

# The Ideology of the Mermaid

Children's Literature in the Intro to Theory Course

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This essay describes our experience with using children's literature in our English department's required course in interpretation and theory. In this class, we assign the kinds of readings commonly found in theory courses (Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense," Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," and Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," to name a few) and raise the now-traditional questions about gender, authorship, and canonicity. But we have also found that framing the course with a consideration of children's literature situates the complicated and sometimes alienating questions theory requires in a lexicon that is seductive to students — seductive precisely because our students tend to view children's literature and, by extension, the reading they enjoyed as children as uniquely free from the messy work of interpretation. In our experience, theory at the undergraduate level tends to be introduced with reference to canonical works, often through multiple readings of a single "classic" text through a variety of interpretive lenses, and this strategy often reinforces an existing divide in students' minds between reading for pleasure and reading for school — a divide that tends to be not only false but in fact counterproductive. We have found that teaching and interpreting children's literature serves as an effective means to overcome — or at least to begin to overcome — this false divide.

Our working theory is that because our students encounter these children's texts during the very time of life when they are unconsciously

absorbing ideological codes, their emotional investment in the ideological legitimacy of such texts is high — so high that these texts appear, ironically, to be uniquely *free* of ideology. In other words, because children’s texts (such as fairy tales, Disney films, or fantasy novels) perform the actual work of Althusserian interpellation or Lacanian “quilting” of the subject into the realm of the symbolic, these works are often experienced by students as singularly unsuited to *any* kind of analysis or critique. Undergraduates who may be perfectly comfortable assuming interpretive complexities of *Hamlet* or *Beloved* balk at the idea that *Harry Potter* or *The Little Mermaid* could be an appropriate object of intellectual inquiry, much less ideological critique. Were we to discuss Althusser or Lacan on the first day in connection with a text that students expect to find in a literature class — *Hamlet* or *Beloved* — students would continue to think of literature and critical reading as outside of their own daily reading experiences. They would continue to separate “reading for pleasure” from “reading for school,” and theory and interpretation would simply be strategies to be suspended once they cross the threshold from the classroom to their daily lives. In other words, working with children’s literature helps us to uncover the ideological investments already present but not yet visible in students’ reading, investments that in fact go a long way to making “reading for pleasure” possible in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

The course we teach, *The Pursuits of English*, is designed to introduce students to the concepts and practices of critical reading and literary theory. It was developed during our department’s two-year overhaul of the major, a project that was premised on what Lawrence Schwartz (2003: 16) referred to as the “unmasking of ideological assumptions about the major requirements and [the faculty’s] own pedagogies or at least the conscious recognition of these assumptions.” The course is specifically *not* designed as a survey of literary theory but, rather, to raise the foundational questions of literary study: “What is literature? Why study it? What is a text? Why do we read what we read? How do we read and write? What occurs in the process of interpretation? What are the politics of interpretation?” (Schwartz 2003: 19). Beyond raising these fundamental questions, the course has no prescribed boundaries; instructors choose works from whatever genres, eras, languages, and national traditions they see fit. Students are encouraged to take the course midway through the English major — when they have some experience with college-level reading and interpretation but still have time left in their undergraduate careers to put into practice the interpretative strategies they encounter in the course. To ensure that students experience multiple views and pedagogical practices, the course is always team taught.

By and large, the students at our institution come from middle- and working-class backgrounds and tend to think of the college degree primarily as a credential necessary for a well-paying job. Many of our English majors plan to teach in middle or high school after they graduate, and while they are interested in books and enjoy reading, they struggle mightily with interpretation in many of their courses and are confused about why theorizing about literature might be necessary and valuable. Thus this course, because it is the sole required course for English majors, and because it requires an engagement with theory that may not seem terribly practical, suffers from a terrifying reputation, and a significant portion of the students enter the class anxious. These students fear that “reading for pleasure” will no longer be acceptable and during our first meetings of the semester, many articulate quite clearly that they fear we’re going to ruin literature with “political correctness” and overinterpretation. On further discussion, this fear generally turns out to be a suspicion that the close-reading, theme-based essays that are acceptable in traditional literature classes are only a starting point in this class and that unsettling discussions about gender, sexuality, and race will spoil the enjoyment they derive from reading.

