

## Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch? And Other Questions the Jesuits Left for Me:

Kal Alston

*University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana*

When I was in the first grade, I played a witch in the Hansel and Gretl section of an original production of “Raggedy Ann and Andy in the Magic Book.” Although in this version Hansel and Gretl seemed to be doomed, at the end of the day our plucky red-yarn-haired hero and heroine managed to outwit me and bake me in my own oven. “Hansel and Gretl,” of course, is a cautionary tale with several morals and several moral objects; it has a little something for everyone. Hansel and Gretl, you may recall, are faced with the “Jean ValJean dilemma”: Is stealing wrong if it keeps you and your family from starvation? Though in the end, Hansel and Gretl find happiness in the forest, even they do not come away unscolded; their travails with the witch suggest two maxims about property rights and consumption: that little children shouldn’t be too greedy, and they shouldn’t, as a rule, eat other people’s houses. The erstwhile parents are themselves no great moral models for Hansel and Gretl; family court would have removed these children from the home in any contemporary American small town. The parents’ transgressions are twofold: deceit and abandonment. They shouldn’t have abandoned their children in the woods, and they shouldn’t have taken them out there under false pretenses.

However, there is room for an interpretation that spreads the responsibility and declares that society should have a safety net to provide food for poor families. Further, feminist analysis takes issue with the demonization of the stepmother (since no “real” mother would abandon her children) that in fact informs the ultimate evil of the witch character — that is, the non-performance of womanliness. Women should, in the moral universe of the story, stick to baking and eating gingerbread (not building houses) and help, rather than eat, children — else they should not be surprised that their death/destruction constitutes the happy ending of the story. I wanted to tell this story of one of my early moments on the stage as evidence that the questions raised in Valentine’s paper — what the connections between theatre and moral education might be — have long been important to me. I want here to try to do three things: to talk about the limits of storytelling and spectatorship; to propose a strategy of moral and aesthetic enactment; and to justify theatre as potentially central in moral education.

So I want to thank Timothy Valentine for the opportunity to revisit my most cherished interests — ones from which I am always getting distracted. I also want to say that I do not directly answer to most of the paper, which I take to be a fairly standard riff on moral education. For me the intriguing bits came in the first half of the paper, and I wish to extend the Valentine argument.

### THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Valentine, in his “Moral Education and Inspiration through Theatre,” states his thesis as this: “Storytelling can motivate students to explore ethical questions in a

non-academic medium.” He proposes the example of Jesuit theatre in school as an exemplar of character education, insofar as it is “designed to bring about a transformation of the will.” He further suggests that certain kinds of stories, stories that are religious in a Deweyan sense (that is, ones that pull us out of everyday realms of experience), can challenge us to “do what’s right.”

Valentine begins by proposing that we look at the Jesuit use of theatre as a way into a discussion of moral education. He, however, whets our appetite for an account of Jesuits and theatre that we do not get in this paper. Early on, Valentine contends that “theatre is a form of storytelling” — a claim that on the face of it makes enough sense to appear to be uncontroversial. In this section of my response I will allow the claim to stand, although I believe that it is incomplete enough to be problematic. Valentine’s account of Jesuit theatre is brief enough that I may be in error about this, but it seems that the clerics themselves sought to externalize “composition of place” by mounting spectacle performances. Like passion plays, *Semana Santa* pageants, Christmas reenactment, these spectacles were an acknowledgment that one need capture and hold the attention of the spectators if the message is to play to as wide an audience as possible. What does it mean to be on the receiving end of these spectacles-as-stories? To be dazzled by the pomp and pageantry of ritual and performance? Unless she is horribly jaded, the spectator can feel the visceral thrill of big sounds and big sights, a pumping up of the senses that engages one differently than being read to or reading. Both of these latter experiences can indeed be enormously exciting, but they initially take up only one sense. When one gets caught up in a simple story, the reader or auditor can layer the other senses on in the imagination, but the spectator of performance sometimes finds himself in the opposite situation — pulling away the layers of sensation to find the narrative.

In the explicitly religious or moral story, the weaver of the parable means for us to derive a direct understanding of the tale by virtue of its consequences. In some tales, the virtuous are rewarded (here or in some version of the afterlife), as for instance in the story of the hare and the tortoise where the virtue (steadiness and moderation) may not at first glance seem obvious. In others the emphasis is on demonstrating the inevitable downfall of the wicked. All of the fairy tale witches, my own included, find themselves burned, melted, left outside the magical kingdom or otherwise foiled. (This generally goes for wolves, ogres, or other creatures whose external ugliness is a marker for a distorted soul.) Another variation combines the two and gives the previously nasty character an opportunity to be redeemed by the grace of G-d (in the Saul to Paul conversion) or by the power of love (in the transformation of the Beast in that “Tale as old as time...”). Here the lessons are direct, explicit, unambiguous. If a stranger were unfamiliar with the local codes or were, as children are early on in life, uninitiated in the mores of the community, these tales from Aesop, Homer, Jesus, Hans Christian Anderson, et al. give the knowledge that allows one to respond to invitations into the moral constituency.

