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## Bottigheimer, Ruth B., Fairy Tales: A New History

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## Fairy Tales: A New History (review)

Jeana Jorgensen

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books that educate children about the real causes of exploitation, bigotry, sexism, racism and war" (p. 75), a brave critique of the sugar-coated children's books that focus almost exclusively on holiday celebrations.

Chapter 5, "What Makes a Repulsive Frog So Appealing: Applying Memetics to Folk and Fairy Tales," centers on the well-known tale "The Frog Prince." Looking at post-Darwinian meme theory, Zipes suggests that the tale type of the beastly marriage serves a biological function. Although he does not cite Clifford Geertz's notion of "deep play," Zipes makes the case that certain themes repeat or are given center stage because they serve some central function. Unlike the more theoretical chapters, this one focuses on four variants of the Frog Prince: a manuscript from 1810, one from 1812, one from 1815, and the final Grimm text of 1857. Citing Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Edward Wilson, Zipes makes useful comparisons between our genetic and cultural inheritances and suggests folklore's unique role in the evolution of our species. Although simplifying text change to its biological functions, the chapter is a treasure trove of films and modern tales that would make most risk kissing a toad for.

Chapter 6, "And Nobody Lived Happily Ever After: The Feminist Fairy Tale after Forty Years of Fighting for Survival," revisits earlier arguments made by Zipes and others about the fluid cultural relevance of tales. Again citing Bourdieu and his notion of how a "literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces" (p. 122), Zipes notes that feminists worked through the tales, making them meaningful anew, but cautions that in our current time of spectacle, "the spectacle occludes our vision of social relations" (p. 127).

He asks of our times: "Where is the resistance?" "How is it expressed through the fairy tale? Is there any hope provided by the fairy tale?" (p. 128). The book concludes comparing tales and tale writing to a game within a game, and suggests that "games are tilted to blind us to the realities of political struggle" (p. 139). But games, as players know, invite you to play, to tell stories, and to break rules.

The fear of spectacle re-emerges in his conclusion in the form of the Nazi spectacle, and

Zipes, a scholar of German, is skeptical for good reason. He turns the reflexive eye on himself and his fellow storytellers, chiding them for their marketability, their chameleon-like ability to be adopted by any community for any purpose. He asks, "Is authentic storytelling possible?" (p. 154). Zipes is "not without hope" but concludes with his fear that storytellers, even with integrity, cannot "vie with the lies of spectacles" (p. 156). These are essential issues, but I question whether spectacles are the evil villains he portrays. Ultimately, this fine and thought-provoking book asks about art in the dialectical frames of power. I have been waiting for a book like this one, and will reread it.

**Fairy Tales: A New History.** By Ruth B. Bottigheimer. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. Pp. vii + 152, notes, works cited, index.)

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In *Fairy Tales: A New History*, Ruth Bottigheimer expands her recent research on fairy-tale origins, including her 2002 book *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition* and her presentations on the literary origins of fairy tales at the 2005 Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research and the 2006 meeting of the American Folklore Society. In each of these outlets, Bottigheimer challenges conventional folkloristic wisdom about oral tradition, the transmission of fairy tales, and the role of print culture. Bottigheimer's work is as always provocative and interesting, yet although this latest book does not seem written for folklorists, its messages and methods—especially the heavy use of dichotomies—definitely ought to concern us.

In chapter 1, "Why a New History of Fairy Tales?," Bottigheimer describes the basic hypothesis of her work: that fairy tales should be defined not only by shared motifs, structures, and happy endings, but also by their overall narrative thrust, leading to her distinction between "restoration" tales and "rise" tales. In the former, a royal protagonist falls into poverty and must regain his or her standing through magical assistance, whereas

in the latter, a poor protagonist gains wealth and a higher social standing through the use of magic. The second important part of Bottigheimer's hypothesis is that rise tales are not only uniquely European, but also urban and fairly recent in their composition and transmission. Bottigheimer traces the development of rise tales to one particular figure, the Venetian writer Straparola, whose collection of fairy tales *Pleasant Nights* was first published in the 1550s. Much of this information has already appeared in Bottigheimer's book *Fairy Godfather*, but it must be restated to make sense to Bottigheimer's intended audience. This is one of the most contentious aspects of Bottigheimer's hypothesis, as other reviewers and discussants have noted; see Cristina Bacchilega (Review of *Fairy Godfather*, *Western Folklore* 66:383–5, 2007), Clizia Carminati (Review of *Fairy Godfather*, *Marvels & Tales* 18:317–20, 2004), Francisco Vaz da Silva ("From Tartu to Milwaukee: The Genesis of a Fairy-Tale Debate," *ISFNR Newsletter* 2:20–1, 2007), and Jan Ziolkowski ("The Rise and Fall of the 'Rise Tale,'" *ISFNR Newsletter* 2:21–2, 2007).

Chapters 1, 4, and 5 of *Fairy Tales: A New History* are the most saturated with discussions of literacy in sixteenth-century Venice and descriptions of how book transmission must have played an inviolable role in fairy-tale evolution; chapters 2 and 3, describing the German and French fairy-tale traditions respectively, are more empirically grounded in the comparison of versions over time and space. Bottigheimer's demonstration of the borrowings from Italian tradition by the Grimms, Perrault, Mlle Lhéritier, and others is illuminating, and exemplifies the insights that close readings of classical texts, interwoven with snippets of the authors' biographies, can yield.

