind of fantasy stories that might nourish a child’s imagination. In an 1808 lecture, Samuel Taylor Coleridge attacked moral tales for children as promoting not goodness but ‘goodyness’ and stated a preference for stories such as Jack the Giant Killer, ‘for at least they make the child forget himself.’<sup>3</sup> This celebration of the immersive power of fantasy stories, over literature with more worldly aims, is echoed in the concluding paragraph of ‘Frauds on the Fairies’: ‘The world is too much with us, early and late. Leave this precious old escape from it, alone.’ Dickens’s allusion here to the sonnet by William Wordsworth, ‘The World is Too Much With Us’,<sup>4</sup> suggests the influence of Romanticism on Dickens’s thinking. Sir Walter Scott similarly condemned moralising literature, saying that when children read it ‘their minds are, as it were, put into the stocks’.<sup>5</sup> The suggestion that material of this kind could hinder the capacity for free thinking is taken further by Dickens, who declares that this has implications for the development not only of individual children but the nation as a whole: ‘a nation without fancy, without some romance, never

did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun.’

Dickens’s article, however, is concerned not with moral literature as a separate category from fantasy, but rather with the unwarranted intrusion of the former into the latter. By the time he was writing, fairy tales had become widely accepted, and indeed celebrated, as suitable reading matter for children, and the publication of collections such as the Grimms’ tales, translated into English in 1823, marked their elevation to a literary form.<sup>6</sup> This shift in the view of fairy tales can be seen in Dickens’s use of the word ‘texts’ to refer to them, in spite of their origins in oral culture. The popularity of such stories might suggest that the Romantic view of children’s literature had triumphed, but the divide between didacticism and fantasy had never been entirely clear-cut, and Cruikshank’s version of *Hop-o’-my-Thumb* reflected the ongoing integration of the two by many writers.

While Dickens’s article primarily discusses fairy tales, he mentions the Robinson Crusoe narrative as an example of a classic children’s story that might be (mis)used for moralising purposes. This story is also the subject

of a nursery wallpaper design produced in the final quarter of the nineteenth century,<sup>7</sup> which depicts selected scenes from Crusoe’s time on the island. The very existence of a product such as this, designed expressly for use in a child’s nursery and depicting a story considered suitable for a child, suggests both the heightened status of childhood in the Victorian period and the important place assigned to stories within childhood. Dickens’s view of childhood as a ‘blessed time of life’ was not an isolated one: childhood was often idealised in Victorian culture as a time of innocence that should be protected and celebrated.<sup>8</sup> The wallpaper, and others like it, indicates that at least by the second half of the nineteenth century – when such specialised goods began to be produced<sup>9</sup> – this stage of life was considered sufficiently important that middle- and upper-class parents might be willing to buy nursery furnishings specifically designed for children’s rooms. It is, however, also suggestive of a view of children as occupying a separate sphere from adults: this is a decorative piece to be used in a part of the house reserved for children, whose access to other rooms might be limited.<sup>10</sup> Dickens may express a wish to ‘walk with children, sharing their delights’, but

<sup>2</sup> Robin Bernstein, ‘Toys Are Good For Us: Why We Should Embrace the Historical Integration of Children’s Literature, Material Culture and Play’, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter 2013), p. 458

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in M. O. Grenby, ‘Chapbooks, Children, and Children’s Literature’, *The Library*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2007), p. 295

<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘The World Is Too Much With Us’ (1807), Poetry Foundation website

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in M. O. Grenby, ‘Moral and Instructive Children’s Literature’ (15 May 2014), British Library website

<sup>6</sup> Lewis C. Roberts, ‘Children’s Fiction’ in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger & William B. Thesing, p. 357

<sup>7</sup> ‘Unknown, Robinson Crusoe, 1875–1900, 101.6 x 50.9 cm, wallpaper, Victoria and Albert Museum, London <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74620/robinson-crusoe-wallpaper-unknown/>>

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, p. 354

<sup>9</sup> Jane Hamlett, ‘White-Painted Fortresses? English Upper- and Middle-Class Nurseries, 1850–1910’, *Home Cultures*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (November 2013), p. 246

<sup>10</sup> Hamlett, p. 247

the idealisation of childhood contained in his article maintains a firm divide between children and adults.