In other words, most of our students arrive the first day of class firm in the conviction Gerald Graff shares in *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992: 83), where he writes, “Every literature teacher knows deep down that his students suspect — not necessarily without admiration — that what he does is ‘read into’ texts meanings that are not really there.” “The process,” he continues, “still seems vaguely like a trick when the student learns to go through the motions well enough to get a good grade.” Our students have a suspicion that they will all be required to perform tricks and literary sleights of hand and that the meaning we will all “read into” the texts will be politically charged.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the political inflections of interpretation inevitably become immensely personal to students; they feel implicated and harshly judged if a text they enjoy, or even one they’ve read dutifully, is revealed to present characters or situations deemed racist or sexist by their professors or by critics whose work we read as a class.

We have found that beginning the class with a discussion of popular children’s literature proves an effective means of addressing this resistance to theory. Raising questions of interpretation with favorite children’s texts initially confirms students’ fears about how English professors “ruin” literature; at the same time, however, it affirms their personal reading experiences as worthy of careful consideration. We toss them into the middle of a conversation about texts that they already know — the *Harry Potter* series, *Bambi*,

*The Little Mermaid*—within a genre to which they have deep allegiances.<sup>3</sup> We present during our first meeting two newspaper op-ed columns about the *Harry Potter* series: a somewhat notorious hatchet job by Harold Bloom (2003) and a pithy, Marxist reading by a French critic, Ilias Yocaris (2004). The two pieces open up discussion of children’s literature on both evaluative and interpretive levels, even though students generally resist *both* critiques of a series that many students enjoy and all have heard of. They resist these readings largely because they consider *Harry Potter* to be off limits for academic critics, and the polemical tone of both pieces initially entrenches them in their resistance. Bloom dismisses J. K. Rowling, along with Stephen King, as simply “bad writers,” lambastes *Harry Potter* on aesthetic grounds, and then laments the fact that its popularity echoes the demise of the academy—and probably of Western Civilization.<sup>4</sup> To students, such a diatribe smells of the kind of elitism that they resist even as they are in college, pursuing a degree in English, striving perhaps to attain the very same cultural capital as the elitist they resist. Yet if they chafe at Bloom’s “elitism” (students often characterize him as hysterical and shrill), they are nonetheless quite comfortable with thinking of the function of the critic as someone who provides a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Yocaris (2004), in contrast, keeps his evaluative statements to a minimum and instead coolly reads the series as an ideological buttress for American-style laissez-faire globalization: “We have, then, an invasion of neo-liberal stereotypes in a fairy tale. The fictional universe of Harry Potter offers a caricature of the excesses of the Anglo-Saxon social model: under a veneer of regimentation and traditional rituals, Hogwarts is a pitiless jungle where competition and the cult of winning run riot.” But although students are able to see that Yocaris’s critique proceeds from different premises than Bloom’s and offers a mode of reading not based primarily in aesthetic evaluation, they still react negatively not merely to its conclusions but to the impertinent fact of its very existence. It is not only the critique of capitalism that insults them but its entire project of interpreting *Harry Potter* at all; our students heatedly reply that these are “just children’s stories” that carry no hidden meanings.

Students’ frustration is usually compounded by reading Russell Banks’s “*Bambi: A Boy’s Story*” (1991: 4), a belletristic essay in which the novelist identifies *Bambi* as “the movie that changed [his] life” and describes, in jargon-free and personal prose, a process very much like interpellation. Situating his early viewing of the film in his 1930s blue-collar New Hampshire childhood, he describes how the movie made him suddenly conscious of his gender identity: “One person—a child very much like the newborn fawn

Bambi, of no particular gender . . . — seems to have died that afternoon; and another—a child defined by his gender—got born.” Banks recognizes the power of Disney films to shape his sense of gender, and, while he never invokes a specifically Freudian vocabulary, he recalls that for years after seeing the movie he would trace on his schoolroom desk the design of a mature stag’s enormous antlers. He describes himself as having seen the film precisely at the moment when a child can be most easily “colonized” by the gender-specific notions of his or her culture (12), and his essay illustrates the claim that Peter Hollindale (1988: 17) makes in “Ideology and the Children’s Book”: “Ideology is not something which is transferred to children as if they were empty receptacles. It is something which they already possess, having drawn it from a mass of experience far more powerful than literature.” In other words, Banks’s viewing of *Bambi* at an impressionable age does not teach him sexist values; instead it narrates and makes coherent for him the gender values that already exist in his world.

