

Praet, Stijn, and Anna Kérchy, eds. *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard: Literary Self-Consciousness in a Marvelous Genre*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2019. 290 pp.

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Every single book analyzing literary fiction that might attract a younger audience seems to begin with a disclaimer: yes, we know that this can be read by children, and no, we do not think it does not deserve serious critical attention. *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* is no exception, but it courageously leaves the apologetic tone of earlier works and adopts an entirely professional attitude. The volume promises to reveal that fairy tales have always had their embedded potential in being able to express literary self-consciousness long before it was made mainstream through postmodern literature. As editor Stijn Praet observes in the introduction, this self-consciousness relies on both metaliterary reflection and literary experimentation. In his view, the fairy tale is an essentially protean genre, and a deeper look into its high fictionality and opaque textuality will definitely contribute to a wider acceptance of this often marginalized field of research.

The editors intend to achieve this goal through a wide and varied selection of papers, organized according to the logic of their main argument. The collection thus consists of two main parts: the first part focuses on metaliterary reflection in fairy tales, the second moves on to the issues of literary experimentation. Both sections are concluded in a summary that interestingly involves reflection (and even criticism) on the papers. Nevertheless, editorial reflection and counterarguments do not weaken the general arch of the collection, instead, they emphasize that fairy tales are inducing an ongoing critical discourse open to other interested researchers. The volume is concluded in an interview with a “Vanguard author,” Rikki Ducornet, a contemporary writer who relies heavily on fairy tales in her fiction. Her detailed description of writing methods provides a fascinating shift of perspective on fairy tales—an unexpected twist-end for a book on literary research.

Despite the structure proposed in the introduction, the papers offer other important approaches and keywords that establish new links among the texts, proving the extreme flexibility of fairy tales as tools of literary expression. Accepting that each reading is different, I would like to highlight three subtopics that are central to contemporary literary discourse.

Firstly, the editors clearly valued cultural heterogeneity and included topics ranging from the role of seventeenth-century French female fairy-tale authors in the debate of Ancients and Moderns to the role of fairy tales in the formation of

Romanian national identity. In this respect, A. Emeline Morin's paper ("Cartesian Wit and American Fantasy: A Comparative Study of Eric Chevillard's *Le Vaillant Petit Tailleur* [2003] and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* [1996])" is particularly thought-provoking, as it suggests differences of attitude towards magic in Anglophone and Francophone fairy tales. Even though it is doubtful that the limited length of the paper allows enough space for the justification of such a bold claim, it is definitely a research topic to be elaborated on. B. Richard Van Leeuwen's paper ("Fairy Tales and Genre Transformation: The Influence of *The Thousand and One Nights* on French Literature in the Eighteenth Century") is equally outstanding: it provides a detailed analysis of how the tales in *The Thousand and One Nights* served as the cultural other in eighteenth century French literature.

Secondly, *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* does not refrain from approaching one of the most common topics of all fantastic literature: the relation of the real and the imaginary. In this respect, one highlight of the volume is Ute Heidman's paper ("Perrault's Vanguard Experimentation with Apuleius, Basile and History: Sleeping Beauty, Psyche and the Bourbon Princess") on tracking down the possible parallels between the modifications made by Perrault in his fairy-tale collection and the life of the Bourbon princess to whom the work was dedicated. Another is María Casado Villanueva's "Excavating the Very Old to Discover the Very New: The Modernist Fairy Tales of D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield," in which she analyzes two pieces of short fiction to show how modernist literature incorporates the fairy-tale tradition.

Thirdly, though not as openly as in the previous two cases, *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* also explores the embedded gender issues in fairy tales. Interestingly enough, this topic is most boldly tackled through a classic: Lewis Carroll's Alice books. In her paper, "Meta-Imagination in Lewis Carroll's Literary Fairy-Tale Fantasies about Alice's Adventures," Anna Kérchy reminds the reader of the subversive political edge of traditional storytelling. Starting from this assumption, she argues that through Alice's capacity to rule over the imaginary, Carroll demonstrates the inherent inseparability of spontaneous fancy and strategic imagination, and thus he problematizes the conventional cultural engendering of these two cognitive faculties.

This multiplicity of topics is one of the main strengths of *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard*, yet it also reveals its limits. However, intriguing each paper might be, they remain glimpses into issues that would be worthy of a book-length analysis in themselves. Some papers also seem to stretch the traditional definition of fairy tales, such as Björn Sundmark's analysis of Pär Lagerkvist's *Evil Fairy Tales*, a collection of short fiction that relies relatively loosely on the fairy-tale tradition. Villanueva's paper mentioned above is somewhat similar as she traces the remnants of fairy-tale plotlines behind the veil of realist fiction. Nevertheless, these texts nicely demonstrate how fairy-tale narratives bleed into mainstream fiction, and that the boundaries have always been blurrier than we would have thought.

Even though this volume is a strong statement about the literary merits and significant influence of fairy tales, it is unlikely to convince every literary scholar who believes that all literature accessible to children is inherently suspect. What it does achieve though, is a giant wave to other marginalized genres that rely on the fairy-

tale tradition. Fantasy, for instance, is ready to combine all kinds of fairy-tale and mythic tradition in its cauldron of story, and many of its theorists have highlighted its self-reflexive qualities. The heightened fictionality and opaque textuality are also qualities to be studied both in fairy tales and fantasy, and these shared features may fuel a closer cooperation of scholars in these fields if they are ready to boldly adapt their methodology. For fairy tales, as *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* reveals, are treacherous beasts: sometimes they appear to be tame or almost invisible, hiding within the texture of modernist narratives, but deep inside they are ancient monsters, and in their bellies a thousand years of cultural memory glows.