

A review of
**Aurelia: Art and
Literature Through
the Mouth of
the Fairy Tale**

Rose Williamson

Carol Mavor's *Aurelia* is a gold-tinged, pictorial fairyland which explores artistic, linguistic, and poetic representations of fairy tales and childhood. It is a journey taken through libraries, galleries, and cinemas, guided by Mavor's personal voice with assistance from over a hundred stunning colour images, all interspersed with *Aurelia's* unique presentation of bolded golden passages within the text. Yet, as visually appetising as this book is, it seems to be still in the aurelian pupal phase described in its own introduction, trapped between reflective prose and academic argument. Mavor has experimented with a creative-critical approach in her text, but the 'critical' is neglected in order to lay on a feast of visual fantasy and poetic language. Mavor is evidently well read, using a number of literary and art scholars to begin arguments about each piece of media she discusses. There is a yearning as a reader for her to linger longer on any one argument, to make the case more clearly, and to tease out more meaning before rapidly moving to the next thought. As an academic text, the stream of consciousness style feels too erratic. But if this book aimed to be a reflective piece of creative nonfiction, the interspersing of literary theory and the necessity for endnotes takes it into the academic register:

This is most problematic when it comes to determining the book's corpus. Mavor's approach to the fairy tale is to gather texts and images for discussion which seem 'magical' and 'fairy-tale-esque', but which are not grouped by any definitive set of parameters. I recognise the difficulty in defining the fairy tale, but, from an academic standpoint, *Aurelia* would have benefitted from boundaries that limited content: fairy tales, children's literature, literature about children or childhood, and so on. While these topics are all interrelated, they are, indeed, also distinct. Taking them on as a whole contributes to the confusion of the corpus. Mavor is certainly aware of scholarly works which help to define these disciplines. She dedicates the book to Marina Warner, who has, of course, laid out some boundaries for the definition of a fairy tale in *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*. Mavor only mentions one of these, that the fairy tale has an implicit or present magic, yet Warner has laid out more parameters: that the fairy tale is short, familiar, has an implied oral tradition (admittedly, this point Mavor

does reference with her 'oralian'/'Aurelian'/'auralian'/'Orwellian' wordplay), utilises one-dimensional language to reflect a fairy-tale grammar, exists in a fairy-tale place and time, and expresses fairy-tale hope. Whether one agrees with these points or not, Mavor does not offer her own insight, nor does she explicitly use any explanation from another scholar to determine what *Aurelia* considers to be a fairy tale. Signposting such as this would have had a significant impact upon the reader's journey. Tale 'tropes' are referenced, but not any of the well-known methods for arranging such tale types and tropes, such as the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale types or Thompson's motif index – at the very least, I would expect some explanation for why the author would choose *not* to use these throughout. Credit is given where it is due to Maria Tatar and Jack Zipes for providing 'excellent histories of the fairy tales and their variations' – but *which* fairy tales, and is the author aware of other comparative studies of fairy tales and folk tales that have been accomplished by scholars such as Alan Dundes, D.L. Ashlimann, Katherine Briggs, or Peter and Iona Opie (just to name a few)?

I fixate on this point about the definition of a fairy tale due to two things: one, the title misleadingly makes one think this is a book considering either fairy tales in art and literature or the effect of fairy tales on art and literature, and, two, because Mavor never addresses this point even though it would have prepared the reader for the type of discussion that follows. I would claim that this book considers not 'art and literature through the mouth of the fairy tale' but rather 'art and literature considering childhood'. Although much of her discussion references fairy tales or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (the latter of which one might consider does not represent the 'fairy tale' genre), not all artwork discussed seems to tie into this theme. Alternatively, choosing a medium to focus on could have helped rein in the vast number of fairy and folk tales, short stories, novels, films, photographs, paintings, museum artefacts, ephemera, and buildings that are discussed.

Another issue inherent throughout is the tenuous linking of concepts in order to make forced connections or to read into texts and images ideas for which there is no evidence. A factual titbit is sometimes thrown into the analysis that seemingly has no connection with the preceding content, such as in the chapter on 'An Alicious Appetite', where, inserted into a discussion about Alice's difficulty finding things to eat in Carroll's tales, one finds a very loosely related fact about 17th-century treatises on fairies who invisibly consume what an unknowing victim thinks he is putting into his own mouth. However interesting these facts may be, they disrupt the exploration of the scholarly arguments. These unsubstantiated relationships can be particularly problematic when it comes to word origins and language usage. For example, in the first chapter, 'Eating Gold', Mavor makes an argument for the way in which the Grimms' tale 'The Golden Key' utilises the opening 'One winter when' to enchant the reader and anticipate the action. She recognises that opening with an 'O' occurs only in the English translation (the original German is 'Zur winterszeit'), but does not address the German, nor discuss the fact that there could be no intention behind this on the part of the Grimms. Similarly, overtly pointing out the homonym 'shudder' for 'shutter' in relation to Roland Barthes ignores

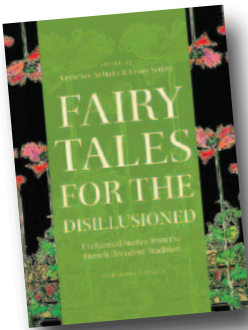
that his work was originally in French, or that the homonym works in a North American but not a British accent. Thus the comment functions only as a gratuitous aside, and this type of aside is not an isolated incident within Mavor's text.

Finally, this book would also benefit from captions underneath its pictures. There are a huge number of images in this work and, occasionally, they are not on the same page spread as Mavor's analysis of them. This made it quite difficult to follow on some occasions. From a practical standpoint, having to flip between analysis, endnotes, and image references was distracting. Overall, without adhering to strict parameters, this book is only quasi-academic and would not serve the student or scholar. I think this book works best for the reader who enjoys a poetic, personal style and the dreamy but sometimes macabre world of the fairy-tale-esque.

