



Ruth B. Bottigheimer. *Fairy Tales: A New History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. vii + 152 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-2523-8; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-2524-5.

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## Exposing the Creation Myth of the Grimms' Fairy Tales

Who put the “Volk” into “Volksmärchen”? Ruth B. Bottigheimer’s new book signifies a significant step towards answering this question, a question that European fairy tale scholars first began to ask in the 1980s. As Bottigheimer lays out in her introduction, literary historians, such as Heinz Rölleke, began to investigate the sources used by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm in the compilation of their *Kinder und Hausmärchen*. These sources, heretofore believed to be either members of the rural population or domestic servants hailing from a rural background, were in fact revealed to be in most cases acquaintances and neighbors of the Grimm brothers in Kassel, which was very much an urban environment. This led to a general questioning of the notion of a purely oral transmission of the fairy tales and a deeper analysis of the sociocultural effects of the Grimm brothers claiming such a tradition.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer has long made a name for herself as a proponent not only of a different base for the Grimm fairy tales—one that goes back to the Venetian tale author Giovan Francesco Straparola (c. 1480-1557)—but more importantly, an alternative transmission process for these tales, one that is based on print sources and reading instead of purely oral transmission. In her present book she takes her reader on a journey back to the origins of the Grimm tales, starting out in nineteenth-century Kassel and ending in sixteenth-century Venice, stopping in places like Paris and Naples along the way. By comparing key tales in various renditions, Bottigheimer makes a compelling case for the dif-

ferent authors or composers having had recourse to the published compilations of their precursors. By further delving into the publication history of these various compilations, Bottigheimer reveals a new and more probable way the tales were disseminated throughout Europe.

Bottigheimer begins her work by laying out various theories on the transmission of fairy tales. Citing scholars such as Bruno Bettelheim and Jack Zipes, she shows that contemporary notions of fairy tale transmission are intricately linked with psychological processes. Instead of pursuing the psychological ramifications of the fairy tale topic, Bottigheimer focuses on the transmission and creation of the fairy tales. As far as theories on this topic are concerned, Bottigheimer finds them falling short of accepted academic procedure because they rely on assumptions instead of verifiable facts. She proceeds to offer an overview of various types of tales and their definitions, so as to draw clear demarcation lines for the kind of tales she is discussing in her present book. The fairy tale is therefore distinguished from the folk tale and the magic tale, with which it is often confused and conflated. In her view, it is mainly the plot trajectory in combination with standard motifs and elements which make the fairy tale. Among those trajectories Bottigheimer distinguishes between the rise fairy tale, with a protagonist climbing the social ladder, and the restoration fairy tale, with a protagonist regaining a previously lost high social position and wealth. This first chapter, for all the useful information it offers on the classification of fairy tales, lacks a broader

background on the current status of fairy tale scholarship apart from the two psychological approaches cited. Bottigheimer offers this information at the very end of the book for reasons which are not apparent. In my opinion it would be more beneficial, especially for a reader new to the field, to provide that larger framework first so as to allow for a better situating of her own work.

The first station of Bottigheimer is her treatment of the Grimms' fairy tale background. The Grimms' sources—supposedly from a rural peasant background—are revealed to have been the daughters of their neighbor, an apothecary, in Kassel. Only one female informant, Dorothea Viehmann, seems to have been truly from a peasant family. The true background of these sources had been glossed over by Wilhelm Grimm, who wrote the prefaces to the fairy tale collection. He also covered up their limited regional scope, claiming he and Jakob had consulted informants in all of Hesse. From there Wilhelm went on to make his larger claim that the fairy tales formed part of “everything that still exists from Germany's ancient poetic forms” (p. 34). This became immensely important at a time when Germany was under the Napoleonic occupation and later as it was looking to establish its own cultural identity as a unified nation. This was also the time when the fairy tales became teaching tools, finding their way into textbooks and reading primers.

