



A review of
**Des Fata aux fées:
Regards croisés de
l'Antiquité à nos jours**

Francisco Vaz da Silva

This volume, titled *From Fata to Fairies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives From Antiquity to the Present*, stems from a conference held at the University of Lausanne in 2009. Its 17 contributions present a wealth of studies along two interlocking threads. The first examines feminine figures that impart fate at birth, ranging from obscure divinities in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to the wise women in Grimm's 'Dornröschen' ('Little Briar Rose'). The second thread focuses on the tale of Sleeping Beauty, given that the best-known variants of this tale – 'La Belle au bois dormant' by Perrault, 'Dornröschen' by Grimm, and 'Sleeping Beauty' by Disney – feature fairies shaping a destiny. But this thread actually covers a wide spectrum of literary variants, ranging from the medieval *Roman de Perceforest* to modern twists on the image of sleeping beauties. Regardless of whether the focus is on the feminine entities that control destiny, or on the fairy-tale image of young beauties slumbering in bed, a number of contributions variously examine the dark undercurrents associated with feminine figures who usher (or personify) transitions from darkness to light, death to life. As Michelle Ryan-Sautour stresses in her preface, the full impact of this book stems from the interaction of its various pieces, and from the recurring conceptual strands that lend a sense of coherent questioning to the whole.

The volume's contributions come grouped in three batches following a rough timeline from antiquity to the present day. Since most papers are in French, with no English abstracts, an overview is in order.

The first batch features four papers that examine documentary evidence for archaic birth-related practices and beliefs. These discussions address data from ancient Mesopotamia (by Constance Frank), Egypt (Cathie Spieser), Greece (Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge), and from imperial Rome (Véronique Dasen). These converging papers explore a number of hoary notions, e.g., newborns come from the realm of the dead,

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feminine entities (divine as well as human) control the passage from death to life as well as back to death, and humble feminine tasks (such as giving the newborn its first bath, and cutting its umbilical cord) are momentous rites of passage rife with prophetic potential.

The second group connects the classical heritage of Moirai, Parcae, and their ancient sisters to the literary *contes de fées*. In the wake (but not necessarily always in the spirit) of Laurence Harf-Lancner's memorable book, *Les fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine, la naissance des fées* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1984), these contributions trace the literary appropriations and transformations of fairy themes across centuries. Papers in this batch address a piece of mythical rewriting by Ovid involving the Parcae (by Jacqueline Fabre-Serris), medieval 'transliterations' of the mortal-meets-deity motif from Apuleius' 'Tale of Cupid and Psyche' to the Mélusine story (Jean-Claude Mühlethaler), and supernatural entities involved in the 'sleeping-beauty' episode of the medieval *Roman de Perceforest* (Noémie Chardonnes). Overall, intertextuality is the byword in this section. The literary *contes de fées* by Perrault, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and others are addressed as transformations on pre-existing literary texts (Ute Heidmann and Sylvie Ballestra-Puech respectively address Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche' as a source for Perrault and d'Aulnoy) on the one hand, and as links for other rewritings (Magali Monnier examines the connection between d'Aulnoy and Angela Carter) on the other. Last, but by no means least, two contributions focus on 'Sleeping Beauty' proper: Cyrille François shows that the different literary projects by Perrault (rationalist, symbolic) and the Grimms (romantic, ethnographic) crystallise in the different depictions of the fairy figures they respectively propose in 'La Belle au bois dormant' and 'Dornröschen'. Donald Haase, in a thought-provoking essay, points out a metafictional, self-reflective dimension of Sleeping Beauty regarding storytelling within the story.

The third batch of contributions examines the fortunes of fairies, and of Sleeping Beauty, in the modern cultural scene. A paper on Gustave Doré brings out the association between the Parcae/fairies and a pervasive funereal strain in the oeuvre of this influential illustrator of Perrault's *contes* (Philippe Kaenel). Another contribution pinpoints the presence of ambiguous, mysterious, powerful feminine figures – at once fairies and demons – in the decadent aesthetics of the European fin-de-siècle literature and art (Michel Viegnes). An inspiring essay on Angela Carter's use of the Sleeping Beauty theme in vampire stories argues that Carter's transformations of 'La Belle au bois dormant' help illuminate a dark dimension of Perrault's text; and it makes the metafictional point that the vampire woman represents Carter herself, who preys on old stories to give them a new bite (Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère). Veering

away from fairies and towards the motif of sleeping beauties, another study addresses a twist in contemporary literature whereby the young beauties remain 'catatonic' in order to provide new life to old gentlemen (Elizabeth Wanning Harries). Finally, two contributions examine politically invested literary transpositions of Sleeping Beauty: one presents Ana María Matute's *El verdadero final de la Bella Durmiente* as a Perrault-inspired allegory of the Franco's regime (Sylvie Ravussin), while the other examines Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* as a novelistic transposition of 'Dornröschen' in the context of the Holocaust (Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Géraldine Viret).

Overall, this volume offers a wealth of data on historically situated representations regarding feminine powers. (It also affords a view on extant paradigms of fairy-tale studies at the University of Lausanne, whence half of all contributors hail.) Even if you cannot read French, the fine subset of four papers in English may be worth your attention. I was particularly stricken by insights on the metafictional dimension (Haase, de la Rochère) and the sacrificial logic (Harries) pervading Sleeping Beauty as the theme unfolds across media and genres. You may find other interesting lines of thought in this rich collection.

Editors: Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Véronique Dasen.
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