

10-1-2006

Preface to the Special Issue: "Hidden, But Not Forgotten": Hans Christian Andersen's Legacy in the Twentieth Century

Andrea Immel

Recommended Citation

Immel, Andrea. "Preface to the Special Issue: "Hidden, But Not Forgotten": Hans Christian Andersen's Legacy in the Twentieth Century." *Marvels & Tales* 20.2 (2006). Web. <<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/marvels/vol20/iss2/2>>.

PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE:
“HIDDEN, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN”: HANS CHRISTIAN
ANDERSEN’S LEGACY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A green cloth volume of Andersen’s fairy tales in the Grosset & Dunlap *Illustrated Junior Library* is one of the books I remember most vividly from childhood. And when my first grade teacher discovered I could read aloud “The Ugly Duckling” without any coaching, she exempted me from regular reading instruction. But Andersen probably would not have appeared on a list of my favorite authors. Reading him was a visceral but not especially pleasant experience, because the stories that aroused a ghoulish confusion of terror and pity were the most mesmerizing. The response was triggered not so much by Andersen’s words as by Arthur Syzk’s jewel-toned illustrations in the Grosset & Dunlap edition. The upper left-hand corner of Syzk’s endpapers was dominated by the Snow Queen, whose huge, haunted yet cruel eyes compelled me to stare at its complex design. At the same time, her figure prompted an equally powerful desire to turn away. I never got more than a third of the way through that volume of Andersen, because one picture was so frightening that I always stopped at the page that, if turned, would reveal the horrible thing. Skipping ahead to the stories that followed the picture was impossible because of a premonition that something dreadful might happen if all the stories were not read straight through in order. Whatever terrors that picture awakened I was never able to articulate, but for years I disliked so much as touching the volume’s spine because of the knowledge that the picture was concealed within. It is the only book I recall inspiring such unsettling feelings, which may help explain why Danny Kaye singing “I’m Hans Christian Andersen, / I’ve many a tale to tell” made absolutely no impression on me. The Andersen I had glimpsed in Syzk’s illustrations had nothing to do with the Hollywood song-and-dance man on the Cinerama Dome’s big screen.

I suspect many other people’s childhood impressions of Andersen were also formed by their exposure to highly distinctive or freewheeling interpretations of

his best-known works rather than by real familiarity with the unmediated texts. Most of us know only the handful of tales that have been the backbone of Andersen anthologies for decades—"The Princess and the Pea," "The Swineherd," "The Little Match Girl," "The Nightingale," "The Red Shoes," "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," "The Tinderbox" (and even those may not be familiar to a surprising number of people, as I discovered when curating an exhibition on Andersen's illustrators). Admittedly they are wonderful stories all, but Andersen wrote many others—"The Gardener and His Master," "Valdemar Daae and His Daughters," "The Shadow," "It's Perfectly True," "The Elfin Mound," "In the Children's Room," and "Jumpers" to mention a few personal favorites—which rightfully deserve places in the English-language canon. Andersen himself regretted that the *Eventyr's* (the *Fairy Tale's*) best stories threatened to overshadow everything else he had done, convinced that his genius defied easy categorization as a writer of fairy tales. However, being lionized as a beloved author for children was by no means a bad thing for someone who craved the recognition that international fame conferred. Shortly after his death, Andersen attained the status of a writer whose "classic" works for children were obvious candidates for regular repackaging, just like the fairy tales of Charles Perrault or the Grimms. In Andersen's case, however, the process of recycling his best-known stories in America and Great Britain bestowed a form of immortality—but not without exacting a price.

Consider the case of "The Emperor's New Clothes." It passed long ago into the wider cultural consciousness: few readers of Paul Krugman's 11 November 2005 *New York Times* editorial would miss the allusion to an emperor with no clothes with reference to President George W. Bush, even if they weren't able to identify Andersen as its source. "The Emperor" is also one of those stories with such good bones that it manages to be presentable no matter how it has been tricked out. Barbara G. Walker gives it a happy ending where the duped empress of Cathay both forgives the clever dressmakers and allows them the opportunity to prove that they always had the powers to rise on their own merits in *Feminist Fairy Tales* (1996). The sly brilliance of the confidence scheme at the tale's heart, which exposes the emperor's vanity and the court's sycophancy, is rarely obscured by illustrators' decisions to cast the protagonist as a Louis IV look-alike, the ruler of an imaginary early twentieth-century petty principality, or even a dinosaur in drag. In dramatic adaptations, whether for film, a children's theater piece, or opera, the story doesn't have enough business to sustain even a short production, so the scriptwriter is obliged to freely insert new characters, incidents, and dialogue into the original outline, often sacrificing Andersen's distinctive combination of humor, pathos, and satire in the process. Ironically enough, the adapters of Andersen for stage or screen would probably be surprised at the suggestion that the addition of garrulous anthropomorphized

sidekicks—whether animal, vegetable, or manufactured—following the Disney formula may owe an indirect debt to Andersen’s secondary characters, like the storks in “The Marsh King’s Daughter” or the kitchen equipment in “The Flying Trunk.”

The treatment of “The Emperor’s New Clothes” may be more extreme than most, but it is by no means atypical. The tendency of modern reinterpretations and refashionings of Andersen’s tales to flatten the originals out by distancing the narrative structure from the distinctive style of telling is surely a factor in the declining critical interest in his work since the 1970s in the Anglo-American world. While he is revered as one of the greatest masters of the *Kunstmärchen* (literary fairy tale), the question of Andersen’s influence has been somewhat neglected. His legacy is hidden, but not forgotten, to borrow the title of one of his less familiar tales; which, although modest, is curiously compelling for showing an aspect of Andersen that is rarely glimpsed in anthologies. And this became the theme and title of the conference to celebrate the bicentenary of Hans Christian Andersen’s birth, which was hosted by the Cotsen Children’s Library at Princeton University in November 2005. In the early stages of organizing the program, Donald Haase and I decided to pay tribute to Andersen by encouraging the participants to reconsider the nature of his impact during the twentieth century. During the proceedings, academic analysis and performance were given equal weight as a way of re-accessing the Andersen we thought we knew. Formal sessions punctuated by lively (and sometimes heated) discussion were alternated with storytelling by Storytelling Arts; a presentation of Garrison Keillor’s send-up of “The Ugly Duckling” by the Princeton improv troop, Quickfire; screenings of films based on Andersen; and excerpts of an opera performed by the engaging young musicians of the Westminster Conservatory Youth Opera Workshop. The essays presented at Princeton are offered here in the same spirit to the readers of *Marvels & Tales*—to reread and explore further dimensions of the extraordinarily complex contribution of Hans Christian Andersen to the fairy tale.

Andrea Immel
Cotsen Children’s Library
Princeton University