

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marina Warner. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995. xxv + 463 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-15901-6.

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## Fairy Tales and Cultural Values/Change

There's an old rock-and-roll refrain which concludes that: "It's the singer, not the song." In Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, however, both teller and tale receive equal attention.

It is appropriate, then, that this assiduously researched tome is divided into two sections: "The Tellers" and "The Tales." They are linked by a shared concern with women both as narrators and as central characters of the traditional fairy story. For Warner, although fairy tales are "rebarbative as historical documents," they are still able to reflect our changing perceptions of the real (and imagined) worlds in which we live. In this way, the evolving figure of the Beast, for example, illustrates a "profound shift in cultural values" in the modern world.

There is no doubting the depth and quantity of information contained in this substantial work. Further, it is well annotated and well illustrated with varied, interesting, and appropriate illustrations. However, it is also true that the wealth of factual detail here is sometimes so great that, if one may exploit an appropriate metaphor, it is often difficult to find a clear path to grandmother's house through the densely informational forestation.

Warner is at her most absorbing in her more speculative, theoretical, and thematic sections. This may help explain the success of her series of Reith Lectures for BBC Radio in 1994, in which she created a very arresting balance between information and argument. This is not in the least to say that this volume is without interest: it is

simply to contend that some sections among its 462 pages are much more stimulating than others.

The search for the character of Mother Goose, which takes up much of the first section of the book, does, as Warner herself proclaims, take on something of the character of a "fairytale quest." It is the second section which brings the reader to headier stuff. As Warner admits (perhaps a little unguardedly), "Instances and statistics of female story telling are not however nearly as illuminating as the internal evidence of the stories themselves." There quickly ensues a key section on "absent mothers," followed by Warner's strongest chapters on (appropriately) beasts (chapter 18) and then blondes (chapter 22). It is here that the real strengths of this work lie.

Although the majority of *From the Beast to the Blonde* is taken up with traditional European fairytales and their tellers, Warner is also sensitive to the importance of more recent popular cultural forms in which the stories, themes, or archetypes of traditional tales are re-articulated. The vital chapter 18, for example, pays strong attention to Disney's animated "Beauty and the Beast." Scholars of the genre will doubtless agree when Warner declares: "it is simply unthinking and lazy to denounce all the works of Disney and his legacy." Archetypal connections, meanwhile, are made between avenging females and "slasher" movies, between crimes against women and the films of Hitchcock and De Palma, between the concept of the beast and movies such as "King Kong" and "Edward Scissorhands," and between silent

heroines and Jane Campion's "The Piano." Warner is at her most exciting when making connections such as these: scholars of popular culture will regret that there are not even more of them.

Some types of media theorists will regret that Warner has not set out to account for the audience in the same way that she has both the teller and the text. Certainly, it is somewhat surprising not to see mention or discussion of Ernst Bloch in connection with Warner's persuasive perception of fairytales as a utopian critique. This must

rate as an omission. However, it would be churlish to criticize a volume of the scope of this for not including everything. Not even Mother Goose could have created such a book.

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