Such recognition of his own gender construction leads Banks as an adult to experience a pronounced anxiety about his four-year-old granddaughter’s fascination with *The Little Mermaid*, a movie that “instantly seized her attention” (5). The granddaughter’s childhood fascination with Disney’s Ariel strikes a deep chord with many of our students, especially our women students (who make up a significant majority of the class). *The Little Mermaid* is the first film many of them remember, and because they have fully embraced the manifest “message” of the film— young women should stand up for their desires—they deeply and vocally resent Banks’s assertion that the film, in addition to being aesthetically inferior to earlier Disney animations, is appallingly sexist: “My wife and I . . . realized that *The Little Mermaid* was essentially a dramatized tract designed to promote the virtues and rewards of female submissiveness and silence” (6). In their outrage, many initially miss Banks’s admission that his attempt to “protect” his granddaughter from the sexism of *The Little Mermaid* is futile. While he does not regret interrupting his granddaughter’s enjoyment of *The Little Mermaid*, he does ultimately realize that he hasn’t protected her from anything at all:

I wish that someone . . . had taken a look at the first scenes of *Bambi* that Saturday afternoon and had said to himself this movie is only going to drive the kid deeper into sexual stereotyping. . . . “Let’s get out of here, boys,” he might have said to me and my brother Steve and cousin Neil. . . . Let’s come back when they are showing a movie that *won’t* change your life. (13)

Rather than recognizing the underlying point Banks articulates at the end of the essay — that the main problem is that at such a young age, his granddaughter is already fascinated by the sounds and images of sexism — most focus on his characterization of Ariel as “a bimbo in a bikini, Barbie with fins” and resent his attempts to protect his granddaughter from its images of adolescent femininity (7).

The intersection of putative overinterpretation and paternalism that students sense in Banks’s essay not only sparks heated discussion about what messages *The Little Mermaid* in fact promotes, or how much children take in through their repeated viewing of Disney films (many students know all the songs from the film by heart), but also moves them toward reconsidering the work of interpretation in general. In other words, discussing these texts helps demystify the work of interpretation as we move them from their initial reactions of anger and annoyance to a more measured consideration of why they are deeply invested in these narratives and how interpretation and theory complicate what seem to be simple responses to simple stories. Most troublesome for students is the notion that a critical understanding of these narratives — particularly in their definition of gender roles — inhibits or destroys the enormous pleasure they have experienced, and often still do experience, in their consumption of the film.

What is clear to us at this point is that students are not simply resisting any interpretation of a favorite text, but a specific interpretation: a feminist critique of a story they have read as liberating. Their sense of *The Little Mermaid* as an animated feminist manifesto is undermined by Banks’s repulsion and incisive critique. In other words, on closer inspection, our students often discover that they actually *do* believe that children’s literature contains ideological meaning (“morals”), but they want those meanings to conform neatly to a set of beliefs with which they are already fully at ease. What they are reacting against is a recognition of their own values and morals as contingent and even potentially oppressive. They resist theory, in short, not because it is somehow irrelevant to their lives, but on the contrary because it is all too relevant.

In addition to assigning Banks’s essay, we ask students to read a chapter called “Hidden Meanings: Or Disliking Books at an Early Age,” from Graff’s *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (1992), that frames some of these same questions about reading and interpretation within an autobiographical context. Graff recounts his transformation from a detached reader barely able to slog through “60 agonizing pages” of *A Passage to India* to a student engaged in the interpretative process by the questions raised by literary critics about *The Adventures*

of *Huckleberry Finn*. The debate about the possible racism of Twain's narrative choices provided Graff with two tools. First, it served as an invitation to consider a document he had viewed as infallible as open to challenges at a fundamental level, the level of plot. Second, the debate provided him with signposts as he reread the novel with an excitement heretofore missing from his experience with "serious" novels. He explains: "Reading the novel with the voices of the critics running through my mind, I found myself thinking of things that I might say about what I was reading, things that may have belonged partly to the critics but also now belonged to me" (68). In addition to making the case for the relevance of theory and criticism, Graff's chapter also provides an ideal articulation of some of the struggles that students face in developing a critical response to the pieces we have already read. It makes clear that the act of critical reading is a social and learned skill and that professors (burdened with their own notion of mystical aesthetic experience that transcends ideology and even meaning itself) often behave as if it isn't, rewarding students who possess a seemingly natural ability to replicate academic-speak. Using children's literature to begin the class pushes them to recognize how they are already engaged (however unconsciously or crudely) in the very kind of critique they resist when they see it in the more sophisticated forms it takes in the pieces by Bloom and Yocaris and Banks.