Indeed, Jane Hamlett writes of the typically strict separation of the nursery from the rest of the house in middle- and upper-class Victorian and Edwardian homes, as a space for children and the servants who cared for them.<sup>11</sup> The material culture of these spaces could, she notes, be imbued with social significance, for instance in helping to instil gender norms, or teaching children about the importance of neatness and order.<sup>12</sup> Commentators such as the architect Robert W. Edis advised parents to pay close attention to the way in which nurseries were decorated and furnished, arguing that material culture could play a role in fostering the right kind of values in children. As with the Robinson Crusoe wallpaper, stories were seen to play an important part in this. Edis suggested that nurseries might be decorated with scenes from 'Jack and the Bean Stalk, Cinderella [...] and a whole host of other nursery rhymes and tales.'<sup>13</sup> The function of these illustrations is not considered by Edis to be purely decorative: he indicates that the choice of stories may also serve a moral purpose, asking 'Why not cover the walls of the nurseries with illustrations, telling of the glories and, if you

<sup>11</sup> Hamlett, p. 246

<sup>12</sup> Hamlett, pp. 248, 255

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Edis, *Decoration & Furniture of Town Houses: A Series of Cantor Lectures Delivered Before the Society of Arts, 1880* (Connecticut: Scribner and Welford, 1881), p. 228

<sup>14</sup> Edis, p. 228

please, the horrors of war - teaching peace and goodwill by illustrating the antitype [...]?'<sup>14</sup> Edis is not necessarily recommending the kind of retouching of stories to which Dickens objects, but as his comment makes clear, the selection (by adults) of stories and illustrations to be displayed in nurseries often involves the promotion of certain values. The link between children's stories, material culture and moral messages can be traced back to Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in the mid-eighteenth century, which was sold with an accompanying ball (for boys) or pincushion (for girls), and included instructions on how these items were to be used to encourage good behaviour.

The choice of the Robinson Crusoe story as a suitable subject for a nursery, and the presentation of the story in the wallpaper design, suggests the promotion of particular values to the children who were to be surrounded by its scenes. This does not mean, of course, that its function is purely didactic - the story has held an appeal for generations of children, and adults, as an exciting adventure - but its status as a 'classic' tale is linked to the ideas it can be seen to promote. Many eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century critics, including, most famously, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had

pointed to the educational possibilities offered by the novel, particularly if children sought to emulate its hero.<sup>15</sup> The potential for Crusoe to function as an imperialist role model for Victorian boys may account, at least in part, for the popularity of versions of the story during the nineteenth century. The boyish appearance of Crusoe in the wallpaper when he first arrives on the island (in the frame captioned 'Robinson Crusoe coming from the wreck') encourages a child to identify with him, thereby placing him- or herself in the position of a British adventurer in a foreign land. The depiction of Friday as physically dwarfed by a now bearded and older-looking Crusoe might evoke a child's sympathy, but his initial nakedness highlights his 'otherness', as does the caption 'Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday', with its implication that he is a possession or, at most, a servant of the European. Still more 'other' are the 'savages', who appear in the background, barely distinguishable as people. The incident of 'Robinson Crusoe and Friday firing on the savages' is seen very much from the perspective of those with the guns, rather than dwelling on the human effects of the violence. Weaponry features prominently - Crusoe's gun appears in every image - but the wallpaper does not follow Edis's suggestion of also depicting the horrors of violence.

<sup>15</sup> Heather Klemann, 'The Matter of Moral Education: Locke, Newbery, and the Didactic Book-Toy Hybrid', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Winter 2011), pp. 238-9

<sup>16</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', Poetry Foundation website

The choice of what not to include therefore supports an imperialist view of violence towards native people as morally acceptable.

