A review of

Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic: From Ancient Egypt to the Italian Renaissance

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The historical European reservoir of fairy tales, rather than consisting of an oral tradition that is impossible to research, represents a collection of books and other printed matter which were extremely popular especially during the 18th and 19th centuries. The notion of an oral tradition is a historical fallacy that has more to do with a romantic predisposition than with actual history, yet it has proved difficult to deconstruct, notwithstanding a mountain of printed evidence. Europe, where the fairy tale originated, was a profoundly literary society where books were revered, including among the illiterate, especially since the invention of printing in the 15th century. Like plays, tales may have been orally performed, but through the centuries remained grounded on paper. The 'literary fairy tale' thus turns out to be a pleonasm. All fairy tales were conceived by authors instead of by an anonymous 'folk'. That is perhaps the reason why literary stories like *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and even *Pinocchio* and *Peter Pan* (not to mention several Snow Queens) blend in so easily with such presumed oral tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* or *Little Red Riding Hood*, which were in reality also written tales. Most adherents of the oral tradition myth seem to have conveniently forgotten the work of scholars such as Albert Wesselski, Iona and Peter Opie, Alan Bruford or Rudolf Schenda and start afresh with an emotional attachment to childhood favourites. The problem of orality ignores history and boils down to what someone wants to believe; ultimately it renders historical research superfluous. Luckily, some academics have a more rational mind as well as a better sense of history.

Ruth Bottigheimer's *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic* is the third in a series of books, starting with *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition* (2002) and continuing with *Fairy Tales: A New History* (2009). In this context, it is

not a straightforward history as it rather circles around mid-16th-century Venice and the author Zoan (Giovanni) Francesco Straparola, the progenitor of what Bottigheimer has called the 'rise fairy tale'. Where *A New History* unfolds backwards in time from the Brothers Grimm to Straparola, the present book starts with the oldest tales and moves forward to the Venetian author and slightly beyond. It is a prequel to the other two studies and a response to the vehement attacks of Bottigheimer's findings by a group of scholars, among others in the *Journal of American Folklore* of 2010. *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic* establishes once and for all that in Venice a new kind of tale was invented which formed the prototype of what is now considered a fairy tale. It does so by tracing changes in the treatment of magic. Readers should, perhaps, consume the three books in their original sequence, for one because in *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic* the author has presumed a familiarity with her two central concepts, restoration tales and rise fairy tales. Distinguishing between the two has become necessary not only because the latter rose out of the first, but also because in the course of fairy-tale history its predecessors were redefined and previously existing tales were incorporated into a tradition that was less ancient than its components. This process is most clearly represented (although not always visible) in the present-day tale type catalogues, yet it was a regular feature throughout fairy-tale history.

Restoration tales, in which a hero of noble birth sets out to restore his position, finds the greatest good on earth and on the way secures the love of a princess, were current several centuries before Straparola had the idea that the hero could also be of low status and, through magic, obtain the same result as his knightly predecessors. It associated the fresh tale with an urban public. Students of fairy tales usually analyse the stories for information on economic hardship or social relationships and have so far hardly considered the magic in them. Yet magic makes a very sensible focus and can, for instance, separate fairy-tale witchcraft from witchcraft in legends. The latter refers to stories about witchcraft, told from the experience of people suffering bewitchments, and their fairy-tale counterparts provide another clue to the otherworldliness and thus literary character of fairy-tale witches. The instances where witches only appeared as the result of translations are even more telling in this respect. Bottigheimer's study of the magic in the precursors of fairy tales actually shows better than anything else how constructed they are and how removed from both the learned practice of magic and the contemporary experience of bewitchments and counter spells. A practical reason for this was that precisely at the time of publication of Straparola's *Le Piacevoli Notti*, Catholic publishing rules began to tighten (the council of Trent was still in session). As a result, mainly those tales which compromised clergy were put on the Index

and fairy-tale magic remained relatively immune from the censor. This was confirmed with the publication of Giambattista Basile's *Lo Cunto de li Cunti* in the mid-1630s, when the Spanish Inquisition had been looking over the author's shoulders. But the process of adopting a subdued kind of magic in stories had already started much earlier.

Bottigheimer's book presents useful overviews of the magic tales among the ancient Egyptians, the Romans, as well as the medieval Christians, Jews and Muslims, and thereby underlines the constrasts with the later fairy tales. As an example of the changes a story underwent from the High Middle Ages into the Renaissance I have selected her treatment of the *Lay of Lanval* and its subsequent permutation into the stories of first *Liombruno* and then *Lionbruno*. The Lay was nothing more than a 'fairyland fiction' in which the hero encounters a beautiful fairy who becomes his beloved. Apart from the fairy herself, the main magical feature here is a cloak of invisibility. When three hundred years later the hero had become Liombruno, he had not only gained a name but turned into a fisherman's son who was abducted by a demon and then by a princess and still took eight years to learn the courtly skills before he could be joined with her. A section was added in which Liombruno obtains a cloak of invisibility, seven-league boots and a heap of money from quarrelling robbers. Only in the print version of the 'proto-fairy tale' *Lionbruno* do the 'tasks and trials that ... have remained the stock in trade of modern fairy tales' (142) make their appearance. The boy still has to struggle through an eight-year course to become socially acceptable. Although he did not write the next tale in this sequence, Straparola put the final nail in the plot by omitting the learning programme and replacing it by, for example, a wish-fulfilling fish. It shows that the development of fairy tales is a slow process, in all probability with some undisclosed side-lines, too.

The case also indicates the wealth of information and thinking behind *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic*. This book could easily have been thrice as long and thus shows the way for further research.

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