A review of

Children into Swans: Fairy Tales and the Pagan Imagination

Katherine Langrish

This book is a fairy-tale treasure trove heaped up in indiscriminate splendour, and, like many a dragon's hoard, best approached with caution. Colourful and entertaining, it will appeal to the general reader as an introduction to the variety, range and depth of (mainly European) fairy tales. Beveridge's reading is wide, her love of the subject obvious and her enthusiasm infectious, but the ambitious scope of her book encompasses too many unexamined assumptions and even inaccuracies to render it useful to an academic audience.

The book is divided into four sections: History, Characters, Stories from the Pagan Year, and Storytellers' Themes. In the first, Beveridge asks and attempts to answer the question, 'Where did the ideas in these wild tales of the imagination come from?' In the second, she sketches a variety of what might be termed the personnel of fairyland – elves, giants, dwarfs, etc. In the third section she touches on stories with seasonal significance, and in the fourth and last she provides examples of a number of common motifs or themes such as shape-shifting, the granting of wishes and the fulfilment of prophecies. The book is stuffed with fascinating details – every page contains something interesting – but only a few of the stories cited are actually referenced, and the author's inclination is too often to stand in wonder rather than to analyse. She can be at once obvious and woolly, as here: 'A long, unbroken Celtic tradition was likely a factor in Ireland's lasting tradition of these vivid and imaginative narratives. From before the time when the Romans invaded England, elements of Celtic culture were evident in Ireland, and for a thousand years this was the culture that prevailed there.' (7) But 'England' as such didn't exist at the time of the Roman invasion, when 'Celtic culture' would have been 'evident' throughout the entire British Isles: the missed point here is that unlike mainland Britain, no part of Ireland ever became a Roman province. Its indigenous, non-urban pagan culture therefore flourished unchanged till the later advent of monastic Celtic Christianity – which as Beveridge rightly points out was relatively tender towards the old myths, not only preserving them, but regarding them as 'worthy to be presented', so that in the 12th-century 'Colloquy of the Ancients' we find the heroes Oisin and Caílte telling tales to St Patrick himself.

In the opening paragraph of Chapter 2, 'The Oldest "Fairy" Tale' (with a single gesture towards caution in the inverted commas), Beveridge describes her search for the oldest fairy tales of Northern Europe: 'I assumed this would be a daunting task, but I was wrong.' (13) A touchstone throughout the book is the 11th-century Irish manuscript 'The Book of the Dun Cow', some of whose tales can be dated to the ninth or even the seventh century. Beveridge now asserts that one, 'Ectra Condla' or 'the adventure of Connla', is 'the oldest story with a fairy in it'. Certainly the translation she offers, slightly modernised from the version called 'Connla and the Fairy Maiden' in Joseph Jacobs' *Celtic Fairy Tales* (1892), seems to support this. But Victorian translators were fond of the word 'fairy' and tended to use it for every supernatural or Otherworld maiden. Important nuances can thus be lost. Aware of this, Beveridge explains, 'Very early, these shadows of the old race … were referred to as fairies and so in many versions and translations of ancient Irish stories, as in the Connla story, the word fairy is used when referring to one of them.' (41) Nevertheless it pays to remember that 'fairy' is not an ancient Irish word – and it comes with a lot of baggage. Is Midir, in 'The Wooing of Étain', a fairy king or an Otherworld demi-god? When is a fairy not a fairy? Though a definitive answer may never be reached, a more careful discussion of nomenclature might have helped avoid pitfalls later in the book, as for example when Beveridge attempts to categorise and distinguish between fairies and elves.

In Chapter 3, Beveridge provides a delightful portrait of the monk Mael Muiri (whose autograph appears in the manuscript's margins) as he works on 'The Book of the Dun Cow', and she chronicles this important manuscript's subsequent eventful history, concluding:

> In the chapters that follow, we will come upon one after another of Mael Muiri's stories and will see what a remarkable book this is. … In the early narratives of Europe we discover elements of mythic lore deeply held in ancient storytelling tradition. Traces of lore in these ancient stories endured in a tradition of folk tales handed down by storytellers over the years, to become further expanded upon in fairy tales – the tales of fantasy that would become so popular in the nineteenth century. (27)

This may be so, but in flinging her net as wide as she does, attempting to cover every aspect of the European fairy tale and its supposed descent from mythic and pagan origins, Beveridge faces a task as overwhelming as that of any Cinderella set to sort millet seeds from ashes. Coherency and argument are swamped in a sea of detail, and if the book has a thesis more sophisticated than 'fairy tales are more ancient than you think', I am unable to perceive it.