At this point in the course (still quite early), the conjunction of these few key children's texts and some critical responses to them has spurred a lively conversation about the nature and the limits of literary criticism, and of the importance of literary and filmic narratives in our lives and our culture. From this sometimes wide-ranging discussion, we underscore two central ideas that we will return to throughout the semester: (1) Graff's suggestion that reading is always an interpretive act and that the meanings we derive from a text will be partial, contingent, and laden with value; and (2) Banks's notion that literature may have a shaping force on social and personal beliefs and ways of understanding the world. (These ideas are of course interrelated; the first implies that readers' belief systems shape their understanding of texts, the second that texts shape their readers' belief systems.) Having established these two guiding ideas or themes, we then shift the syllabus to more traditionally "theoretical" or "philosophical" texts that can amplify our discussion of them. To amplify the first idea (that reading entails the construction of a truth), we assign Friedrich Nietzsche's short but difficult essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense" (1979: 84), with its famous claim that truths (and here Nietzsche goes far beyond simply interpretations of novels or poems) are not discovered but made:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions — they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.

Nietzsche — as he signals by beginning his essay “Once upon a time” — regards the commonly accepted Christian or humanist account of human life on earth as a mere fairy tale, one narrative we choose to read from among many, rather than a fixed truth. Whereas Banks observed how he made a fairy tale (*Bambi*) into a truth, Nietzsche conversely reminds us that our truths are only fairy tales.

Having problematized the idea of truth, we then work to amplify the second guiding idea (that literary or other representations can consciously or unconsciously shape our views of the world and ourselves), by assigning excerpts from Plato’s *Republic* and Percy Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry.” Plato’s banishment of poetry from the Republic, which at first seems like an anthropological curiosity of classical Athens, appears less strange when compared to Banks’s quite similar protection of his granddaughter from the pernicious influence of representation in *The Little Mermaid*. Both Banks and Plato see gender as an important variable that needs to be regulated; the progressive Banks may be worried about teaching his granddaughter “the virtues and rewards of female submissiveness and silence,” and Plato may fear that poetry will effeminize male citizens of the Republic by encouraging them to indulge their emotions, but they share a recognition that literary texts in fact work to shape gender identity. Shelley’s answer to Plato, meanwhile, while offering a more congenial appraisal of the value of poetry, still argues that literature has immense social impact, even as it reconfigures the writing of poetry as a heroic, masculine activity.

These “theoretical” readings thus distill and intensify a discussion about reading already operative in our initial conversations about *Harry Potter* and *The Little Mermaid*. For the duration of the semester, we retain the wider framework of inquiry that these children’s texts have by now helped us to establish. For example, the arguments made by Graff and Nietzsche about the constructedness of our truths can now be seen in the arguments of a critic of the canon such as Annette Kolodny (1980: 12): “We read well and with pleasure, what we already know how to read; and what we know

how to read is to a large extent dependent upon what we have already read (works from which we've developed our expectations and learned our interpretive strategies). What we then choose to read—and, by extension, teach, and thereby 'canonize'—usually follows upon our previous reading." What Kolodny suggests, and what class discussion makes explicit, is that the reading our students enjoyed as children was more than an exercise in pleasure but also the foundation for how they now respond to literature, what they seek in their appreciation of it, and how their response and appreciation shape how they interpret it.

