

Reviews

Stijn Praet and Anna Kérchy, eds. *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard: Literary Self-Consciousness in a Marvelous Genre*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

288 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5275-3472-8

Dániel Bagi

Even though fairy-tales have enjoyed a largely unblemished popularity for centuries, they are often labelled as literature for children only and, as a consequence, they are sometimes deemed unworthy of serious critical attention. In more recent times, however, the genre has become the subject of increasing debate among scholars, and a variety of new approaches have emerged for its study. One such approach is presented in *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard: Literary Self-Consciousness in a Marvelous Genre*, edited by Stijn Praet and Anna Kérchy, a book that features an exciting selection of essays on the hitherto unexplored metaliterary aspects of the fairy-tale genre.

The collection begins with Praet's introduction, which lays a solid theoretical foundation for the following chapters. By briefly recounting a scene from Jonathan Swift's *The Battle of the Books*—an allegorical account of library books personified and pitted against one another to fight out the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns—Praet reminds us that metafictional devices were utilised long before the advent of postmodernism. The fairy-tale has lent itself especially well for literary self-reflection, which he attributes to two factors: first, the authors' awareness of the genre's marginalised status and their attempt at defending the artistic value of their work by engaging in peritextual discourse; second, the genre's formal characteristics that leave plenty of room for literary experimentation. Praet concludes that this self-referential tendency has been conspicuously present in fairy-tales since the early days of the genre, and the essays in the rest of the volume, focusing on texts from the seventeenth century to the present day, provide ample evidence for this claim.

The book contains twelve studies organised into two parts. The first part, titled "Metaliterary Reflections," opens with two chapters on early fairy-tale advocates from seventeenth-century France. Sophie Raynard analyses peritextual pieces from the writings of Mademoiselle Lhéritier, Madame d'Aulnoy, and Madame de Murat, showing that the aristocratic trio eagerly advertised the budding genre to the elite as modern literature worthy of recognition and praise. Similarly addressing an elite audience (more precisely the young Bourbon princess), Charles Perrault's "The Beauty Sleeping in the Wood" can be viewed as an experimental reworking of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and, as Ute Heidmann argues, familiarity with the latter is necessary to decipher the hidden message about the dangers of courtly life in the former. Kérchy's contribution takes us to Victorian Britain and offers an insightful commentary on how imaginative agency

is celebrated in Lewis Carroll's Alice books. Empowered by her fantasising capabilities, the titular character can even turn into an author herself, which Kérchy sees as a forerunner of postmodernist metaperspectivism. Jessica Tiffin examines how the short fiction of E. Nesbit, another remarkable British writer of juvenile literature, reflects on the archaic conventions of the fairy-tale by playfully questioning the relevance of the genre in the light of the social and technological developments of the Edwardian age. Björn Sundmark goes through all of Pär Lagerkvist's eleven *Evil Fairy Tales*, proposing to read them as the practical demonstration of the Swedish avant-gardist's artistic manifesto declared in his *Literary and Pictorial Art: On the Decline of Modern Literature—On the Vitality of Modern Art*. Emeline Morin's essay concludes part one, in which she compares two postmodern rewritings of Grimms' classics, *The Brave Little Tailor* by the French Eric Chevillard and *Briar Rose* by the American Robert Coover, and finds that both of them employ a self-reflexive strategy to challenge generic norms, though she also highlights the differences that result from the distinct cultural contexts in which they were conceived. These six chapters do a great job underlining the metafictional dimension of fairy-tales and the fact that they gather their primary sources from four different centuries clearly supports the thesis posited in the introduction.

The second part, "Intergeneric, Stylistic and Linguistic Experimentations," begins with Richard van Leeuwen's account detailing the impact of the *Thousand and One Nights* on European literature in general and on French fairy-tales in particular. Identifying the narrative cycle's generic eccentricity as the main reason for its immense success among Europeans, van Leeuwen investigates the influence of the Arabic tales in three stories by Jean-Paul Bignon, Jacques Cazotte, and Jean Potocki. Helene Høyrup discusses the innovative aspects of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tales, placing emphasis on the Danish author's unique blend of colloquial and literary language, as well as his narrative technique of addressing children and adults at the same time. Daniel Gicu's chapter traces the role of fairy-tales in the formation of Romanian national literature in the nineteenth century through the work of Arthur and Albert Schott, Nicolae Filimon, and Petre Ispirescu. Gicu also points out the paradoxical nature of the project: though these collections were meant to be authentic, the stories were carefully edited in order to establish a language and style that is distinctly Romanian. Maria Casado Villanueva's analysis focuses on the relationship between the fairy-tale and the Modernist short story, contending that fairy-tales can be an ideal resource for Modernists in their quest to challenge the reader's expectations. To illustrate this, she breaks down how the Cinderella-motif is appropriated in D. H. Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" and "Catherine Mansfield's "The Tiredness of Rosabel." Michelle Ryan-Sautour elaborates on Rikki Ducornet's peculiar fiction that draws on the traditions of the fairy-tale, nonsense, and surrealism, noting that the compact short stories in *The Complete Butcher's Tales* and *The One Marvelous Thing* evoke a strong sense of wonder in the reader through the author's uncommon use of language and orthography. In the final chapter, Willem de Blécourt defends *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*, Tommy Wirkola's 2013 fairy-tale adaptation, stating that the film, in spite of its overwhelmingly negative reception from critics, should be a compelling watch for those with a scholarly interest in the fairy-tale tradition. The chapters in this

section are less preoccupied with the self-reflexive facet of the genre, as they rather concentrate on the fairy-tale's inclination to play around with literary conventions. In this regard, the main objective of part two is to shed more light on the second contributing factor identified by Praet in connection with the volume's main theoretical assumption.

The merit of the volume is further enhanced by some additional material. Besides the aforementioned chapters, each part includes a short overview of the contents of its respective section. These are important structural units, since they not only function as cohesive forces within the book, but also aim to reflect on the two concepts that constitute its title. The fairy-tale, as Ruth B. Bottigheimer argues, has undeniably permeated our culture for a long time, yet it still does not have a universally accepted definition, which allows it to cross borders with various other genres, as some of the contributions in the book set out to show us. While the definitions may vary, the fairy-tale canon remains largely constant. According to Elizabeth Wanning Harries, this is one of the major weaknesses of current fairy-tale scholarship, and a truly vanguardist approach should seek to extend the scope of investigation beyond the usual suspects of our Western tradition. Aware of the challenges of such an undertaking, she gives due credit to the editors for taking a step in the right direction and making room for studies on some lesser-discussed figures. Finally, the collection is rounded out by an interview with Ducornet, nicely complementing chapter eleven dealing with her fiction. The interview provides a fascinating insight into the author's creative influences, her writing process, and her view on the role of wonder in everyday life.

Overall, *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* is a highly satisfactory collection that offers a fresh take on fairy-tale criticism. It is by no means an exhaustive inquiry into the genre's self-reflexive qualities, but that is perfectly understandable, because such a project, given the vast size of the corpus, would exceed the confines of a single volume. Instead, the book should be treated as an ideal starting point for further research, introducing a new way of looking at the subject matter and inviting academics to add to and extend on its original postulation. The generally well-structured chapters can be individually relevant to those interested in the specific topics covered in them, but this collection is best read as a convincing whole. All things considered, *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* will surely be a welcome addition to any fairy-tale enthusiast's library.