

4-1-2007

Preface to the Special Issue on Fairy Tales, Printed Texts, and Oral Tellings

Ruth B. Bottigheimer

State University of New York

Recommended Citation

Bottigheimer, Ruth B.. "Preface to the Special Issue on Fairy Tales, Printed Texts, and Oral Tellings." *Marvels & Tales* 21.1 (2007). Web. <<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/marvels/vol21/iss1/10>>.

PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON FAIRY TALES, PRINTED TEXTS, AND ORAL TELLINGS

This special issue showcases contemporary explorations of fairy tales' origins and transmission, introduces one seminal work previously unavailable in English, and reproduces a long-inaccessible tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* tradition. Throughout the essays, questions of fairy-tale origins and transmission blur boundaries between the categories of "oral" and "literary" and illuminate the origins and transmission of fairy tales.

The traditional history provided for fairy tales largely originated from successive forewords to editions of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*). Nearly all nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars and commentators accepted Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's assertions that the fairy tales included in their collection had had a long oral existence before being committed to paper, despite the fact that—as the Grimms themselves tacitly acknowledged—they had no firm evidence for their declaration.¹

Nonetheless, a respectably long and scholarly tradition of, mostly German-language, research has asserted a heterodox history of European fairy tales. One early, cautiously voiced hypothesis for modifying the Grimms' position arose in an 1867 Göttingen dissertation by F. W. J. Brakelmann, who proposed that Giovan Francesco Straparola's tales were part of a written tradition. Others who opposed the general belief that fairy tales originated in oral tradition among the folk aired their views in the 1880s and 1890s in conjunction with the emergence and organization of national societies for the study of folklore (which at that time meant, in effect, the study of folktales and fairy tales). By and large, however, their conceptualizations of the history of European fairy tales were rejected by larger, more traditional, and more nationalistic forces in the study of folklore.

Doubt persisted, however. In the 1920s the German folklorist Hans Naumann offered a two-culture vision of society in which fairy tales were first

created by an elite and later trickled down to the people. At approximately the same time, the Czech comparatist Albert Wesselski, the first to argue in extenso the primacy of literacy and print in the history of Europe's fairy tales, published a global account of the origins and a lengthy description of the dissemination of fairy tales based on print culture. Wesselski had the misfortune to live and work in the same period in which National Socialism was emerging as a potent force in Germany. Its celebration of the folk resulted in an effective silencing of Wesselski's cogently argued views, which have since then attracted little interest among literary scholars in non-German speaking areas, aside from one study by Emma Emily Kiefer and another by Kathrin Pöge-Alder.²

Nearly two generations passed before evidence supporting the literary origins of fairy tales and their print dissemination was again investigated. Between 1970 and his death in 2000, Rudolf Schenda studied relationships between the oral and the literary, taking as his field of study the enormous and sometimes overlapping folk narrative repertoires of Italy, France, and Germany. His work resulted in two works, both of which affirmed the importance of print culture for studying popular narrative: *Volk ohne Buch* [A People without Books] (1970 et seq.) and *Die Lesestoffe der kleinen Leute* [The Reading Materials of the Common Man] (1976). His lifelong study of European oral culture convinced him of the primacy of print for the origins of oral narratives, and with hundreds of examples he fashioned *Vom Mund zu Ohr* [From Mouth to Ear: Foundation for a Cultural History of Everyday Narration in Europe] (1993). Schenda's studies led him to conclude that print was the single most important instrument for the dissemination of the genre of fairy tales. In 1988 Schenda's doctoral student Manfred Grätz produced a monumental study of fairy tales and tales about fairies in the German Enlightenment that further demonstrated the power of print processes, with a stunning documentation of the wholesale movement of French fairy tales to Germany in the course of the eighteenth century. One of most significant secondary works of the 1980s on the history of European fairy tales, it remains largely unknown in the Anglophone and Francophone world. Maren Clausen-Stolzenburg, in a subsequent analysis of relationships between high literature and fairy tales, expanded the chronological purview—from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century—and clearly distinguished fairy-tale motifs from fairy-tale plots.

At first glance the tales of *Thousand and One Nights* might appear to belong to a tradition well differentiated from European fairy tales. However, recent scholarship in France, Germany, and the United States has illuminated mutual, complex, and long-term narrative relationships between European and Middle Eastern narrative repertoires between the early 1700s and the late 1800s. Consequently, that subject is also drawn into this special issue treating the print history of European fairy tales.

A print-based history of the fairy-tale genre does not call on an anonymous folk, singly or in a group, either as a point of origin for fairy tales or as a means of transmission of fairy tales. This alternative history depends on evidence for educated authors, such as Straparola in Venice, Giambattista Basile in Naples, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier, Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Charlotte-Rose de la Force in Paris, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in provincial France and later in London, and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany. This history explores literary texts; follows and analyzes printers, publishers, translations, and piratings; and documents an overall historical drift from literate classes to middling, artisanal, and finally folk, consumers (Bottigheimer, "France's First Fairy Tales"; Schenda, *Volk ohne Buch*).

