



A review of
**The Fairy-Tale
Vanguard: Literary
Self-Consciousness
in a Marvelous Genre**

Veronica Schanoes

The *Fairy-Tale Vanguard: Literary Self-Consciousness in a Marvelous Genre*, edited by Stijn Praet and Anna Kérchy, is an anthology of essays all circling a central point, that is, that the 'recurring connection between fairy tales and literary self-consciousness is not just a question of some scattered, coincidental cases with a predictable proliferation in postmodernity, but *a conspicuously well-represented diachronic phenomenon that runs throughout the literary genre's entire history*' (3; italics in the original). Praet and Kérchy are positing that, as a literary genre, fairy tales, for reasons inherent to the genre and historically contingent, have been an especially fertile ground for three manifestations of what we now call textual metaconsciousness: paratextual material, such as dedications and introductions; metafiction; and experimental literary techniques. Surely, they ask, the proliferation of fairy-tale authors 'positioning themselves at the very vanguard of literary experimentalism and innovation' (6) is significant, and not merely the result of scholarly myopia. This is a collection that is decidedly concerned with the fairy tale as *literature* and *literary* genre; there is little to no discussion of folkloristics here (this is neither good nor bad; it's merely a note regarding methodological approach and topics).

The various essays in the collection engage with these issues of paratextual material, metafiction, and literary experimentation as a way of creating the self-conscious text to a greater or lesser extent than does the introduction. There are a couple that seem to take this theme as an afterthought only, but the vast majority of the essays are fully engaged with the question of the self-conscious, avant-garde text. The volume is divided into two parts, with the first half being on 'Metaliterary Reflections', with a response by Ruth B. Bottigheimer, and the second being on 'Intergeneric, Stylistic and Linguistic Experimentations', which includes a response by Elizabeth Wanning Harries and an interview with Rikki Ducornet by Michelle Ryan-Sautour.

The collection begins very strongly with Sophie Raynard's 'The Modernist Political Agenda of the First *Contes de Fées*: Mademoiselle L'Héritier, Madame d'Aulnoy, and Madame de Murat's Paratexts'. Raynard's examination of the way the *conteuses* 'intended to define [this]

new literary product to the public' and 'how they marketed the fairy tale as modern and worthy literature' is most interesting, as it encompasses then-contemporary critiques of the fairy tale as well as the way the *conteuses* used their responses to those critiques to position and value their work. Another strong essay in this section is Emeline Morin's 'Cartesian Wit and American Fantasy: A Comparative Study of Eric Chevillard's *Le Vaillant Petit Tailleur* (2003) and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* (1996)', in which Morin examines the differing strategies Chevillard and Coover use in constructing their metaconscious texts, and suggests that these differences are emblematic of distinctions between French and American approaches to fairy tales. I look forward to seeing more of Morin's work in the future. This section concludes with Bottigheimer's response, which takes as its topic the definition of 'fairy tale', and slices this topic very thin indeed, distinguishing among fairy tales, fairyland fictions, fairy stories, fantasies, anti-fairy tales, and warning tales. While these distinctions are interesting, it was not immediately clear to me how they related to the overarching topic of the collection.

