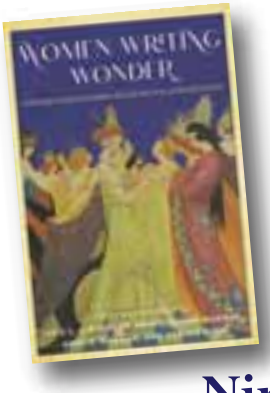

A review of

Women Writing Wonder: An Anthology of Subversive Nineteenth-Century British, French and German Fairy Tales

Joanna Gilar

The concept of the fairy tale was forged by the female salon writers of 17th-century France, then left largely in the hands of men until the end of the 20th century, when feminist writers such as Angela Carter and Anne Sexton took up the mantle and re-explored the genre. So the story has been told. *Women Writing Wonder,* edited and translated by Julie L.J. Koehler, Shandi Lynne Wagner, Anne E. Duggan and Adrion Dula, proves that this is not the case. Delving into forgotten material, much of it previously unpublished in English, *Women Writing Wonder* is an in-depth study of 19th-century fairy tales from France, Germany and the UK written by women. They present an incredibly rich and diverse collection, but as a whole they take to task not simply the idea that the fairy tale in the 19th century was the domain of men, but also the idea that fairy-tale heroines are, as a collective, passive, self-sacrificing, and marriage-obsessed. With little-known stories from authors such as George Sand, Elizabeth Gaskell and Christina Rossetti, as well as tales from prolific writers of wonder whom history has largely forgotten, the collection is a treasure trove of feminist wonder.

Stories range significantly in tone, theme and content. Some are surreal, visionary dreams for which fairy land is as vivid an experience as reality, such as Sophie Tieck Bernhardi von Knorring's 'The Deer' (1801). Others use fairy-tale form to ignite the wonder of the natural world, such as Adele Schopenhauer's 'The Forest Fairy Tale' (1844), in which the forest inhabitants, led by an ancient oak, work together to restore a lost heir to his sylvan heritage. Some are in direct conversation with oral tradition, commenting on or discoursing with oft-repeated fairy tales and their characters. These range from the witty to the unsettling. In Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Curious, if True' (1860), a Richard Whittington is lost while on holiday in France, and taken for his mayoral namesake at an annual fairy tale reunion. In both the

poems of the collection, Letitia Elizabeth Landon's 'The Sleeping Beauty' (1837) and Christina Rossetti's 'The Prince's Progress' (1866), Sleeping Beauty's story is rewritten to throw her happily ever after into unsettling shadow. Landon evokes the gentle, luxurious dream-joy of the sleeper, and questions what might follow on her awakening. Rossetti portrays a lax, thoughtless prince who takes so long that the princess dies in her sleep. Both poems, long before Anne Sexton's 'Briar Rose', deeply unsettle the idea that the perfect resolution for a sleeping princess is the heroically arriving prince.

While the stories that have been gathered here are largely literary stories responding to or corresponding with the oral tradition, the collection also includes some oral stories, such as 'Beardless Hans' (1808), collected from Frau Lehnhardt by Bettina von Arnim, or 'The Three Little Men in the Wood' (1812), given to the Grimm brothers by Dortchen Wild. What is striking about these tales is not so much the stories themselves but the way they have been committed to paper. While Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, particularly in their later editions, polished the stories into finished products, editing and adapting the tales so they could do their didactic duty, Bettina von Arnim was comfortable recording Frau Lehnhardt's tale with an unknown ending, resisting any attempt to close the story off and thus preserving the teller's agency in the part transferral of narrative. Does the tale of Beardless Hans, who is nursed by his mother for 21 years, end with him treasure-hunting for the devil? Or living at the mill grinding ghosts? Neither Lehnhardt nor Arnim knew, and nor do we, but this does not reduce the pleasure we take in reading the story.

This is not to say, however, that the collection doesn't include stories which *have* been written with didacticism in mind. While many of the tales are for an adult audience, others have been crafted either for children in general, or as personal messages to nieces and nephews or grandchildren, wondrous stories tightly spun with messages on how to live well. One of the most striking of these is George Sand's 'The Rose Cloud' (1872), a tale for her granddaughters which begins with a dreamy and sentimental child gathering up a cloud in her apron, and concludes with the image of that child being taught by her mysterious aunt to card and spin 'clouds' into fine thread, suggesting that, as Dula's introduction has it, she should take to task her fanciful imagination, and 'earn her independence and wealth through her own hard work' (106).

The idea that one should forge one's life for oneself is a theme that seems to weave through this anthology. The generally accepted fairy tale notion of a 'successful marriage' is highly questionable, for to marry a prince, or indeed a princess, is more often than not a fate to be avoided at all costs. In Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis' 'Pamrose, or the Palace and the Cottage' (1801), Pamrose is adopted by the Princess Amelie, but maintains a close relationship with her peasant father. Coming to the conclusion that 'the purest felicity' exists not in the sad snobbery which surrounds her adoptive mother, but under her father's humble roof, the story's crux is in Pamrose avoiding the selfish wiles of prince, and becoming safely married to her cousin William. In Félicité de Choiseul-Meuse's 'Rose and Black' (1818),

the Terrible Prince is named so because after pleasing his women 'he would cut out their tongues, put out their eyes, or even throw them in the sea' (96), and, in Elisabeth Ebeling's 'Black and White' (1869), Prince Almansor is persuaded by the vicious racism of the Princess Obstinata to attempt to change the colour of his skin, and nearly dies of it.

These last two stories evidence that, as well as class explorations, fairy tales were also used by female writers to explore and challenge assumptions around race. Still embedded in racist assumptions of the time, these stories are not easy, either to read or to respond to. Choiseul-Meuse's 'Rose and Black' has a young woman whose skin colour changes by the day. The fact that her appearance has no impact on her power, intelligence or virtues is significant, yet the assumptions the story upholds, such as that Blackness can be equated to a curse, still make for deeply uncomfortable reading. In contrast, Ebeling's 'Black and White' pushes further against the boundaries of white supremacist thinking. Prompted by Obstinata, Almansor becomes white through the magic of the Glacier King, but that whiteness is a 'fading', a 'horrific deathly color' which 'crept slowly through the veins of the prince' (239). When he is finally able to break the curse, he does so by digging a spring in the desert. The sun releases the Glacier King's spell and, when the water rises into the pool, he sees his Black self reflected back, and comes to rule his people in strength, wisdom and power. As for the Princess Obstinata, she is turned into a statue. Although Ebeling's tale is still problematic in many ways, the association of whiteness with coldness, immobility and death, as opposed to the strength, movement and power attributed to Blackness, feels both radical and important as an example of the subversive potentiality of the fairy tale.

As Duggan and Dula write in one of their introductions, 'women writing wonder in nineteenth-century France is just as much about women undermining wonder, questioning its validity, or redefining wonder as metaphor, as it is a way of seeing the marvellous in the every day and in everyday people' (26). This is an anthology of magic, but it is also an anthology that grapples with real life, the stories both reinforcing and dismantling oppressions of their time and place. Magic is not used as an escape route, but rather a medium of possibility that allows authors to wrestle with structures of reality, and explore ways of being that are at once real, radical and enchanted.

Editors/translators: Julie L.J. Koehler, Shandi Lynne Wagner, Anne E. Duggan and Adrion Dula.
Publisher: Wayne State University Press (2021), 384 pp.

Joanna Gilar