At this point, we introduce students to their first sustained engagement with a text that probably looks like what they had expected to see in a college English class, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Although many have never read Austen and characterize the novel as "difficult" or "boring," they seem willing to interpret it with a readiness they withheld from their discussions of *Harry Potter* or *The Little Mermaid* and rely on us to perform the magic that, as Graff describes, will reveal to them the hidden meaning of the text. The assumption still seems to be that—in spite of our previous efforts as teachers to disturb the concept of the canon—great literature such as *Mansfield Park* is intended to carry hidden meanings in a way that their own childhood favorites are not. (Paradoxically, many of the same students who protested against the low aesthetic estimation Harold Bloom had assigned to *Harry Potter*, or Russell Banks had assigned to *The Little Mermaid*, are exactly those who quickly sign on to the distinction that the canonical can be subjected to a kind of literary-critical analysis that the noncanonical cannot.) In some ways, our teaching of *Mansfield Park*, through Claudia L. Johnson's Norton critical edition (1998), probably resembles the kind of teaching that goes on in many college theory courses, as we use both the edition's critical essays (such as Edward Said's famous discussion of slave labor on the Bertrams' Antigua plantation) and the contextual materials (primarily the conduct guides and treatises on proper gender roles). But in raising these questions of race, gender, and politics, we once again attempt to situate our reading of the novel within the issues that we initially raised during the opening weeks' discussions of children's literature.

For example, Sir Thomas Bertram's fury at his children's plans for the performance of *Lovers' Vows* during his absence from Mansfield Park can be placed in the context of what we earlier described as our second general guiding question, the potential for literary texts to change our beliefs and our behaviors. Sir Thomas's alarm at the sexual and social transgression implied by a theatrical performance in his own home now provides strong parallels

to both Plato's fear of the power of poetic representation in the *Republic* and, less loftily, Banks's decision to keep *The Little Mermaid* from his granddaughter. And while earlier discussions of these issues had often resulted in rather earnest proclamations of the first-amendment freedoms of a three-year-old, or labored expositions of parenting philosophies, the discussion is often now able to assume a more critical and theoretical cast. Even if students do not endorse Sir Thomas's moral codes, they can still see that participation in a narrative fantasy (whether by acting in a play such as *Lovers' Vows*, watching an animated film such as *Bambi*, or reading a novel such as *Mansfield Park*) might, as Plato suggests, mobilize and direct the emotions toward any variety of ends. Sir Thomas may be an overly repressive patriarch, but his fear about his unmarried daughters' participation in an erotically charged performance can be recognized as a manifestation of the belief that literary texts can shape our patterns of behavior and our ideas of who we are.

We refer to our initial discussion again when we read Nina Auerbach's "Jane Austen's Dangerous Charm: Feeling as One Ought about Fanny Price" (1998: 454), an essay that invokes the fairy-tale motif of *Mansfield Park* and offers the counterintuitive parallel between Fanny and many contemporaneous monsters and outsiders of Romantic literature (Frankenstein's creature, the Ancient Mariner, Wordsworth's leech gatherer). By situating what is generally considered a realist novel within the tradition of the Gothic, Auerbach encourages her readers to consider the fundamental fantasy structure of the novel, suggesting that Austen's novel too has an underlying ideological content. Fanny in her view is an antisocial outsider who, "fabricating an identity from uprootedness, . . . conquers the normal world that acts, plays, and marries." Our students' response to her claim of Fanny Price as more vampire than wallflower is similar to their resistance to Yocaris's interpretation of *Harry Potter*. They are more open to interpretation when it comes to an Austen novel but feel Auerbach goes too far when she describes Fanny as "predatory" and demand of us what we require from them in their writing: textual evidence. The most visible sign of progress at this point is that students willingly read a recommended essay ("Slipping into the Ha-Ha?: Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen's Novels" [Heydt-Stevenson 2000]) that suggests that Austen, who uses not-very-hidden messages in details such as vigorous horseback riding, cunning card playing, climbing spiked fences, and falling into ditches, was most certainly not the Victorian caricature that exists in their imaginations.

Near the end of the Austen unit, we view Patricia Rozema's adaptation of the novel and read Mireia Aragay's essay "Possessing Jane Austen: Fidelity, Authorship, and Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*" (2003), an expe-