The wallpaper does, however, show an abundance of natural imagery, in keeping with both Edis's recommendations and, to a degree, with Dickens's claim that 'love of nature' is something that fairy tales, in their unedited form, can nurture in a child reader. That Dickens chooses the image of a flower garden to represent the unsullied fairy tales - a metaphor extended by the reference to the unwelcome presence of the 'hog' of didacticism 'among the roses', and the likening of intruded opinions to a 'weed' - suggests a linkage between nature and children's stories, as well as childhood itself. This emphasis on nature again relates to Romantic ideas of childhood, which may be seen for instance in Wordsworth's description of the young as 'Nature's Priest.'<sup>16</sup> In the wallpaper, every frame features a backdrop of trees and foliage, some of them 'exotic' in appearance, but others bearing a strong resemblance to English trees. This may perform a similar function to the boyish look of Crusoe noted earlier, helping an English child to identify with the pictures and suggesting the possibility of adventures in their own natural environment. However, the

wallpaper emphasises the ways in which the natural environment may be made to serve human purposes, rather than merely appreciated for its own sake. Crusoe is shown going out hunting and sitting at a table with a neatly built fence shutting out the wilderness, surrounded by his 'family' of domesticated animals. The pictures are framed by borders of sticks, arranged in a regular pattern, which convey a sense of rugged nature while also suggesting the necessity of taming it. This focus on the utility of the island's environment fits in with the imperialist message suggested by the story's portrayal: both natural and human resources may ultimately be judged in terms of their usefulness to Crusoe, or to the (assumed white British) audience.

Dickens's article gives 'kind treatment of animals' as another of the 'good things' that fairy tales have 'nourished in the child's heart', and the Crusoe wallpaper – like many children's stories – includes animals, in the scene of 'Crusoe at dinner with his family' (the 'family' being cats, a dog, and a bird). In the wallpaper, the animals serve to recreate a scene of domesticity, with Crusoe as the paternal figure. Critics such as Andrew O'Malley and Christine Kenyon-Jones have argued that the use of animals (who may represent the lower classes) in children's literature often serves to support social hierarchies,<sup>17</sup> by

representing inequalities as natural, even while they encourage kindness towards the lower orders. Here, the way the animals are looking up at the 'father' Crusoe has the effect of reinforcing familial hierarchies, while also suggesting this familiar domestic set-up is so essential as to be reproduced even in the extreme isolation of the island.

The portrayal of weapons and violence in the Crusoe wallpaper can be seen in contrast to Dickens's assertion that fairy tales – in their unedited form – can nurture 'abhorrence of tyranny and brute force.' However, Dickens's argument implies that the reverse values might be acceptable if they are to be found in the original story. Satirising the idea that the Robinson Crusoe narrative might be edited for moral purposes, as Cruikshank did with *Hop-o'-my-Thumb*, Dickens asks readers to '[i]magine a Total abstinence edition of Robinson Crusoe, with the rum left out. Imagine a Peace edition, with the gunpowder left out, and the rum left in [...] Imagine an Aboriginal Protection Society edition, to deny the cannibalism and make Robinson embrace the amiable savages whenever they landed.' Were such adaptations of the story permitted, he declares, 'Robinson Crusoe would be "edited" out of his island in a hundred years, and the island would be swallowed up in the editorial ocean.'

Dickens's argument, however, not only overlooks the values inherent in the designation of any children's story as a 'classic', but also denies the mutable nature of the Robinson Crusoe story, especially as a tale for children. Soon after the publication of Daniel Defoe's novel in 1719, the story began to be reproduced in pirated chapbook editions, and it was often in this form that the tale was first consumed by children, as well as by many adult readers, as sales of these cheaply produced books far exceeded those of the original.<sup>18</sup> In these editions, the story was highly edited to fit the typical 24-page format of a chapbook, a process which involved both the omission of many elements and an emphasis on others. O'Malley argues that chapbook editions tended to focus on aspects of the story that placed it within an existing popular repertoire, leaving out the parts that made it more unique.<sup>19</sup> Jordan Howell sees these adaptations as helping to produce the character of Crusoe that had been mythologised and broadly assimilated into Western culture by the nineteenth century. That Dickens mentions Robinson Crusoe alongside fairy tales suggests he is referring not to Defoe's original novel but to the popular version of the story. Like fairy tales – which were also widely

read in chapbook form during the eighteenth century – this story is not a fixed text, but something which had been repeatedly adapted and modified. The wallpaper provides evidence of the continuation of this process.

