

Once upon a time, fairy tales were not for children.



From Rags to Witches



The grim tale of children's stories

For at least a thousand years, traditional tales of magic, enchantment, beasts and beauties were told and retold by the lower classes. The melodramatic stories, driven by the characters' actions and not their personalities, were full of sex, death and violence, which would have livened up the long winter nights or the hours of tedious repetitive work.

The world in which they were set is familiar and at the same time other-worldly. The woods may not have been enchanted or inhabited by magical beasts, but the landscape was familiar to a largely agrarian population. Famine was common, and it is no coincidence that many tales feature children abandoned by poor parents unable to feed them. Protagonists are set tasks that reflect the lives and culture of the storytellers. For example a German heroine spun straw into gold whilst her Italian peer completed a lasagne-based challenge. Fairytale princesses married as teenagers because their real-life aristocratic counterparts did.

Attitudes to fairy stories have fluctuated. Nineteenth-century novelist and historian Walter Scott expressed concern whether he could write a work on fairy tales that would be 'obnoxious to ridicule'. A century later, poet W.H. Auden considered *Grimms' Fairy Tales* as important as the Bible and J.R.R. Tolkien defended fairy stories by equating them to fantasy and mythology.

This exhibition has been curated by staff from Manuscripts and Special Collections at the University of Nottingham.



Witch in *Aunt Louisa's London Picture Book* (1867). Briggs Collection PZ6.V2 Oversize barcode 1006125533

Religion does not consist in believing the Legend of the Nursery, where Children with their Milk are fed with the Tales of Witches, Hobgoblins, Prophecies and Miracles.

The lady's new-year's gift, or, Advice to a daughter, the Right Honourable George, Lord Saville (1741). Briggs Collection LT109. BJ/H2 barcode 6002470497.

Derided as children's tales told by superstitious, ignorant nursemaids and old women, fairy stories were not always considered a suitable field for scholarly research, or even for children. A new genre of highly moralistic children's stories became popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but this had begun to decline by the time C.S. Lewis argued with Tolkien that myths and fairy tales were 'lies breathed through silver'.

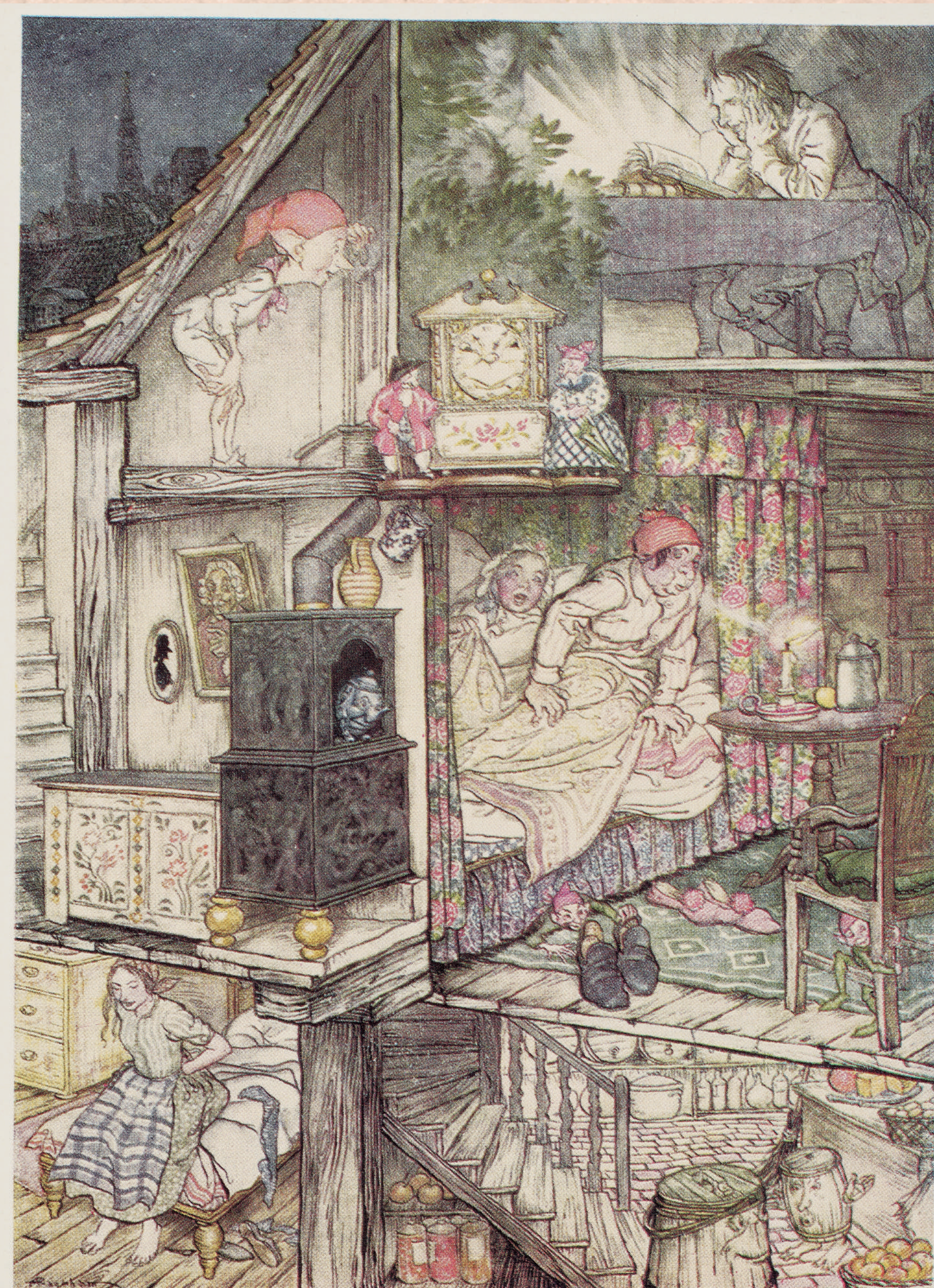


Illustration by Arthur Rackham from 'Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales', from Derek Hudson, *Arthur Rackham. His Life and Work* (1960). NC 242.R3 Central Store barcode 6001396199.

Storytelling both reflected and shaped culture. For two centuries, traditional peasant tales were collected, sanitised, published and released back into popular culture, first by the European middle classes, and then by Disney. Paradoxically, this softening of the stories may well have contributed to the resurgence of interest in fairy tales as a genre.



Page proof containing rhyme and illustration of a witch from *Kate Greenaway album* (1933). Special Collection Over. XX NC242.G7 barcode 6004590274