As Bottigheimer shows, the tales which eventually became the Grimms' German fairy tales had made their way over the French border about fifty years prior to the Grimms' collection and, given the new insights into the degree of literacy among the lower-class population, it can be assumed that a wide spectrum of the population was familiar with the print edition of these French tales. They could have been plausibly disseminated by way of a semi-oral process, centering on a small group of readers and a larger group of listeners who then went on to convey the tale to another audience. In the following two chapters Bottigheimer takes her readers back to the fairy tale compilations in France and earlier in Italy that preceded the Grimms' collection. In the French context she focuses on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century collections of Charles Perrault (1628-1703), Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1650-1705), and Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier (1664-1734). Among the most well-known tales found in Perrault's compilation are “Sleeping Beauty,” “Puss in Boots,” “Cinderella,” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” His book was widely published throughout Europe, in 1756 in London and then in the 1760s translated into German and published in Germany and Switzerland. Using the tale of

“Puss in Boots” among others, Bottigheimer shows how this story was already present in Straparola's sixteenth-century compilation as “Costantino Fortunato” and was considerably edited by Perrault. This is indicative of a general tendency in Perrault to erase most of the bawdy undertones in these tales and to elevate the heroes and heroines in their behavior and manners. The fact that Straparola's compilation, *Le piacevoli notti* (1551), was published in sixteen editions in France alone, makes it most probable that Perrault as well as his niece, who added a more moralizing tone to her rendition of the tales, had recourse to the Italian texts. Another important fact pointing in that direction is that subsequent collectors of French fairy tales, like Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont and Charlotte Rose de La Force, did not include these tales, which they should have, were it true that all of the French authors worked from folk sources alone.

The last stop on Bottigheimer's journey back to the origins of the Grimm fairy tales takes the reader to seventeenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. Beginning with Giambattista Basile's *Pentamarone* (c. 1620), Bottigheimer also offers some valuable background on the genre of the tale compilation as such, in particular as far as the role of the narrator and the frame narrative is concerned. This general background information would have been useful to the reader earlier on, and the reasons for introducing it only in the last section of the literary analysis are not clear. Apart from that, Bottigheimer does a superb job of illuminating the backdrop to the creation of Basile's as well as Straparola's tale compilations, bringing out the different tone of each collection as well as explaining the sociopolitical context behind it. Basile's Neapolitan parody of the lofty Baroque style as exemplified by Boccaccio is as vivid as her analysis of Straparola's *Le Piacevoli Notti*, which she credits with the creation of the rise tale. The last source analyzed in this incredible chain of tale variations, is the late medieval tale “Lionbruno” (1470) whose overwhelmingly chivalric and religious overtones make it a perfect link between the medieval narrative tradition and the fairy tale, which retains some of its elements. In this chapter, literary analysis of the tales themselves, and biographical and historical background information, work together seamlessly, a symbiosis Bottigheimer does not quite achieve to the same degree in the preceding chapters.

The last chapter is comprised of a more thorough overview of various recent scholarly projects associated with the notion of the oral transmission of the Grimms' fairy tales. The scholars and their works discussed in this

section of the book encompass a wider array of associated issues, from new theories on literacy among the European rural population beginning with the eighteenth century (Rudolf Schenda) to scholarly works directly questioning the notion of a purely oral transmission (Satu Apo, Gun Herranen). Czech scholar Albert Wesselski is presented as among the first scholars to argue against a purely oral fairy tale tradition, starting in the 1920s and 1930s. The notion that Straparola's tales form the basis of the Grimms' tale compilation is shown to have originated in the mid-nineteenth century with J. F. W. Brakelmann. Susan Stewart and Diane Dugaw are mentioned as the most recent representatives of scholarship which seeks to clarify, as Bottigheimer does herself, the very real historical basis for the fairy tale compilations in Europe, a basis that insistently points towards the printing press and a transmission process that was both literary and oral. Bringing the tales back home to their proper birthplace, which lies within an urban setting "with its commercial characters, literature and financially stable middle-class and cheap print facilities" (p. 115), is a direction which will prove very fruitful for text-immanent analysis, which is now in the position to offer new and more accurate insights into European *Geistesgeschichte*.

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