



A review of
**xo Orpheus:
Fifty New Myths**

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‘Part of our lives ... are dream worlds, incurably ancient.’

Brian Aldiss (519).

Since the late 1990s, the American writer and editor Kate Bernheimer has become widely recognised and celebrated as a custodian of the fairy-tale genre. Where fairy tales are sometimes viewed as fey and insincere, Bernheimer's ongoing practice campaigns for their acceptance within intellectual circles through the founding of the colourful annual literary journal *Fairy Tale Review* in 2005, as well as three book-length edited volumes, three children's books, two collections of her own short stories, and a trilogy of fairy-tale novels. After her long-term editorial investment in fairy tales of myriad shapes and sizes, it is invigorating to witness her approaching a slightly different literary form in the second decade of the 21st century: the myth. There are, of course, close family ties. Myths and fairy tales share a lack of definite origins, a wealth of variations, and propensities towards the supernatural, and both function as deeply ingrained imaginative bedrocks for an understanding of civilisation. Bernheimer's geological metaphor of the 'Anthropocene' (xxii) seems apt in this regard: myth and fairy tale overlap in their ancientness and humanity, akin to cultural artefacts and the Freudian notion of psychic strata. Attempts have also been made to distinguish them. Bruno Bettelheim, for instance, believed that myths were more pessimistic than the reconciliation of many fairy tales.¹ Drawing on the scholarship of Maria Tatar, Bernheimer points out that the 'domestic' fairy tale can stand in contrast to the 'worldly' myth (*ibid.*), yet both these definitions also propose a unifying archaeology.

xo Orpheus: Fifty New Myths is the editorial sibling or companion piece to the World Fantasy Award-winning *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales* (2010). The generous promise of ten tales more than its predecessor adds a serial quality to this Penguin enterprise. Once again the title does not disappoint: the characters 'xo', symbolising 'kiss, hug', speak in the emoticon parlance of our times. In an era where the majority of editorial projects are conducted electronically, this witty little title offers a

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subtle nod to the style of correspondence Bernheimer no doubt engaged in with her international range of contributors. 'xo' also suggests the intimate agony of the farewell parting. The editor's concise introduction to the volume reminds us of the tragedy of Orpheus, who, although equipped with the artistic ingenuity to save Eurydice from Hades, broke the rules on the return journey from the underworld, and, in turn, lost his beloved for eternity. Bernheimer also explains the critical ambition of her collection: to bid farewell to older mythologies and celebrate the dawning of fifty 'new' tales that seek to re-imagine the myths for an early 21st-century readership. Conceptually closer, I would suggest, to the 'demythologising business' of Angela Carter where well-known tales are revised rather than created from scratch,² Bernheimer invited each contributor to rewrite the allegories of their favourite mythological characters. The museological layout reveals the editor as a doting curator of mythography. Alphabetically arranged, the contents pages read as a kind of Classical school register: Cronos, Daedalus, Daphne, Galatea, Icarus, the Kraken, Narcissus, Persephone, Poseidon, Pygmalion, Siren, among others. Furthermore, serious attention to pre-texts beyond the standard Greek and Roman repertoire, such as Aztec, Inuit and Indian myths, enriches *xo Orpheus* for the post-colonial reader. The majority of tales are creatively retitled, and accompanied by a brief rationale from each author explaining their choice of myth and justifying their treatment of it. For example, Elanor Dymott's 'Henry and Booboo' stages a chilling, guilt-ridden reinterpretation of Herodotus' tale of 'Candaules and Gyges', in which a king allows his bodyguard to secretly watch his queen undress, by reframing it through the childhood 'primal' scenario of 'you show me yours, I'll show you mine'. Dymott notes her desire 'to explore the spaces [Herodotus] leaves: the things unspoken, the explanations withheld, and the questions unasked by his characters' (105). The wealth of imaginative possibilities available for filling such gaps is surely the reason why rewritings of established narratives have proven themselves so fertile and so irresistible. As with many short story collections, it is worth taking the time to absorb oneself in the peculiar logic of each tale. For me, the best ones are disciplined in structure and content; a short story should be *short* with only the sparsest of embellishments. Sigrid Nunez's 'Betrayal' offers key ingredients for a memorable myth: strangers on a train, a magical garment, themes of youth, beauty, ageing, adultery and metamorphosis, all within a compact narrative structure which presents only the bare essentials of such details.

Bernheimer's innate visual sensibility, found in the imagery of her own fiction writing, is catered for on two occasions within the volume. Illustrator Edward Carey bookends his rendition of 'Baucis and Philemon' with twinned illustrations; one double-portrait of the two characters and one stark, poetic image of a pair of telegraph poles. In this tale, poignantly retitled 'Sawdust', an elderly couple are so inextricably entangled in their love that they begin to resemble each other. Each fears losing the other and being the sole

survivor in this ever-changing, uncertain world. Elsewhere, 'The Veiled Prophet' by graphic novelist David B. retells the tale of the Caliph from *One Thousand and One Nights*, serving a welcome visual feast and intermedial infusion to the entire volume. Here recurrent seas of erotic bodies, armies and a deluge of skeletons provide a graphic microcosm akin to the textual fabric of the other tales within the collection. The cover image by Julie Morstad is also worthy of note; her Alasdair Gray-like line drawing of a tearful face offers a coolly restrained envisaging of a modern Orpheus.

The epic nature of Bernheimer's compendium poses exciting questions about the possibilities for fairy-tale collections more generally. Compared to the so-called Golden Age of illustrated books for children in the early 20th century, a more recent trend comprises largely unillustrated collections where fiction writing is juxtaposed alongside scholarly readings, and, therefore, arguably aimed at more specialist audiences. While *xo Orpheus* is primarily an anthology of creative writing, thorough research on the part of each contributor is evident throughout, lending a scholarly dimension to Bernheimer's editorial excavation. In total this book occupies a curious moment in our cultural stratigraphy, one to cherish for its moment of conception.

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References

1. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 38. The inverse can also be true.
2. Angela Carter, 'Notes From the Front Line', *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, Jenny Uglow (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1997), 37-8. In a similar vein, Jack Zipes asserts that 'the fairy tale is myth. That is, the classical fairy tale has undergone a process of mythicization ... Only innovative fairy tales are antimythical, resist the tide of mythicization, comment on the fairy tale as myth'. *Fairy Tale as Myth/ Myth as Fairy Tale* (University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 5-6.