



A review of
Fairy Tale
Cristina Bacchilega

Andrew Teverson's 'Introduction' is inviting and pithy. Drawing on the plots and publication history of three versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood', he presents the fairy tale as 'a multi-tongued genre, a cultural palimpsest' (5), a genre marked by shifting ideas of who the folk are, what the function of the stories is, and which traditions of fairy tale are at play in a single tale. Placing these ideas in the first few pages of this volume has great pedagogical value in my experience, as it is not uncommon to spend time in a course unmaking popular assumptions about the genre – it is universal and 'innocent of history or politics' (7) – that students bring to the discussion. The 'Introduction' does not just save time at the start of a course: in foregrounding the worldly 'plurisignification' (6) of the genre and of each tale in its multiple versions, Teverson's discussion raises readers' awareness of 'the kaleidoscope of interpretations' (6) of fairy tales as well as of our critical responsibilities.

My students and I read *Fairy Tale* at the start of a course for seniors in the Department of English's 'Studies in Folklore and Literature: Fairy Tales and Social Issues'. Most of the students had not taken other courses on the genre, and Teverson's book definitely helped to define and contextualise 'fairy tale' and set the frame for approaching fairy tales within historical as well as critical contexts. Published in Routledge's New Critical Idiom series, which aims 'to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of . . . terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage', *Fairy Tale* does just that – and more, thanks to Teverson's lively and epigrammatic style.

Chapter 1, 'Definitions', usefully distinguishes between legend, myth and folktale as well as among types of folktale, while successfully avoiding a handbook approach. In its final section, 'Fairy Tale', Teverson foregrounds the genre's marvelous events, suspension of disbelief, and plot patterns, while critiquing the 'unsupportable assumption that a clear distinction can be made between oral and literary traditions' (36) and acknowledging at least 'two dominant traditions of fairy-tale writing' – the compact and the complex – that run 'alongside with one another, intertwining and separating at different points of their

history' (37). Because he draws on a wide range of scholars, including Max Lüthi, Tzvetan Todorov, Arnold van Gennep, Alan Dundes, Maria Tatar, Joseph Campbell, Ruth B. Bottigheimer, and Elizabeth Wanning Harries, and does not downplay their differences, readers are drawn into 'defining' as a significant process and critical conversation.

Chapters 2 and 3, 'The emergence of a literary genre: Early Modern Italy to the French Salon' and 'The consolidation of a genre: The Brothers Grimm to Hans Christian Andersen', usefully trace what is by now a well-accepted history of the fairy tale in print. Punctuated by observations on the complexities of tale transmission and on contemporary adaptations, Teverson's balanced presentation contextualises and synthesises the work of Nancy Canepa, Lewis Seifert, Heinz Rölleke, Neil Philip, Angela Carter on Hans Christian Andersen, and more pervasively Jack Zipes and Maria Tatar. Chapters 4 and 5, 'The emergence of fairy-tale theory: Plato to Propp' and 'Psychoanalysis, history, and ideology: twentieth- and twenty-first-century approaches to fairy tale', are just as useful pedagogically, but more ambitious. Chapter 4 outlines historical and ideological debates about fairy tales primarily in 19th- and early 20th-century folklore studies, formalism, and structuralism.

The bulk of Chapter 5 centres on the two 20th-century theoretical approaches that Teverson sees as dominant: the psychoanalytical, which focuses on 'latent meanings ... from the unconscious parts of the human mind' and proposes that 'the interpretation of fairy tales can bring to light the latent desires and anxieties that such fictions conceal'; and the socio-historical that 'argues that fairy tales are implicated in the political and social belief systems of the societies that have mediated them' and that these belief systems or ideologies are expressed in both obvious and hidden forms in the tales (109). The discussion of Freudian and Jungian interpretations of fairy tales is remarkably accessible and, as he does consistently with other critical approaches, Teverson points out their varied uses and limitations. His synthesis of socio-historical approaches is especially productive, as seen in the following statement, which my students immediately identified as a significant 'takeaway' and kept going back to it during the semester:

Four basic principles underlie this reaffirmation of the historicity of fairy tales. They are, firstly, that fairy tales are historical documents with a specific material past; secondly, that the meaning of fairy tales can only be understood in relation to the cultural contexts in which they have been produced and received; thirdly, that fairy tales do not have stable or universal meanings but mean different things in different contexts; and fourthly, that fairy tales, like all products of human culture, are not 'innocent' or 'naïve,' but reflect the priorities—the 'world views', 'ideologies' or 'mentalités'—of the cultures that have shaped them. (124)

Teverson brings into this critical conversation not only Robert Darnton, Donald Haase, Lutz Röhrich, and Jack Zipes, but Kamau Brathwaite, Patrick Chamoiseau, Walter Benjamin, and José Limón. Feminist approaches, however, receive a surprisingly slight treatment in this chapter, as they are limited to Marina Warner's suggestion 'that folktales are a means of recovering the voices of women' (127), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 reading of 'Snow White' (134-7), and references to Angela Carter throughout the book. The index includes a number of entries about 'gender', 'masculinity', and 'women in fairy tales', but the book does not convey the cumulatively transformative force of popular and scholarly debates on gender and fairy tales, nor does it point to the current pressures and promises of bringing queer theorising to fairy tale studies. I would thus recommend, when adopting *Fairy Tale* for a course, complementing it with readings that focus on gender and sexuality in fairy tales and fairy-tale studies, and also with discussions of fairy-tale film, which Teverson addresses primarily in the 'Conclusion' (140-3).

I will make use of this compact but substantive treatment of the fairy tale again in both graduate and senior college courses. That in some respects it leaves me wanting for more is symptomatic of the richness of approaches to the genre, its own transformations, and the situatedness of our critical engagements.

Author: Andrew Teverson.

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