Author: Carol Mavor.

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Rose Williamson



A review of
**Fairy Tales for the
Disillusioned:
Enchanted Stories
from the French
Decadent Tradition**

Victoria Leslie

It is clear to see why the short story, 'Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned' (1894) by Willy (Henry Gauthier-Villars) was selected as the title for this anthology of fairy tales from the French decadent tradition. Not only does it capture rather aptly the decadent mood of disenchantment and anxiety surrounding the modern age, but it is also overtly about responding to the gaps and silences within the original stories, a theme that unites many of the tales within this anthology. The story itself focuses on Daphnis and Chloé, who, on the eve of their wedding venture into the forest,

encountering a host of fairy-tale characters who proceed to tell them their versions of the famous stories in which they feature. Not unlike the scene in DreamWorks' animated film *Shrek*, when the eponymous hero discovers a medley of fairy-tale characters having descended upon his swamp to gripe about their banishment from the kingdom, Willy's characters are also keen to appeal to Daphnis and Chloé and give voice to their discontent. In this tale, Sleeping Beauty moans about Prince Charming dreaming of other women, the Wolf is framed by Little Red for murdering grandmother, Cinderella settles for a cobbler instead of a prince and continues her days keeping house, and Donkey Skin is spurned by the king's son. Daphnis and Chloé, after receiving this collective wisdom, decide not to marry despite having already consummated their love. Willy's message is clear: don't believe in fairy tales for there is no happily ever after.

The same disillusioned mood, the danger of believing too much in fairy tales when coming to terms with the complexities of the modern age, pervade most of the stories in this anthology – 36 in total, many newly translated by the volume's editors, Gretchen Schultz and Lewis Seifert. Likewise, the idea of revisiting a classic tale and offering a new perspective as well as redeeming those characters seemingly 'wronged' by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm seems to be the impetus behind many of the stories. In Anatole France's 'Seven Wives of Bluebeard' (1909) for instance, the narrator likens Bluebeard to Macbeth, who is forever regarded as a villain due to his misrepresentation by Shakespeare. France's story serves as a testament to the good character of Bluebeard, assuring the reader that this version, unlike Perrault's, is 'based on authentic documents'. The process of exploiting the gaps and silences within the original stories adheres to the anthology's subtitle, of this being a collection of 'oddly modern fairy tales'. This certainly rings true, with many of these stories self-consciously playing around with fairy-tale tropes and archetypes, rendering them uncannily reminiscent of the much later wave of postmodern fairy tales by the likes of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood.

The 'oddly modern' epithet also applies rather fittingly to many of the ideas in the stories concerning gender and sexuality. In Willy's tale, Daphnis and Chloé are dissuaded from marriage but not from sex, there being no ramifications for Chloé's loss of virginity. Meanwhile in Rachilde's 'The Mortis' (1900), the protagonist, a Count and the last of his line, openly possesses an appetite for both 'brunette ladies and blond pages'. Similarly, in Catulle Mendès' 'Isolina/Isolin' (1885), a wicked fairy casts a spell on a princess, condemning her – on her wedding night – to turn from a girl into a boy. Mendès leaves just enough wiggle room to avoid an ending promoting a same-sex relationship, whilst Renée Vivien's 'Prince Charming' (1904), on the other hand, goes a step further, replacing magic with deception, with Prince Charming's sister usurping her brother's place in order to steal his bride. Though the story becomes a 'bit difficult to tell', Vivien doesn't shy away from painting a 'vision of ideal tenderness' between two women, who against conventionality live happily ever after.

Conversely, the fear of modernity itself is one of the overriding themes of the collection and an obvious decadent concern and the tendency to lament the past holds appeal for many writers of this movement. In Alphonse Daudet's 'The Fairies of France' (1873) a fairy is on trial for trying to burn down Paris – it being the centre of progress and modernity – a revenge of sorts for the destruction of all the fairy habitats lost to deforestation and the incursion of railways. Displaced and lost, the last of the fairies find themselves redundant because they aren't believed in anymore and are forced to head into the 'big cities in search of work.' Likewise, Catulle Mendès' 'The Last Fairy' (1885) is about another fairy made homeless by the felling of trees. She tries to gain employment by using her magic to assist a variety of people she meets along her way but finds that all the services she tries to offer – separating wheat from chaff, summoning a host of glow-worms to illuminate a room – are already accomplished by various new technological marvels. The same conclusion is drawn by the protagonists of Pierre Veber's story of the same name – 'The Last Fairy' (1908) – that the modern world has no need for the presence of fairies. The story follows the misadventures of 'two divine tourists' (the last fairy of the title and a genie) as they venture into the world of man. But the process leaves them disillusioned and quick to return to their ancient patch of woodland where they can live out their days undisturbed by mankind's disregard.

Though evidently the fairies were dying off at the end of the 19th century according to this collection, the fairy tale in its reimagined state was flourishing. Schultz and Seifert cite 'hundreds' of decadent fairy tales appearing during the period 1870 to 1914, it being the perfect vehicle to respond to the changing times and to explore decadent concerns. Their notion that fairy tales often appear 'in moments of cultural, social, or political crisis and transition' is well argued in a useful introductory essay exploring the history of the *conte de fées* and the function of these modern rewrites within the decadent literary movement. Besides being a thoroughly engaging read, *Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned* is an extraordinary contribution to the fairy-tale canon. As with the last fairy and the genie in Veber's tale, waiting patiently in the last remnant of enchanted forest, by translating many of these stories, and retrieving countless others long out of print, Schultz and Seifert have managed to recover a little bit of the magic so necessary for modern life.

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