In other respects, however, Bottigheimer seems to be writing both for and about an idealized, imaginary public. This is the same general public that Bottigheimer writes "widely believes in fairy tales' oral composition and transmission" (p. 7); according to her, the oral origins and spread of fairy tales comprise "the history that everyone in the English-speaking world knows" (p. 28). This is a gross generalization on Bottigheimer's part, yet the "general public" and the "everyone" to whom she refers seem to be her intended audience for this book.

It seems unclear why she would solely cite the contentious work of Bruno Bettelheim and the most recent, hotly debated memetics work of Jack Zipes in her first few pages. These are the fairy-tale authors with whose work the non-academic public would most likely be familiar, and they are easy targets for Bottigheimer to position and then discredit in order to justify her own interpretation of fairy tales.

At the same time, Bottigheimer does contribute some useful distinctions to her general readers. Her discussion of tales with fairies in them as opposed to fairy tales as tales of magic situates narratives and characters within social and historical contexts. Magic as a defining feature also informs Bottigheimer's categorization of folk tales versus fairy tales. Bottigheimer characterizes folk tales as brief, with linear plots, and most often without happy endings; they are peopled with peasants and their concerns (money, property, marriage) because "folk tales reflect the world and the belief systems of their audiences"—commoners, according to Bottigheimer (p. 4). Fairy tales, on the other hand, necessarily involve magical helpers and magical assistance through which the protagonists rise in the social world. And these magical transformations, particular to fairy tales, are, Bottigheimer claims, unique to modern, urban audiences.

This insistence that narratives conform to and reflect the worldview of their audiences is another of Bottigheimer's points that is at once incisive and stunted. In describing the social and economic conditions in sixteenth-century Italy that supposedly led to the invention of the rise fairy tale, Bottigheimer characterizes the "mental environment that would have been receptive to a new kind of story line, one in which magic facilitated a poor person's ascent to wealth" (p. 20). Like many of Bottigheimer's points, I cannot dispute this; however, I think she misses opportunities to apply the same logic to narrative traditions beyond her area of interest. Bottigheimer writes: "It thus seems a realistic assumption that country folk might have invented folk tales of the sort discussed above, but not that they would have conceived of fairy tales, the earliest of which are firmly embedded in the imagery, characters, and references of *city life*" (p. 18, emphasis in original). The first part

of that statement seems plausible enough, yet I doubt that fairy tales were solely gestated within the “urban assumptions and expectations” that Bottigheimer attributes to them (p. 13). When Bottigheimer writes that fairy tales “remain relevant because they allude to deep hopes for material improvement, because they present illusions of happiness to come, and because they provide social paradigms that overlap nearly perfectly with daydreams of a better life” (p. 13), I wonder how any of these statements solely apply to urban folks, and not also rural ones? Here I think of Bengt Holbek’s analysis of the fairy tales collected from Danish peasants by E. Tang Kristensen in the 1800s (*Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1998). Holbek convincingly demonstrates that Danish fairy tales contain precise metaphorical and literal links to the worldviews of the peasants who tell them. Fairy tales may be, as Bottigheimer suggests, an urban form of folklore, but they are *also* a rural form, attuned to and expressing worldviews conditioned by experiences other than city life.

The city/country debate in the book is unnecessarily dichotomistic; so is the oral/literary debate. Fairy tales have been documented as existing in both print and literary cultures, but Bottigheimer believes that the absence of printed fairy tales prior to the 1550s means that they simply did not exist: “Dig where we may, no rise fairy tales can be found in layers of literary remains before Straparola” (p. 100). I believe that Bottigheimer is once again correct, within the narrow confines of her understanding of fairy tales: perhaps there were indeed no *literary* fairy tales prior to Straparola. However, that does not mean that there were not oral versions of fairy tales, or similar narratives, in circulation. This is an example of Bottigheimer’s circular logic, which hinges upon the very precise genre definitions discussed above: once she has defined fairy tales as explicitly connected to urban experiences and worldview, of course these fairy tales will not be found anywhere *but* urban environments and the places that can be shown to be linked to those urban locales

through print transmission. Bottigheimer’s criticism that folk narrative theory “relied, and even insisted on, an absence of evidence” (p. 42) is a truncated (and possibly deliberate) misinterpretation of the folkloristic statement that the absence of evidence is *not* the same as the evidence of absence. To misunderstand this fact—that oral culture will go undocumented until someone documents it, and thus a text not being recorded is not the same thing as it not existing—is to misunderstand how folklore works.

Based on her statements in this book, I would thus posit that Bottigheimer is defining fairy tales as not folklore at all. They partake of folkloric elements, such as magical motifs and prevalent narrative structures, but as Bottigheimer defines the genre of fairy tales, they are literary in origin and have only recently become folklorized and folkloristic. This is naturally a problem when faced with the existence of narratives that fulfill other scholars’ definitions of fairy tales that were documented prior to Straparola, such as “Cupid and Psyche” (ATU 425) and the ninth-century Chinese version of “Cinderella” (ATU 510A), to name two of the best-known examples. Additionally, reviewers such as Bacchilega and Carminati have disputed certain of Bottigheimer’s historical research surrounding Straparola and the prevalence (or lack thereof) of literacy in sixteenth-century Italy. Given that I have focused my studies on contemporary fairy tales rather than early-modern tales, it is not my place to comment on the historical accuracy of Bottigheimer’s research; however, the guesswork involved, as with any historical undertaking, does concern me a little.

In the end, I must ask what this hypothesis accomplishes for the study of fairy tales as a whole; thus far, I have seen Bottigheimer’s approach provoke much debate, but little dialogue. Readers are also encouraged to refer to the special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* (vol. 123:490, 2010) on “The European Fairy-Tale Tradition between Orality and Literacy,” which has appeared since the writing of this review.