The second section of the volume opens with Richard van Leeuwen's 'Fairy Tales and Genre Transformation: The Influence of *The Thousand and One Nights* on French Literature in the Eighteenth Century', a fascinating essay that traces the way the 'generic instability' of the *Nights* made a resounding impact on the literary world of 18th-century Europe. Van Leeuwen describes this instability as stemming from the unusual interrelatedness of the tales within the frame story as well as the tales themselves defying, or perhaps proliferating, generic classifications through the many kinds of stories presented together. Helene Høyrup's essay, 'Little Worlds of Words and Things: The Intergeneric and Linguistic Innovation of Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales', introduces the reader who is not literate in Danish to Andersen's experimentations with language and address, experiments that seem not always to translate into English, and demonstrates new layers of complexity in Andersen's stories. These two essays are followed by yet another strong entry, Daniel Gicu's 'The Role of Fairy Tales in the Formation of Romanian National Literature', in which Gicu tracks the way Romanian fairy-tale editors rewrote collected folktales to be more ornate, more poetical, and longer, in the service of constructing a Romanian national character that was more 'genuinely Romanian', in order 'to show the world the natural poetical inclinations of the Romanians' (189). Elizabeth Wanning Harries's "'Wondering and Wandering" in Fairy-Tale Studies' is the response to this section, and Harries considers each of the essays in her section judiciously. She then asks where all this is taking us, and turns to Cristina Bacchilega's 'fairy-tale web', as put forth in her 2013 *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*. She argues that we should be expanding our knowledge of this web, to texts that are 'interdisciplinary, nomadic, creolized, uncanonical, strange'. Most of all, she tells us that we cannot stay in the American/European tradition, as do all 15 essays/interviews in this book.

Not every aspect of the collection lives up to the high standards set by the essays I describe above. Willem de Blécourt's 'The Witch in the Oven: Exploring *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*' is a really interesting essay about the figure of the witch in the title movie, but the references

to metatextuality and self-consciousness seem belatedly tacked on and somewhat irrelevant. There are errors regarding the events of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* in Anna Kérchy's 'Meta-Imagination in Lewis Carroll's Literary Fairy-Tale Fantasies about Alice's Adventures'. Cambridge Scholars Publishing's copyeditor let too many typos slip by. But these are minor complaints about an otherwise fascinating collection. I am left wondering, though, about one of the questions Praet raises in the introduction: is the level of metaconsciousness and experimentation in the fairy tale really unusual? Or is this rather the norm for literature, when examined closely, affectionately, and generously? Which raises another question: if the fairy-tale genre is indeed so rife with such experimentation, is it really experimentation at all? If the vanguard is a tradition reaching back to the early modern period (and before, Praet tells us), is it really a vanguard?

Editors: Stijn Praet and Anna Kérchy.

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Veronica Schanoes



A review of **Fantasy: How It Works**

Taylor Driggers

Over the course of his decades-spanning career, Brian Attebery has established himself as one of the foremost English-speaking theorists of fantasy and the fantastic. One of Attebery's chief innovations in fantasy studies has been drawing attention to its performative characteristics, highlighting that what fantasy *does* is just as, if not more, important than what it *is*. His new monograph, *Fantasy: How It Works*, explicitly positions itself as an elaboration and refinement of this project, aiming to address two questions: 'how does fantasy mean?' and 'what does fantasy do?' (1). Attebery sets himself the task of answering these

questions while also responding to the rapid shifts that have occurred both in fantasy publishing and in academic fantasy scholarship over the past decade. The volume also arrives in the wake of a devastating pandemic and the global rise of fascism, and the anxieties surrounding these issues form a significant backdrop to the majority of the discussions that Attebery undertakes here.

Largely derived from individual talks and papers delivered during Attebery's Leverhulme Visiting Professorship at the University of Glasgow in 2019, *Fantasy: How It Works* seemingly by design lacks a unifying argumentative throughline. Instead, the chapters here function as smaller critical interventions and assessments of the current state of the field, loosely organised around the aforementioned questions regarding fantasy as a meaning-making art form and as a performative discourse. This approach, in my opinion, serves Attebery well: while it does mean that this new monograph is not quite a definitive statement on fantasy, it also lends the volume a generosity and lightness of touch that sees Attebery embracing his current status as one scholarly voice among many in a field he helped develop. (With that having been said, the monograph's tenth chapter, 'How Fantasy Means and What It Does', handily synthesises some key observations and theoretical claims from each of the preceding chapters to give a comprehensive view of the book's arguments.)

