



A review of
**Inviting
Interruptions:
Wonder Tales in the
Twenty-First Century**

Apolline Weibel

Contemporary wonder tales 'invite us to exchange the well-trodden paths of fairy-tale forests for threads of connection across webs of wonder', Cristina Bacchilega and Jennifer Orme declare in the introduction of *Inviting Interruptions: Wonder Tales in the Twenty-First Century* (x). With this intriguing collection of textual, textural and pictural narratives, Bacchilega and Orme question the shapeshifting nature of the fairy tale through the prism of its many transformations across the 21st century. As disturbing and disorienting as this collection might at times be, the editors never abandon you to fend for yourself in search of meaning among the thorns. Instead, with a weaver's precision and light touch, Bacchilega and Orme spin their own, implicit narrative throughout this collection, redefining not only the purpose and shape of wonder, but also its ambivalent relationship with the inviting Other.

Perhaps the most original and inviting aspect of this collection is its constant interweaving of artistic mediums and narrative voices that echo and interrupt one another, sometimes even within a single narrative. The heroine of Rosario Ferré's 'A Poisoned Tale', for instance, comments on the narrative as it is still developing, assessing that the 'story is getting better; it's funnier by the minute' while also remarking that the narrator 'doesn't sympathise with' her (136). The chorus of wondrous voices gathered in this anthology is itself repeatedly interrupted by the editors' own insights and interrogations, forcing us to stop and ponder over these tales, leaving us suspended between the familiar and the unknown, like the boulder overhanging the cottage in Shaun Tan's 'Shelter' (133). Besides, in spite of its meandering structure, Bacchilega and Orme's collection is undoubtedly centred on several themes, including the exploration of queer desires, the fascination for the monstrous, and the cyclicity of abuse and revenge. These themes are woven together into a coherent – if occasionally bewildering – fairy-tale tapestry that might well have been spun from the silk of Shary Boyle's spider-woman sculpture itself (10).

Gramarye: The Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy, Summer 2021, Issue 19

Far from diverting our attention from traditional fairy-tale themes and tropes, the hybrid nature of this collection is always inherently inviting, and the unexpected ruptures in rhythm, style and medium only interrupt us long enough to draw attention to the importance of redefining the wonder tale in light of its contemporary metamorphoses. Thus, in addition to using multiple or unreliable narrators, this anthology disrupts such prototypical elements as sequential storytelling (as with Maya Kern's achronological 'How to Be a Mermaid'), authoritative language and syntax (through the atypical narrative style of Emma Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Cottage') and even the concept of story itself, by blurring the border between tale and object with Su Blackwell's book sculpture 'Once Upon a Time'. By turning the message into matter, and infusing the matter with message, the artists featured in this collection invite in a plurality and hybridity of voices, shapes and agendas within the genre, both intra- and extradiegetically. This way, Bacchilega and Orme remind us that the wonder tale is, above all, made to be interrupted, altered, transformed. After all, as the protagonist of Diriye Osman's 'Fairytales for Lost Children' states: 'The God of Imagination lived in fairytales. And the best fairytales made you fall in love' (85).

Osman's tale also hints at the political power of wonder tales when the protagonist declares that, for his militant pre-school teacher, 'even Story Time was political' (85). With *Inviting Interruptions*, Bacchilega and Orme set out to prove that they are: by deliberately shaping this collection to be as intersectional and inclusive as possible, they invite traditionally alienated voices, crafts and perspectives into the realm of wonder, welcoming Otherness back into the fairy-tale genre. 'The invitations and interruptions these new tales offer . . . invite us to imagine the world, not only the world of wonder and marvels but the world around us every day, differently. They invite us to see ourselves differently, interrupt complacency, and imagine Otherness,' they thus declare in the introduction (xiii). Without having to sugarcoat its tales or shy away from the darkness and horror intrinsic to the genre, this anthology urges us to sympathise with monsters like Maya Kern's carnivorous mermaid and Shary Boyle's aptly named 'Beast' (55), as well as to make space for neurodivergent and disabled protagonists like the heroines of Kelly Link's 'Swans' and Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Cottage'. Similarly, we are encouraged to support and engage with contemporary attempts at queering and decolonising traditional tales and myths, and even to envision potential transbiological and post-human worlds with works such as Tan's futuristic and intriguing 'Birth of Commerce' (47).

With this original and hybrid collection of wonder tales, Bacchilega and Orme extend to us an invitation to wander – and get temporarily lost – in the woods of contemporary folklore and fairy tales. While the constant shifts in format, culture, tone and medium can often prove a little disorienting, they also draw attention to the porous borders of the genre and the many missing perspectives and silenced voices it has become urgent to reclaim and celebrate. Thus, instead of merely observing the transformation of the genre throughout the 21st century, we are forced by the numerous deliberate interruptions contained within this anthology – be they commentaries, questions, or even unclickable video links – to

become active participants and truly engage with the material. As readers and spectators, we must therefore seek out missing information, imagine the elements that cannot translate to the page (such as shape and texture), piece together morsels of biased information and draw our own conclusions from them. Indeed, only by inviting ourselves into these tales and accepting to interrupt and modify them can we, in turn, hope to recognise and reclaim our own of sense of otherness and wonder.

