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EXPERT COMMENT: #MeToo, Sleeping Beauty and the often controversial history of fairy tales

[Pete Newbon](#), Lecturer in Romantic and Victorian Literature at Northumbria University discusses #MeToo, Sleeping Beauty and the often controversial history of fairy tales for The Conversation.

It's one of the more bizarre episodes to have seen the light of day since the #MeToo movement got going late last year. In November 2017, the British newspaper The Telegraph reported that the mother of a schoolboy who had brought home a copy of the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty was calling for the text to be banned. The reason she gave was that the heroine could not have consented to the kiss that released her from her enchanted sleep.

This news story emerged in the aftermath of the revelations of serial sexual harassment allegations against numerous Hollywood stars, generating the #MeToo hashtag, with which millions of women worldwide shared their experiences of sexual molestation and objectification.

Yet despite the headline – “Mother calls for Sleeping Beauty to be banned” – when you actually read the piece it turns out that, in fact, the mother had suggested that rather than ban the story, the tale might be used as a starting point for discussing personal consent and bodily autonomy with children.

This didn't deter plenty of media outlets from jumping aboard the bandwagon – whether in support of the proposition that the fairy tale be banned or updated, or scoffing at the notion as needless censorship. And, of course, there was a follow up on the problems with other fairy tales.

Small minds

While fairy tales have existed for millennia as oral folktales, they first entered print in their recognisable form in the 17th century – and initially among the aristocracy. Over the subsequent 300 years or so, fairy tales have frequently been a source of controversy and ideological battle.

A cursory glance at only a few examples illustrates the variety of ways in which they have caused anxiety and consternation. The Neapolitan courtier, Giambattista Basile first produced his collection of fairy tales (including Rapunzel and Cinderella) in 1634. A little later, the French académicien Charles Perrault published his *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (1797), containing such prized tales as Little Red Riding Hood, Puss in Boots, Blue Beard – and Sleeping Beauty. Written for an educated and urbane courtly readership, Perrault's tales smuggle in risqué innuendo under the veil of moralism.

In Britain, one of the first and most influential critics of fairy tales was the philosopher John Locke. In his seminal treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke cautioned parents against allowing servants to frighten their children with tales of “Raw-Head and Bloody Bones”.

As a Rationalist, Locke feared that peasant superstition would damage the healthy development of children. In this period, fairy tales in Britain were circulated in the rude tradition of “chapbooks” (rough almanac prints sold by itinerant “chapmen”) and made little distinction between children and adult readers.

It was the pioneering publisher John Newbery (among others) who fused Locke's respectable suspicion of rude chapbooks with an entrepreneurial appreciation of the potential market for children's books. His *A Pretty Little Pocket-Book* (1744) cleverly replicated entertaining aspects of chapbooks – but shorn of their cruder elements in order to appease middle-class parents. This trend continued into the 19th century, when such celebrated authors and adaptors of fairy tales as Hans Christian Andersen and the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, all tailored and censored their writings to avoid causing upset.

Culture police

The Romantic generation of artists and writers venerated fairy tales for inspiring childhood fantasy and wonder and as texts that opposed the

rationalism of the Enlightenment. But, in the wake of the French Revolution, political and literary culture came under immense scrutiny in Britain from a newly energised Conservative government and press.

With the increased policing of culture for signs of dangerous Jacobins and Democrats, conservative evangelical educationalists including Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer undertook the role of castigating children's writers deemed politically and religiously seditious. One of their main targets was the anarchist philosopher – turned children's publisher – William Godwin (the widower of the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*). In order to escape censure, Godwin often published anonymously, or under a series of comical pseudonyms, such as Theophilus Marcliffe.

Godwin was involved with many Romantic-era writers now considered illustrious, but who at the time were often obscure figures. Two of these friends – the poet William Wordsworth and the essayist Charles Lamb – Godwin endeavoured to involve in his publishing, with revealing controversies.

Charles Lamb and his sister Mary are best-known for their highly popular *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), which was published by Godwin. But when Godwin commissioned Charles to write an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* for children, the two got into an argument over Lamb's initial refusal to tone down the gory scene in which the cyclops Polyphemus vomits the remains of Odysseus' crewmen whom he had consumed. Godwin feared losing custom from a squeamish middle-class readership.

In 1811, Godwin wrote to Wordsworth – who had in youth briefly been his protégé – asking him to translate *Beauty and the Beast* from the French. Wordsworth's cantankerous response is extraordinary (in part, he was irate for having to pay the postal fees). The poet responded to the philosopher that he could not bring himself to the task as:

I confess there is to me something disgusting to me in the notion of a human Being consenting to mate with a Beast, however amiable his qualities of heart.

Wordsworth was, in middle age, moving increasingly towards Toryism, and his astonishing response may be interpreted as underlining his rejection of

Godwin's radicalism. It also seems to indicate Wordsworth's growing religious conservatism, as he justifies his statement by quoting from the poet John Milton's *Paradise Lost* – describing Adam as set apart by God from animals: "Among the Beasts no mate for thee was found".

Throughout their history, fairy tales have caused consternation and outrage among the religious and the secular, the progressive and the conservative, wrestling over what goes on in the minds of growing children.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). You can read the original article [here](#).

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