

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

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*

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 engage-

*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,

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 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

*of Huckleberry Finn*. The debate about the possible racism of Twain's narrative choices provided Gra 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 belong

In addition, Gra'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.





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

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

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

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 *Mansfeld Park*. Rozema’s adaptation of the novel is a professional drama critic’s criticism (entirely to the contrary) 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>

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 named 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 hallelujah 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

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

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, (t) TD [r28(n)1e-27(a)-381 Tf were Wdescribed, such as trouble finding things to say about their reading 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 territorial 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 C4e-12(e)-19(s)-13 TD 5.



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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.