The importance of storytelling (or actually of hearing and seeing stories) has been reinforced in cultures at all stages of literacy. The power of the moral of the story explains why these stories endure in many forms and in many traditions. That

power also explains why educators, parents, literary critics and others have always been anxious about the content of the stories being told — Plato’s concerns in the Republic are not so different from the recent decision to give ratings to television shows. Most people believe that it matters in the development of children as intelligent, moral citizens what stories they are told and what morals stick with them over time.

Since I do want to talk about enactment, I won’t spend too much time on this point, but I do want to make it. While I absolutely agree that we do not want to expose children to the most morally ambiguous stories our culture has to offer, I also believe that we miss educative opportunities when we decide in advance to offer them only *direct* moral instruction in stories. Insofar as we mean moral education to “transform the will[s]” of students, we mislead them as to the complexity of doing the right thing when we do not encourage their participation in both the telling and interpretation of moral stories. In real life, in the lives our children lead (uncloistered as it is for many of them) making the right choice is not often direct, nor is it easy. So, it seems to me to be pernicious to encourage children to think of morals of the story as being “received” wisdom rather than the products of struggle and, sometimes, resistance. This texturizing of the story needs to be done with their participation — so that they learn not only the contents of the moral but the activities required to apprehend the moral.

#### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

This last point provides the segue for this part of my argument: that theatre is not equivalent to storytelling — at least not theatre as I consider it to be most interesting to this discussion. (There is another paper to be written on why theatre is not non-academic, but not here and not today). Theatre is like storytelling on the hoof if we act out stories previously enjoyed in the reading or hearing (albeit perhaps with costumes and props). That sense of storytelling, however, remains in a passive model of spectatorship that provides blocks of working moral knowledge, but does not simply in the telling provide the impetus for moral enactment, or what Hugh Sockett and I call moral encouragement. That is a development of courage to do what you may already know to be right.

Theatre for the young provides, in my view, an opportunity to make the move from knowledge to enactment. It can move beyond receiving storytelling when students make their own theatre experiences in order to tell their own stories and to reinterpret the stories they have been told. I am going to give a very quick outline of the three areas in which I believe participation in theatre arts can have an impact on moral projects for young people. (I must, however, be clear that there is nothing in “putting on a show” itself that will necessarily have effects in this area; it requires, rather, that the director/teacher take up the possibilities of performance as having potential moral weight.)

First, theatre is not purely another forum for storytelling; it is an art of communication. As such, it opens the possibility of sustained engagement with communicative virtues and an expansion of the modes of communication. Listening, speaking, and expressing are the primary modes of communication in performance.

Expressing differs from speaking because theatre does not only traffic in words but in voice, body, and energy. At its best it makes clear and salient the connection between all of those elements — which is a connection that needs, I think, to be brought forward in the discussion of moral education.

Second, theatre performance continues and extends the concern I have with moral storytelling. It requires the participation of the actor as interpreter of words, sentiments, and stories that may not be her own. And at the next level, the processes of enactment can encourage extending those interpretive moves into interpolating ones in which the actor begins an actor to character dialogue as well as a character to audience dialogue (not to mention character to character, actor to actor, etc. encounters) It is in these encounters that the kind of relationships are developed in which considerations of a moral life start to make real sense — because gathering moral knowledge is never enough; there must be venues for the enactment of that knowledge. For me those venues will arise in relations with self and other.

Third, there are two specific virtues (if you will) to which performance and performers aspire. (I believe both are important for students and the young to export into other parts of life). The reach for excellence in performance demands the revisitation and re/writing of texts, skills, and relations. Performers are always negotiating and renegotiating the meanings of excellence in any given project and also discovering new readings and interpretations. The second “virtue” is deeply connected to the first: commitment. In both my training as an actor and as a director, almost always the first lesson to be learned was that one must look for the beginning, middle, and end — of a moment, scene, song, dance, play, whatever. Further, performance encourages collaboration that builds (at least temporary) communities whose members commit to a common project — even if not to agreement and the repression of ego. (Though a director sometimes has dreams....)

I believe that moral storytelling in and by itself has a very limited function — telling neophytes what sorts of activities are approved or disapproved by the local culture. If we want children (of any age) to make moral lives for themselves, we must encourage them to do so. In general, this courage comes, I believe, from their participation in certain kinds of relationships. Possible extensions of storytelling that can enliven moral discourse and provide opportunities for moral embodiment/enactment are story writing and theatre performance. The latter gives us an opportunity to grapple with complex interpretive problems, to engage in communicative activities, and to develop a sense of commitment to re/telling stories, forging relationships, and engaging in projects. Both in the reinterpretation of texts/stories and in the demands of performance lie possibilities for moral enactment and the development of new moral knowledge.

I left the theatre because the lure of the big bucks from philosophy of education was far too great, but I am gratified to see that others, like Valentine, see a connection between moral and aesthetic practices. I continue to believe that those connections have important philosophical and educational implications.