rience that enhances student understanding about the process of adaptation (a topic we return to at the end of the semester when they finally read Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" and view the Disney adaptation of the story). We make clear beforehand that we regard Rozema's film as an adaptation of the novel into a new medium, not a visual transcription, and we discourage students from simply trying to judge whether the film version is "better" or "worse" than the novel, or "faithful" or "unfaithful" to it—a task made easier by Rozema's bold project in which she offers a modern interpretation in the guise of a period piece. The film offers a lively heroine who has a Sapphic experience with her rival and, more noticeably, makes explicit what Rozema evidently regards as Austen's implied commentary on slavery. Students are almost as frustrated with Rozema's interpretation of the novel as they are with Yocaris's reading of *Harry Potter*, though for very different reasons. Aragay's essay challenges the negative response Rozema's adaptation received from reviewers who held certain expectations of "heritage cinema" (a phrase Aragay uses to describe films whose primary focus is a convincing representation of a specific time period and "whose emphasis on visual spectacle and nostalgia ultimately works to downplay the ironic perspective and the social critique that are often present in narrative" [180]). Aragay in fact dismantles the very concept of fidelity to the original text: "Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single correct 'meaning' which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with" (178). She concludes that what professional film reviewers (with whom many of our students are initially in sympathy) dislike in Rozema's adaptation is not her lack of "fidelity" but the politics of her interpretive choices. Hers can be taken as a postcolonial reading of the novel, and Aragay points out that even though Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* is at least as unfaithful to its source novel as Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, the nature of Lee's changes fit within the popular narrative of Austen that most viewers possess. Lee's adaptation was therefore both critically lauded (an Academy Award for best screenplay and several nominations) and commercially successful (over \$130 million in worldwide box office sales), while Rozema's brought harsh criticism—criticism students in the class echo when they argue that Rozema should have called her film something other than *Mansfield Park*. Rozema's adaptation reveals therefore an overinvestment in the meaning both our students and professional film critics find in (or bring to) Austen's novel, and with Aragay's help our students generally learn that understanding film adaptations is never simply a discussion of fidelity. While we as viewers think we

are protecting the integrity of the novel, what we are actually protecting is our interpretation of it.

There is of course much else we do in the class—discussions of canonicity, authorship, technology, not all of it linked directly to children’s texts—but we come back in the final unit of the course to fairy tales through a trio of readings: the original text of Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” Angela Carter’s rewriting of the tale in “The Bloody Chamber,” and Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian analysis of it in *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim’s readings of Perrault’s story and other fairy tales work well partly because they are so schematic and old-fashioned in their Freudianism; his unambiguous insistence on the sexual implications of various symbols, and on the fairy tale genre as a narrative about sexual maturation, is intellectually accessible and articulates more fully and systematically the ideas about children’s stories, gender, and sexuality broached by Banks at the start of the course.<sup>5</sup> Perrault’s story by this point seems to be just another text, and as students have gained confidence in seeing interpretive possibilities, they are more receptive to finding what Graff calls “hidden meanings” in the tale. (Perrault himself, interestingly, provides not one but two rhyming morals to the story.) Carter supplements Bettelheim wonderfully because she simply takes the latent sexual content of Perrault’s story for granted, using Freudian symbols such as the churning pistons on a train with self-consciousness and humor that many of our students can discern. Of course these childhood stories have sexual subtexts, Carter seems to say. More playful and polymorphous than the serious (and heteronormative) Bettelheim, Carter also allows us to return to the question of pleasure through a very idiosyncratic sort of feminism; her story features a woman narrator who can be ambivalent about traditional patriarchal narratives and roles—finding in them not only oppression and murderous violence, but also, somewhat uncomfortably, pleasure. This dualism allows us to revisit the issue of whether analyzing a text—particularly for its disquieting ideological implications—requires that it no longer be a source of aesthetic enjoyment, and to look at the ways in which that enjoyment is bound up with our often unconscious ideological investments, even if those investments are restrictive or repressive. The divide between “reading for pleasure” and “reading for school” has thus by now been crossed and recrossed, and what emerges, at least among some students, is a more receptive and even intellectually curious attitude toward theory.

In the final unit for the term, students read Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” read the lyrics to Ursula’s song in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, and then view Disney’s 1989 adaptation of the story (directed by

Ron Clements and John Musker). After a semester of Nietzsche, Plato, Benjamin, Said, Kolodny, and Guillory, they are happy to return to children's literature. If some are decidedly less hostile to the idea of these texts narrating complicated ideologies than they were at the start of the semester, many still retain the conviction that children's literature should be exempt from analytical discussions. Reading Andersen's original of "The Little Mermaid," however, results in a number of shifts. Most notably, it completely undermines the implied authority students assign to Disney's 1989 adaptation, which now—especially after our work with the film adaptation of *Mansfield Park*—becomes seen as a highly contingent set of interpretive choices that utterly recasts the prior narrative. They are stunned by how drastically different the original is from the adaptation they know so well.