Chapter 1, 'How Fantasy Means', outlines some principles regarding the nature of fantasy's ability to create meaning as 'the lie that speaks truth' (9) which implicitly inform the majority of the discussions that follow. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope to describe the inextricability of fantasy narratives and the fantastical worlds in which they are set, he argues that in its navigation of the space between the familiar and unfamiliar, fantasy can transform our perception of the underlying structures and causes of problems that surface realism can merely describe. Maria Nikolajeva's concept of 'fantasemes', discussed in this chapter as the structuring vocabulary of fantasy, also helps Attebery to elaborate on this point in Chapter 2, 'Realism and the Structures of Fantasy', which highlights how fantasy's proximity to and distance from literary realism allows it to interrogate the limits of realism's construction via close reading of E. Nesbit's children's fantasies.

Chapter 3, 'Neighbors, Myths, and Fantasy' examines contemporary fantasy's contention with the complications of a pluralistic society, with multiple religious and cultural myths inhabiting shared spaces. Previous studies of religion in fantasy have neglected the subject of interreligious exchange – Alana M. Vincent's *Culture, Communion, and Recovery* (2012) being a notable exception – so Attebery's treatment of it here is a welcome development, even if his ultimate solution to encountering alternative myths, which is to simply 'acknowledge their validity for someone else' (61), does not sufficiently address the historical antipathies, theological exceptionalisms, and exclusionary logics that are often complexly woven through the structures of such

myths. Attebery's response to conflict is more satisfying in Chapter 4, 'If Not Conflict, Then What?', which builds on Ursula K. Le Guin's criticisms of conflict-driven storytelling in order to map out alternative scripts for addressing problems that fantasy narratives can offer.

Among the most generative and critically innovative chapters in the book are the ones focused on gender. Chapter 5, 'A Mitochondrial Theory of Literature', takes the legacies of second-wave feminist science fiction and fantasy by authors like Joanna Russ and James Tiptree Jr. as a point of departure for considering mitochondria as a metaphor for literary influence that resists the canonical model. Because mitochondria are both separate from and part of a living cell, this model 'reminds us that a text that is drawn into newer text is still alive' and demonstrates that a 'single act of reference is really a whole history of incorporation, negotiation, and synergy' (90). Meanwhile, Chapter 7, 'Gender and Fantasy', inhabits the well-trod ground of gender and fairy-tale retellings, but uses this opportunity to spotlight a previously under-researched facet of this subject in its focus on fairy tales and critical masculinities.

There are places where Attebery's engagement with recent criticism in fantasy is less successful. Chapter 8, 'The Politics of Fantasy', largely rehearses critiques of the racial politics of Western fantasy by Maria Sachiko Cecire (2019), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019), and Helen Young (2015), and suffers somewhat by comparison. These scholars' arguments are better articulated, and with greater nuance, in their own respective works, and Attebery does them few favours by simply summarising them in brief here with little elaboration. Attebery also incorrectly identifies Nigerian-American speculative fiction author Nnedi Okorafor as an Afrofuturist, an aesthetic movement that Okorafor has critiqued and from which she has publicly distanced herself. Despite clearly positive intentions on Attebery's part, and some salient analysis of works by Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, and Kai Ashante Wilson, the chapter falls just short of fully engaging with the work of non-white and non-Western fantasy authors and scholars on their own terms, and risks flattening the distinctions between them.

While Attebery's deliberately expansive (in his terms, 'fuzzy') approach to fantasy is a positive quality in a field that has too often been preoccupied with issues of categorisation, his arguments also occasionally go astray at sites where fantasy intersects with other speculative genres, sometimes undermining otherwise compelling propositions. Chapter 6, 'Young Adult Dystopias and Yin Adult Utopias', adopts a Taoist framework to introduce the intriguing concept of a 'yin', or limited, utopia, but yields little new insight when it comes to young adult literature. Meanwhile, Chapter 9, '*Timor mortis conturbat me*', is one of the most poignant chapters in the monograph due to its examination of fantasy as a way of reconciling with the fear of death, but Attebery unfortunately positions this analysis in contrast to overdetermined claims regarding the limitations of horror fiction.