The articles that make up this special issue of *Marvels & Tales* speak to issues outlined above. In "The Relationship between Oral and Literary Tradition as a Challenge in Fairy-Tale Research," Satu Apo, a professor of folklore at the University of Helsinki, revises the history of fairy-tale origins and transmission in Finland by contextualizing a detailed analysis of specific tales within Finnish fairy-tale publishing history. Charlotte Trinquet's "On the Literary Origins of Folkloric Fairy Tales" studies an American folk telling of a fairy tale and relates it to a Mme d'Aulnoy original, while Maria Kaliambou's case study of popular print in Greece, "The Transformation of Folktales and Fairy Tales into Popular Booklets," investigates the effects of print products on literary and oral traditions. In "A Prologue Tale as Manifesto Tale," Hameed Hawwas delineates storytellers' conscious awareness of differences between stories appropriate for the marketplace and those for a royal audience hall. In so doing he reintroduces a long-ignored tale from the Bulaq edition of *Thousand and One Nights*. Suzanne Magnanini tackles a longstanding mystery about how Basile's tales reached Paris. In "Postulated Routes from Naples to Paris" she follows Antonio Bulifon, a French-born publisher active in Naples, on a trail from Paris to Naples and back to Paris.

Taking the position that fairy tales originate with literary imaginations requires considering their texts as carefully and consciously crafted. In "New Poetics versus Old Print," Sophie Raynard shows Mlle Lhéritier and Mme d'Aulnoy both regarding their tales as purposefully moral and aesthetic creations, while Orrin Robinson's examination of several Grimm tales—"Does Sex Breed Gender?"—reveals witting editings of pronominal forms that communicate surprising linkages between morality on the one hand and grammatical gender and a girl's or woman's age on the other.

In terms of theory, Rudolf Schenda's exposition of the centrality of book learning and literacy in the transmission of popular narratives provides a basis for nuanced thinking about relationships between oral transmission and print sources. "Semiliterate and Semi-Oral Processes" is translated from his *longue*

durée study of the substance and the origins of oral narratives, *Vom Mund zu Ohr* (1993).

Tales from the far corners of Europe show the same kind of pattern in relationships between literary precursor texts and subsequent oral tellings that emerges from the text of “The Prologue Tale” in the Bulaq edition of *Thousand and One Nights*. The text, long difficult for non-Arabic readers to locate, asserts the importance for storytellers in the premodern world (as they are described in *Thousand and One Nights*) of access to a story in a written form. Perhaps this assertion made the story disagreeable to generations of orally oriented researchers. Whatever the reason for its general unavailability, it has long been accessible only to Arabic readers or to those lucky enough to have an early nineteenth-century copy of Edward Lane’s translation into English, where its text is included in a note. Today that edition has been photomechanically reprinted, but it is still little known beyond the ranks of specialists.

Taken together, the essays in this special issue of *Marvels & Tales* indicate richly layered possibilities of research when fairy tales are viewed as literary creations and as components of European publishing history. New avenues of inquiry open into how fairy tales came to tell the stories they do and how they spread from European origins to distant locations. Analytic textual histories have the potential to lead to new insights into individual authors’ compositional practices, social networks within larger groups of fairy-tale authors, and even the pace at which and the manner in which fairy tales spread into Italian, French, and German populations. The fairy-tale field is large to begin with; research into fairy tales’ literary creation and publishing dissemination expands it enormously.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer
Guest Editor

Notes

1. In forewords and epilogues to the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* from 1812 to 1856 the Grimms implied the existence of *märchen* of the sort they included in their volume in the ancient world and in the medieval period. However, they were only able to provide ancient examples of folktales, but not of fairy tales, either as they are commonly understood in the modern world (rags-to-riches tales) or as the term is generally used in this special issue and is described above.
2. See Kiefer, *Albert Wesselski and Recent Folktale Theories*, and Pöge-Alder, *Märchen als mündlich tradierte Erzählungen des Volkes?*

Works Cited

Bottigheimer, Ruth B. *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002.

- . “Fairy Tales, Old Wives, and Printing Presses.” *History Today* 54.1 (2004): 38–44.
- . “France’s First Fairy Tales: The Rise and Restoration Narratives of ‘Les Facetieuses Muictz du Seigneur François Straparole.’” *Marvels & Tales* 19 (2005): 17–31.
- Brakelmann, F. W. J. *Giovan Francesco da Straparola da Caravaggio*. Göttingen: E. A. Huth, 1867.
- Clausen-Stolzenburg, Maren. *Märchen und mittelalterliche Literaturtradition*. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1995.
- Grätz, Manfred. *Das Märchen in der deutschen Aufklärung: Vom Feenmärchen zum Volksmärchen*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988.
- Kiefer, Emma Emily. *Albert Wesselski and Recent Folktale Theories*. 1947. New York: Haskell House, 1973.
- Naumann, Hans. *Primitive Gemeinschaftskultur: Beiträge zur Volkskunde und Mythologie*. Jena: E. Diederichs, 1921.
- Pöge-Alder, Kathrin. *Märchen als mündlich tradierte Erzählungen des Volkes? Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Entstehungs- und Verbreitungstheorien von Volksmärchen von den Brüdern Grimm bis zur Märchenforschung in der DDR*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1994.
- Schenda, Rudolf. *Die Lesestoffe der kleinen Leute: Studien zur populären Literatur im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1976.
- . *Volk ohne Buch: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe, 1770–1910*. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1970.
- . *Vom Mund zu Ohr: Bausteine zu einer Kulturgeschichte volkstümlichen Erzählens in Europa*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1993.
- Wesselski, Albert. *Versuch einer Theorie des Märchens*. 1931. Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1974.