They are unprepared for this radical rewriting of the story and recognize immediately that Disney erases the nuances of the original even as it adds all sorts of inventive details—comical, musical, visual. While they notice a number of distressing alterations, the deletion of many of Andersen's female characters is often what troubles them most. In the original story, the finned protagonist has relationships with her sisters and grandmother. Even students who have been hostile toward feminist theory for the entire term are unable to ignore the implications of deleting female voices from the story. In class discussion, students who have been quiet for much of the term, as a result of either shyness or skepticism, begin to speak and to ask questions of the text and interpretations of it. Reading Andersen also allows them to engage with Bettelheim's claims about children's literature, and some are quite ready to find Freudian symbols themselves (such as the "sharp pain" that accompanies Ariel's transformation from mermaid to human). Reading Andersen's tale also asks them to think about the text as a *kind* of truth. They have had a fixed notion of the "true" story of "The Little Mermaid," but reading Andersen lets them see how arbitrary their own sense of the story is at the most basic of levels. They see not only that Disney's *The Little Mermaid* is sexist but also that it is merely one rather arbitrary way to narrate Ariel's story. They also begin to understand that Disney makes very deliberate choices in how it treats children's literature and how it tells love stories.

We always have a student volunteer read Ursula's song (voiced by Pat Carroll)—the sea witch's seduction of Ariel. After Disney's Ariel is forbidden to consort with humans by her father, she is led to Ursula by two of her henchmen (eels in this case). Ursula offers Ariel a troubling bargain: give up your voice, become human, and win your prince. Students are often stunned by the following verses, even if they've grown up with the lyrics:

The men up there don't like a lot of blabber.  
They think a girl who gossips is a bore.  
Yes, on land it's much preferred  
For ladies not to say a word,  
And after all, dear,  
What is idle prattle for?

[Come on]

They're not all that impressed with conversation.  
True gentlemen avoid it when they can.  
But they dote and swoon and fawn  
On a lady who's withdrawn.  
It's she who holds her tongue  
Who gets her man. (Menken and Ashman 1989)

The sexist lesson here is obvious to even the most skeptical students, and many of them come forward as interpreters of the text rather than defenders of it. When the film is presented now as an object of critical reading, students see everything—often calling out moments never mentioned by Banks or either of us: the depiction of overweight women as grotesque, masculine, and emasculating (Ursula stealing Triton's “sword” takes on a whole new light for the class as they see him shrivel into a shell of a man); the minstrelsy in the racial caricature of the Caribbean crab Sebastian; the rapidity of Ariel's falling in love at first sight.

It is satisfying for us, as politically progressive feminists, to hear hal-lelujah narratives from many of our students at the end of the course, stories of how they have come to recognize just how profoundly *The Little Mermaid* shaped their notions of femininity: the student who proudly announced that she wears her hair red in homage to Disney's Ariel; the women who tell us that they imitated Ariel's sensual emergence from the sea in their pools and at the beach; the women who realize that while they imagine themselves as independent, they are waiting for a prince and castle. It is equally satisfying for us, as scholars committed to the value of close textual analysis, to see narratives of intellectual arrival of the sort that Graff (1992: 68) describes in his account of his awakening as a critically engaged reader. The debate about the cultural significance of a novel like *Huck Finn*, with its complicated racial narrative, had shown him that “judgments about the novel's aesthetic value could not be separated from judgments about its moral substance.” He finds this realization empowering: “Perhaps it would not be so bad after all to become the sort of person who talked about ‘cultural contradictions’ and the ‘inseparability

of form and content.’ Perhaps even mere literary-critical talk could give you a certain power in the real world.”

