



A review of
**The Fairies Return:
Or, New Tales for Old**

Andrew Teverson

First published in 1934, the collection of 'stories about fairy stories', *The Fairies Return: Or, New Tales for Old*, was the product of an imaginative venture by Peter Llewelyn Davies, the owner of the publishing house that commissioned the stories, and, more significantly, one of the five Llewelyn Davies brothers, who in childhood had inspired J.M. Barrie in his composition of the play *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904). This childhood legacy, as Maria Tatar observes in her substantial introduction to this reissue of Davies' compilation, weighed heavily with Davies. In later years he described Barrie's play, with poignant ambivalence, as a 'terrible masterpiece' (31), and he began increasingly to resent identifications in the popular imagination between himself and the lost boy who had taken his first name. In light of this, Davies' choice to 'return' to the fairies in 1934 by issuing a volume of reworked fairy tales is highly suggestive: at the age of 37, Peter Llewelyn Davies was returning to the sites and scenes of his childhood, reflecting upon the environment in which his imagination had been shaped. Simultaneously, however, the stories collected in *The Fairies Return* also make it clear that Davies was staging a rejection of the neverlands of his childhood, for the narratives that he commissioned are not innocent and enchanting, or designed to perpetuate the illusions of childhood, but cynical, satirical, worldly and thoroughly adult, both in theme and in general attitude. The story of 'Puss in Boots' by Helen Simpson, for instance, is a modern satire upon the cynicism and decadence of contemporary politics, and Clemence Dane's brooding and mysterious reinvention of the Grimm tale 'Godfather Death' is a powerful allegory about suffering in early 20th-century Europe.

In all, there are 14 tales in this collection (the original had 15 but copyright reasons have meant that E. Arnot Robertson's 'Dick Whittington' could not be reprinted by Princeton University Press). The stories are by a selection of literary luminaries of the period, notably Christina Stead, the author of the masterpiece of modernist storytelling *The Salzburg Tales* (1934); the Hollywood scriptwriters Clemence Dane (pseud. Winifred Ashton) and Helen Simpson (not to be confused with the contemporary short-story writer of the same name); and one of the founding fathers of contemporary fantasy writing, Lord Dunsany. All of the stories rework classic fairy tales, the main principle of revision being that the fairy-tale

sources should be updated so that the narratives take place in modern contexts and address modern concerns. Thus, Snow White's stepmother consults a gramophone rather than a talking mirror, and Sleeping Beauty, in an exquisitely crafted story by G.B. Stern, falls into a deep sleep after she has sampled her mother's secret morphine supply, and is awoken by a dashing doctor who crashes his aeroplane into a maze of hedges outside her country house. The result of all this invention is a set of ingenious narratives that capture some of the narrative power of the old stories, but adapt that narrative power for new scenes and new sensibilities. As observed by the authors of the energetic final story in the collection, R.J. Yeatman and W.C. Sellar, better known as the authors of the historical spoof *1066 and All That* (1930), 'Old wine is often all the better for being re-bottled; perhaps old wives' tales are like that, too' (354).

Published in the mid-1930s, the stories in this collection bear the marks of that turbulent decade in various ways. Some reflect the dangers of overweening ambition and political irresponsibility, perhaps with half an eye on the recent election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor in Germany. Others record a disappearing world of debutante balls and presentations at court, marking the transition from aristocratic ascendancy to popular mass politics. The collection enjoys its modernity too: the story of 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' by A.G. Macdonnel takes pleasure in, and generates a great deal of pleasure out of, the thrill of modern stock exchange speculation; and a number of the stories capture some of the glamour and sophistication associated with Hollywood lifestyles in the 1930s, though Lady Eleanor Smith, in her refiguration of Hans Christian Andersen's narrative about transition between worlds, 'The Little Mermaid', also warns about the dangerous seductions of Hollywood.

As well as being distinctively of its time, the collection also helps contemporary readers to contextualise developments that have occurred since in the transformation of the literary fairy tale. Most immediately, it reveals that the revolution in fairy-tale writing that has taken place in the wake of the radical experimental adaptations of fairy tales by Anne Sexton and Angela Carter in the 1970s is not without precedent in literature in English. The presentation of new tales as 'old wine' that is 'better for being rebottled' by Yeatman and Sellar clearly anticipates Angela Carter's well-known declaration: 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode!' Even as it anticipates Carter, however, this quotation draws attention to the differences between fairy-tale transformation in the 1930s and fairy-tale transformation after the 1970s. Carter and her contemporaries were rewriting stories with a partial view to contesting and transforming depictions of gender, class or race in traditional fairy tales; they sought, as Carter says, to 'explode' the old tales. Davies and his crew of rewriters, by contrast, do not have the social politics of the old stories in their targets, they are not seeking to explode the tales that they deal with in an ideological sense, but to use the models of the old tales to interrogate social

and political mores in the present. In some instances this results in stories that actively perpetuate the problematic social and cultural agendas of the sources. For instance, Cinderella's unpleasant mother in Robert Speaight's tale is condemned because she cuts her hair, wears trousers and lacks 'the dignity, the repose . . . which lend a permanent beauty to her sex' (278) – a new figuration of an old gender code; and Little Red Riding-Hood, in E.C. Somerville's story, is tamed of her wildness and independence at the end of her story by an enforced union with her predatory suitor. In the main, however, these tales, whilst they are not preoccupied with the ideological concerns of the source stories as Carter's generation were to be, have a transformative energy all of their own, drawn from the fruitful aesthetic of modernist innovation and surrealist irreverence for rational modes. It is this transformative energy, in evidence, for instance, in Stead's outstanding reworking of the Grimm tale about the boy who goes forth to discover fear, 'O, If I Could but Shiver', that will make this collection a revelation to those who seek to understand the development of fairy-tale writing in the course of the 20th century.

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References

- ¹ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line,' *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Micheline Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983), p.69.