Each of the scenes shown in the wallpaper can be found in Defoe's novel, but the artist has made a choice about which scenes to select and how to depict them. This selective use and interpretation of a story is also done by illustrators whose work accompanies an original text. Indeed, Cruikshank had illustrated some of Dickens's writing, including *Sketches by Boz* and *Oliver Twist*, and this had been at times a source of friction between the two men. From the outset of their working relationship, Dickens insisted that Cruikshank should keep closely to what he had written, rather than seeking to influence the meaning of the text<sup>20</sup> – a concern with the preservation of the original meaning of a work of literature which is also seen in the article, written 18 years after his first introduction to Cruikshank. As an illustrator, Cruikshank saw his relationship with texts differently, seeking not only to decide which scenes he should illustrate but at times suggesting alterations to the text itself.<sup>21</sup> This potential challenge to

<sup>17</sup> Darren Howard, 'Talking Animals and Reading Children: Teaching (dis)Obedience in John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's *Evenings at Home*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.4 (Winter 2009), p. 643

<sup>18</sup> Andrew O'Malley, 'Poaching on Crusoe's Island: Popular Reading and Chapbook Editions of *Robinson Crusoe*', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2011), p. 18

<sup>19</sup> O'Malley, p. 23

<sup>20</sup> Harry Stone, 'Dickens, Cruikshank, and Fairy Tales', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, Vol. 35, No. 1/2 (Autumn/Winter 1973), p. 218

<sup>21</sup> Stone, p. 220

the author's control over the meaning of the text is particularly pertinent in children's literature, which commonly features extensive illustrations. Such illustrations can influence the reader's perception of the text even when it is seen in its original form, by highlighting certain episodes as especially worthy of attention, or suggesting a particular way of imagining characters or events.

The fixed status of texts written for children is further complicated by the different ways in which children consume literature, compared to adults. Younger children will often have the story read to them, giving the adult reader the potential to influence the meaning of the text by how it is read, or even edit what is spoken. The meaning of these texts is not, however, solely controlled by adults, whether authors, illustrators or readers. As Robin Bernstein has argued, children themselves appropriate literature in their tendencies to recreate stories through play.<sup>22</sup> Dickens's article declares that anyone who alters a fairy tale 'appropriates to himself what does not belong to him', protesting against Cruikshank's 'right' to alter such a story. However, this raises the question of who does own these stories. Dickens may be suggesting that such stories belong to children, but he is himself seeking to impose an adult's judgement on the acceptable form the stories may take, even if this is based on an idea of what children

might prefer. Dickens's opening sentence, 'We may assume we are not singular in entertaining a very great tenderness for the fairy literature of our childhood', constitutes an appeal to the nostalgia of his adult readers, but his desire to protect the purity of this literature is threatened not only by adult editors or illustrators, but also by children themselves.

The Robinson Crusoe wallpaper and 'Frauds on the Fairies' are testament to the importance of stories in Victorian views of childhood, and to the contested use of such stories in shaping children to become the 'right' kind of adults. In 'Frauds on the Fairies', Dickens recognises the potential power of stories for promoting particular values to children, but objects to the editing of fairy tales, or 'classic' stories such as Robinson Crusoe, for this purpose. However, the article overstates the extent to which the stories it discusses - and, indeed, children's literature more generally - can be seen as having a fixed form, content and meaning. The history of Robinson Crusoe as a children's story points to the ways in which such tales have been repeatedly adapted - a process of which the wallpaper provides one example. Even where this is not done for explicitly moralising purposes, the editing and presentation of the story can impact upon the values it conveys. Children's literature is especially susceptible to reinterpretation, since

it is often illustrated, frequently read aloud, and at times recreated in material culture, whether in products such as the wallpaper considered here, or by children themselves through play. These multiple points of reinterpretation make attempts to control the original content and meaning of stories for children particularly problematic.

<sup>22</sup> Robin Bernstein, 'Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or, The Possibility of Children's Literature', *PMLA* 126(1) (2011), p. 163