Editors: Cristina Bacchilega and Jennifer Orme.

Publisher: Wayne State University Press (2021), 254pp.

.....

Apolline Weibel



A review of
**Staging Fairyland:
Folklore, Children's
Entertainment,
and Nineteenth-Century
Pantomime**

Jonathan Roper

In this work, Jennifer Schacker, whose earlier book *National Dreams* (2003) dealt with 19th-century fairy tale collections, turns her attention to the links between fairy tales and pantomime. And as much as it is a discussion of pantomime, this book is also (or maybe more) an intervention into debates in fairy-tale and folklore studies.

The work consists of five chapters, together with a substantial introduction and an 'afterpiece'. These mostly, though not entirely, concentrate on the Victorian pantomime, though there is some discussion of the pre-Victorian pantomime. Pantomime's continuing 20th- and 21st-century life is beyond the purview of the work. Schacker's central argument is that the fact that many Victorians would have known fairy tales in the form of pantomime

has been overlooked by fairy-tale scholars, who have instead concentrated on the print and oral circulation of such stories. She discusses her goals in the following terms:

tracing nineteenth century repertoires across media and in relation to pantomime performance requires a reconfiguration of our thinking about fairy tales – their bearing on questions of identity and sociability, genre and ideology, and also their signifying possibilities. (22)

To give an example of the overlooking of stage fairy tales, she brings up the case of one Victorian writer on *Little Red Riding Hood* who sees Perrault-derived versions as the tale's form in England. However, as Schacker rightly points out:

by 1878, Red Riding Hood was firmly entrenched as a stock pantomime character, and the story with which she was associated was a stock pantomime plot ... this kind of 'Red Riding Hood' could well be considered another 'English version of the story' – very well known and widespread (189-90)

Her chapters and sub-chapters cover a variety of cases. Perhaps the most interesting of her sub-chapters is the one that discusses the work of Thomas Crofton Croker, where she presents the intriguing case of 'Daniel O' Rourke'. In his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), Croker claimed that a man of this name was one of his informants. Speaking against this is the fact that a character called 'Daniel O'Rourke' had appeared earlier in both a tale in verse and in a play. (Another detail that Schacker marshals to attack Croker's account is that he would have only been 15 at the time, but I am not sure that this is necessarily a problem: an intelligent 15-year-old could certainly record a tale). Croker, with Walter Scott's encouragement, subsequently transformed the story into a pantomime, which in turn was published. As Schacker notes, it certainly is

striking that one source for the story that is never mentioned in the footnotes [to the book of the pantomime] is that of a face-to-face encounter between Croker and his 'good friend' Daniel O'Rourke on that June day in 1813. That is understood to be a fictional conceit, one that requires no further discussion (100)

In short, what has been hailed as the first field collection in these islands now seems much less securely so. Perhaps Robert Hunt's 1828 fieldwork then takes the laurels.

On the whole, the case the author makes is fair. Yet, as may happen in books with a thesis, a fair case can be overstated and its supposed adversaries mischaracterised. To give an example, we find on page 108 that W.J. Thoms' work is characterised as 'Francophobic'. Is the author of 'Lays and Legends of France' (1834) a Francophobe? The man who speaks of 'the natural vivacity by which the French are animated'? The style may be overripe, but the sentiment is not Francophobic. There are similarly dubious claims (144) about Thoms' 'virtual erasure' of many popular literary texts. Thoms was interested in popular print (what he called 'English Folk-Books'), and his very first publication was an edition of *Early English Prose Romances*. The bibliography reveals that this treatment of Thoms is based on the reading of a grand total of four pages from his output.

Richard Dorson, despite being (or perhaps because he is) the key figure in the establishment of academic folklore studies in the USA, has become something of a *bête noire* in that discipline in recent years, and is another who comes in for harsh words. It does seem remarkable that a great deal of attention is given to condemning past scholars, whereas contemporary scholars do not receive the same amount of scrutiny. Such a situation is unlikely to pertain in, say, history or sociology, to give just two examples of other disciplines. Nor was it the case in American folklore studies of the 1970s. I am not sure that it is a healthy state of affairs when a discipline spends more time in debate with dead scholars than with living ones.

Overall, there are remarkably few factual errors or imprecisions in the work. The Captain Swing riots began in east Kent, but were not confined there (29). The Charles Dickens writing in 1896 is Charles Dickens jr (176). The author negotiates her way through the minefield of when to use 'English' or 'British', and 'Great Britain' or 'the United Kingdom' (in its 19th-century extent) almost entirely unscathed.

As said at the start, this work is really an intervention in fairy tale studies disguised as a book about pantomime. It has interest when taken on these terms. It will also be of benefit if it brings international attention to the pantomime and underlines the links in the life of fairy tales between stage and page. For me, however, the work's main merit is the wonderful set of more than 27 pantomime images its pages are illustrated with.

Author: Jennifer Schacker.

Publisher: Wayne State University Press (2018), 296pp.

.....

Jonathan Roper