In Chapter 4 Beveridge chronicles the 19th-century resurgence of interest in folk and fairy tales, characterising the Romantic movement as 'nostalgia for the past, and the idealization of rustic simplicity', which, though not untrue, rather misses the nascent nationalism which motivated many folklore collectors. She gives a good account of the 18th-century French fashion for literary fairy tales, before turning to the Victorian popularisation of fairy tales for children. But it is incorrect to suggest as she does that, '[i]n Victorian England, it was felt that literature for children should have a moral purpose, and all tales of the supernatural, with fairies, witches, and giants, were unacceptable reading material' (33). It was the Age of Enlightenment, not the Victorian Age, which disapproved. In any case Victoria did not ascend the throne until 1837 and as Beveridge herself goes on to quote, 'From the 1840's to 1890's, Victorian England witnessed … the greatest flowering of writing for children … Writing fairy tales for children had become an acceptable literary activity.'

As a phrase, 'the Victorians' often seems to elicit knee-jerk reactions. In Chapter 5 Beveridge holds them responsible for the invention of the diminutive fairies so unfashionable today: 'This is an entirely modern idea that was first popularised by the Victorians.' She is not alone in this confident assertion and perhaps it depends on what you mean by 'modern', but miniature fairies have been around at least since 1597 when Shakespeare's Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* described the fairy midwife Queen Mab, who comes 'In shape no bigger than an agate-stone/On the forefinger of an alderman' (Act I Sc 3). Shakespeare's audiences were apparently unfazed by the notion that the lesser fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might 'creep into acorn-cups', or that Ariel in *The Tempest* might lie 'in a cowslip's bell'. In 1625 Robert Herrick (best known for 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may') tells in 'Oberon's Palace' how Oberon sits at a mushroom table and quaffs a dewdrop from a violet, while Michael Drayton's mock-heroic poem 'Nimphidia' (1627) describes the diminutive knight Pigwiggen as he arms himself with a cockleshell shield, a hornet's-sting rapier and a beetle's head helmet, before riding to the fray on a frisky earwig. Finally, Katherine Briggs cites, from a 17th-century manuscript in the Ashmolean, a spell to conjure a fairy into a crystal glass 'in length and breadth 3 inches'. Enough already! Stop blaming the Victorians.

The rest of the book is a valiant attempt to separate out and examine numerous different strands of fairy lore and follow them back to archetypes from the Celtic and Norse mythologies. Interesting as many of these are, such as her association of the Sleeping Beauty's spindle with the norns, valkyries and fates who spin and weave destiny (185), the sheer volume of material is overwhelming and the attempt becomes increasingly breathless and scattered, while an ongoing failure to explore the interchangeable names of fairy creatures, especially in translation, leads to confusion. An example is the Grimms' tale of 'The Elves and the Shoemaker'. In the original

German text the tiny shoemakers are simply '*zwei kleine niedliche nackte Männlein*', 'two pretty little naked men', and the title is '*Die Wichtelmännchen*', which Margaret Hunt in 1884 chose to translate as 'The Elves'. Beveridge duly cites the tale in Chapter 6, on 'Elves', but such creatures more properly belong in Chapter 8 with 'Household Spirits', along with brownies, nissen and tomten. What difference there is – if there is indeed any difference at all – between elves and fairies, whom Beveridge splits into separate chapters, is never discussed. She does recognise (55) that 'elf' in 'Njal's Saga' can refer to a ghost or a dead man. But so can 'troll', and fairies too are often associated with the dead. In truth, the categories often simply bleed into one another, and it is as well to recognise that.

Turning after individual chapters on fairies, elves, dwarfs and house spirits, to 'Water Dwellers', I had to blink at the assertion that 'Mermaid mythology is ancient and, *unlike the others* [my italics], is widespread, ranging from Japanese, Chinese and Russian mermaids, a Babylonian merman … to images of mermaids in medieval bestiaries'. Taking only house spirits as an example, this is to forget or ignore the *domovoi* of Russia, the *pukis* of Latvia, the *zashiki-warashi* of Japan, the kitchen god of China, the *lares* and *penates* of Ancient Rome and even the *teraphim* of the Old Testament. Yet Beveridge is far from ignorant. She is simply trying to cover too much ground. A chapter on 'Trees', for example, begins with a look at 'the magic wands of witches, wizards and fairy godmothers' and, after a brief account of the Grimms' story 'Sweetheart Roland', informs us that 'Wands were primary magical items, and most witches and wizards had one' (205). For wizards this may be true, but not for witches. Aside from 'Sweetheart Roland' I cannot find another of the Grimms' tales in which a woman wields a wand, and only two out of more than a hundred witch narratives in Katherine Briggs' colossal *Dictionary of British Folktales* involve a wand – both employed by men. Why does this matter? It mischaracterises witches, whose magical accessories traditionally belong to a humble domestic sphere – cooking pots, broomsticks, animal familiars, etc. In a field so vast it isn't safe to bridge gaps in your knowledge with unsupported generalisations.

In the old sense of the word, and I don't mean this unkindly, Beveridge is an amateur: her love of her subject is evident on every page. For the interested but inexperienced fairy-tale reader 'Children into Swans' will be a delightful and jam-packed introduction to the tales and folklore of many different countries, along with fascinating indications of their longevity and mythical roots. The scholar, however, will need to look elsewhere.

Author: Jan Beveridge.

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