Yet our primary pedagogical aim is neither to teach students to recognize latent sexism (and certainly not to avoid or condemn any text with a hint of racist, sexist, or homophobic implications) nor to nurture facility with a particular critical jargon that allows them to accrue cultural capital. Rather, our aim is to help students see how literary criticism as a discipline can help us to understand the multiple ways in which both we and other readers make meanings out of texts. Far from being a set of arcane and irrelevant philosophical positions, literary theory must be shown to be a discourse that matters to students’ lives — to their experiences, beliefs, and identities. As Graff emphasizes, theory and criticism can be valuable precisely because they help us to understand the stakes of reading, and why interpretive choices have assumed such significance to other readers. In our course, children’s texts work to make this link between literature and life in a way that other texts do not, for the simple reason that these are texts whose often unarticulated interpretation *has already mattered* in students’ lives. Thus at the end of the semester (if we’re successful), students are breaking down the barriers between children’s literature and canonical texts (since all can now be seen as open to interpretation), between pleasure reading and critical reading (since even pleasure reading entails an ideological investment). After re-viewing *The Little Mermaid*, students in their final papers and exams are invited to rethink *Mansfield Park* or “My Last Duchess” or even Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense” with the critical strategies they have now developed. Critical contact, we hope our students come to see, does not need to corrupt *The Little Mermaid*, *Harry Potter*, or any other childhood favorite. Reading for school can in fact afford its own pleasures.

## Notes

1. Peter Hunt (1991: 81) argues that children’s literature is often written in a manner that tends to restrict the possibilities of interpretation: “By attempting to control the texts in various ways, writers, by implication, require readers to read only within both implied and defined limits; and texts become, in the theorist Bakhtin’s terms, ‘monological’ rather than ‘dialogical’ or ‘polyphonic.’” Though our argument does not by any means contradict this claim, its emphasis is less on inherent properties of the text than on the contexts, both social and developmental, of its reception.
2. Our understanding of student anxiety about literary criticism and interpretation is based on the class discussions we’ve had with students in the five times that we have

taught the course. James Nash's study of students enrolled in this class illustrates the same anxiety. In "The Attitudes of English Majors to Literary Studies," Nash (2007: 78) reports on how students discuss their reading experience before starting college and the tension they feel when faced with the work of interpretation. After assigning the same chapter from Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars* ("Hidden Meaning, or, Disliking Books at an Early Age") that we ask students to read, Nash and his teaching partner Janet Cutler ask students to write an essay about their reading experiences. According to Nash, "60 percent reported the kinds of significant problems that Graff described, such as trouble finding things to say about their reading assignments, alienation from books and — something Graff does not report — a loss of an earlier capacity for pleasure in reading. They often attribute the latter two problems to demands placed on them in English classes, such as the pressure Graff describes to find 'hidden meaning' — or to accept the hidden meanings that teachers offer."

3. In this regard, we diverge somewhat from Hunt's (1991: 144) belief that "for most adults who are 'readers' . . . , children's books are open territory because there is nothing to be afraid of. Adults who would feel unqualified to express even an opinion about a peer-text feel free to talk about children's books because they do not have the shadow of the schoolteachers' 'right answer' hanging over their heads . . . they are part of the real world, and can be challenged." While we would concur that our students (most of whom are of a transitional age between childhood and adulthood) tend to feel more qualified in expressing their opinions about children's texts than canonical ones, we would disagree that for them "there is nothing to be afraid of." On the contrary: while there may be little fear of misreading, there is a perhaps much more profound fear of having deep attachments disrupted. Indeed, we would suggest that it is not only students' belief in their own expertise but also the strength of their attachments, and of the fear of losing interpretive control of a favorite text, that motivate the kind of lively and active student discussion of them.
4. In the scant ground of an editorial, Bloom leaps from *Harry Potter* and Stephen King to a defense of Walt Whitman, anger that the major Romantic poets have been displaced by Felicia Hemans and a few other women, and the terrified claim that Aphra Behn has replaced Shakespeare in the curriculum. His concern about Shakespeare rings false with our students, who have generally not heard of Aphra Behn and know that three faculty members in our department specialize in Shakespeare and offer two different Shakespeare classes every semester.
5. Hugh Crago's (2003: 24) argument about the nature of fairy tales coincides with Bettelheim's view: "A fairy tale is a narrative form which represents a society's collective concerns with some aspect of 'growing up,' and it explores these concerns at the level of magical thought."

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## **The Ideology of the Mermaid: Children's Literature in the Intro to Theory Course**

Patricia A. Matthew and Jonathan Greenberg

This article argues that introducing undergraduates to literary criticism and theory can be most effectively accomplished through the teaching of children's literature, fantasy literature, and Disney films alongside traditional literary criticism. We discuss a series of assignments we use in Pursuits of English, our department's introductory theory and criticism course.

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