On the whole, however, *Fantasy: How It Works* is worth recommending on the merits of the connections it draws between fantasy studies and broader literary theories, its synthesis of past and current scholarship on fantasy, and its own original theoretical innovations. It serves equally well as an introduction to the field for newcomers, and as an elaboration on established theorisations and a snapshot of the current state of the field for seasoned scholars. The social and political context of this work's publication lends it an urgency that is keenly felt throughout as Attebery endeavours to demonstrate how fantasy can mean and what it can do, not just in a general sense, but at this particular moment in time.

Author: Brian Attebery.

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Taylor Driggers



A review of **The Watkins Book of English Folktales**

Joanna Gilar

In 1992, writer, folklorist and poet Neil Philip produced *The Penguin Book of English Folktales*, a compendium of stories from across England, largely collected in the 19th and 20th centuries, stories from Cornwall to Shropshire, Sheffield to Suffolk, stories of ogres and witches, boggarts and fairies, heroes, mischief-makers and wild adventurers. In 2022, to the benefit of folklorists and storytellers everywhere, this incredibly rich compendium of stories was reprinted by Watkins, with a foreword by Neil Gaiman and a new, as well as the original, introduction by Philip.

As both Gaiman and Philip point out, England is not a place typically associated with rich folkloric history. As Gaiman puts it, 'folk stories and fairy tales came from somewhere else, not England. That was something I'd learnt as a schoolboy' (xv). Yet in

Philip's 'treasure-trove of living stories' we find evidence of a storied history that we, like Gaiman, had perhaps 'never imagined existing', a rich and complex tapestry of imagination that is both fantastical and outrageously, stubbornly real, embedded in landscape, time and the diverse intricacies of English culture (xv).

In truth, there are many types of story in which England is not particularly rich, and Philip acknowledges as much in his introduction. Whether, as he says, this was caused by the relatively early evolution of the chapbook and widespread semi-literacy, which made it harder for the oral storytelling tradition to survive, whether more folkloric energy went into songs and less into story, or whether England just did not have the ingrained habits of story-sharing that we find in the rest of the United Kingdom, will perhaps never be fully understood. Many stories which may once have been widespread have left no traces. There are, for example, relatively few English *Märchen*, or wonder tales; though evidence from the 16th century suggests there used to be far more (xxix). Yet those that have been preserved, such as 'The Small-Tooth Dog', an English 'Beauty and the Beast' (61), as well as our version of Rumpelstiltskin, 'Tom Tit Tot' (97), or a 'Snow White' (90) in which the seven dwarfs are rather three robbers, are gathered in this book, and deserve to be better known and more often told.

One of the highlights of the collection, however, is that it also allows us to witness the gathering together of tale patterns that still do exist in abundance. 'Jack' tales, for example, exist in multitude, from those we know well, 'Jack and the Beanstalk' or 'Jack and the Giant Killers', to those lesser known, such as 'Jack and the Buttermilk' from Nottinghamshire, in which Jack outwits a witch who attempts to kidnap him (23), or 'The Ass, the Table and the Stick', from Yorkshire (110) in which Jack loses his precious gifts of a magic donkey and enchanted tablecloth, only to find them again with the help of the third gift, a club with which to beat the thief!

Another type which exists in abundance across England are local legends, often featuring supernatural creatures. In his introduction, Philip quotes from *The Denham Tracts* (1892-5) an astounding list of magical beings one might come across in the English countryside, including 'scraggs, breaknecks, fantasms, hobgoblins, hobhoullards, boggy-boes, dobbies, hobthrusts, fetches, kelpies, warlocks, mock-beggars, mum-pokers, Jemmy-burties'. Within the compendium, we read many of their stories, of those well-known such as ogres and giants, witches and fairies, and those little known, such as a little hairy red man from the lead mining area of Derbyshire (20), the Hart Hall Hob of Cleveland in Yorkshire (268), or Skillywidden (274), a Cornish spriggen caught for gold, but swiftly escaping back to his family before he can be forced to provide any luck or riches.

There are the supernatural stories we expect, such as the heroic vanquishing of a multitude of dangerous creatures. There are also those less expected, such as the tale of 'The Witch Wife' (263), gathered by Alfred Williams in his *Round About the Upper*

Thames. In this tale we hear of a man marrying a beautiful woman, only to discover that she travels away at night. One night, he asks to go with her, and she gives him a milk-white calf to ride beside her, bidding him to hold his tongue whatever happens. He accidentally exclaims over the high leaping of his calf, and ends up alone and abandoned in a river. Yet 'with loving kindness', the narrator tells us, his wife returns to him at the end of the night, 'and took him out with her on the white calves many time afterwards, but he had the good sense to observe her injunctions and never to break the silence with any incautious remark' (263).

Stories like these, perhaps, evidence the importance of such collections, for they showcase not only a troublesome wrestling with the supernatural, but also a possibility of existing with it on entirely harmonious terms. And then, of course, as well as supernatural stories, there are stories of the delicious and ridiculous ordinary, anecdotes of life which have become part of the folkloric tapestry, such as the humorous tale of 'The Doctor and the Trapper', in which a doctor asks his friend to donate his body to the College of Surgeons after death, and his friend agrees, so long as, if the doctor dies first, he agrees to donate his body to his rabbit-catching ferrets (215). Then there are spirited religious anecdotes, such as the tale gathered in Derby of an Irish girl who wanted to marry, and knelt down behind a hedge to ask the Holy Mother if she might have Patrick. An old man behind the hedge, hearing her, said 'No, thou can'st not', to which the girl replied 'Thee be quiet, little Jesus, and let thy mother speak' (221).

As well as the above-mentioned story patterns, the collection includes animal tales, ghost stories, horror and humorous tales to create a rich and vibrant tapestry of imaginative, fantastical and anecdotal conversation stretching over centuries. As both a writer and scholar, however, Philip provides more than the recorded stories. In his extensive introduction from the 1992 edition, as well as his opening to the new edition, in which he questions some of his previous selections and exclusions, he provides us with complex commentary not just on story, but on the process of its gathering. He highlights folktale collectors whom history has largely forgotten, such as Thomas William Thompson, a chemistry teacher who worked extensively with Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities to record tales without support or guidance from established folklorists but with deep respect to both stories and their tellers, which enabled him to do, as Philip puts it, 'astonishing work' (xxvii). Then there are other collectors, who blurred story-gathering with storytelling, such as Ruth L. Tongue, who poured creative energy into the stories she gathered, with the result that in 1992 Philip 'considered her essentially as a fraud', a judgement he has reconsidered for this edition, realising that 'with her naturally vivid and expressive storytelling style she was in fact making a unique contribution to the English folktale' (xviii). With discussions of these and other tellers, Philip allows us a glimpse into a world of story-collecting as complex, fraught and multi-layered as the best stories the book provides.

'An orally transmitted text is not a fixed thing, like a static printed text', Philip states in his introduction. 'It is fluid, changeable, alive' (xxiv). As both a storyteller and scholar, he is very aware of the limitations of story-recording, for if, as he concludes, 'we record or report a spoken story, what we have on paper is evidence of storytelling, rather than the story itself'. As he acknowledges, this evidence of storytelling, to be truly understood, needs to be set into a context of society, habit and culture that is 'now almost impossible to supply' (xxiv). What stands out for me, in reading the collection, is the extent to which Philip understands this, and with this understanding comes deep respect both to the stories and their tellers, which pulses throughout the book. While he cannot provide us with context that no longer exists, the context he does provide, both in his introductions and in the commentaries after every story, gives enough social and folkloric history to allow us to understand the tales, not as dead artefacts in the museum of the imagination, but as slices of telling: momentary instances in the life of these incredibly complex organisms of still-living story.

Author: Neil Philip.
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