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Perhaps because of its wide appeal across the humanities and social sciences, the fairy tale has been the subject of more feminist critiques than any other genre of folklore. Beginning in the 1970s with the publication of Alison Lurie’s essay “Fairy Tale Liberation” (The New York Review of Books 15(11): 42–4, 1970) and Marcia R. Lieberman’s spirited response, “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale” (College English 34(3): 383–95, 1972), scholars from a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to folklore and literary studies, have generated a steady stream of discourse about the role of women in the production and content of fairy tales. They have brought an array of different tools to this endeavor, using theories from Frankfurt School Marxism to semiotics and second-wave feminism. Their goals, however, have remained essentially the same: to address women’s roles in the production and reception of fairy tales and to examine the modalities and consequences of their various portrayals.

Fairy Tales and Feminism promises a change in direction—an exploration, as the book’s subtitle suggests, of some new approaches. It consists of eleven essays written by some of the most prominent names in fairy-tale research today. Beginning with editor Donald Haase’s survey of feminist fairy-tale scholarship, it includes pieces by Ruth Bottigheimer, Elizabeth Harries, Lee Haring, Cristina Bacchilega, and feminist fairy-tale pioneer Kay Stone. Haase writes in his introductory chapter that one of the goals of the volume is “to expand the focus of feminist fairy-tale research beyond the Western European and Anglo-American tradition, and even within those traditions to investigate . . . the work of minority writers and performers” (p. 29). The collection achieves this goal admirably, addressing narratives from the Middle Ages to the Information Age, and from the traditional fairy-tale locale of Germany to the Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and Réunion. While no single essay in this volume escapes too far beyond conventional conceptions of the subject matter, as a unit Fairy Tales and Feminism opens for readers a commendably sprawling vista.

Even as the collection nibbles at the genre’s historical and geographical edges, however, it remains indelibly committed to its core. In his essay “On Fairy Tales, Subversion, and Ambiguity: Feminist Approaches to Seventeenth-Century Contes de fée,” Lewis Seifert reflects on the French contes who, although long ignored, have become a critical focus of feminist fairy-tale scholarship. In like fashion, Jeannine Blackwell, in her “German Fairy Tales: A User’s Manual,” examines the role of female informants in the collecting activities of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Depending on how you choose to count, six to eight of the eleven essays in Fairy Tales and Feminism deal directly with the Anglo-European tradition. This does not necessarily constitute a limitation to the volume’s purported breadth, but it can certainly be read as testament to the continuing weight of the genre’s historical home.

Of course, innovative approaches never occur only at the boundaries of a genre. New re-interpretations of an established body of data are often just as challenging, if not more so, than new data seen through established lenses. Although it does not happen across the board, the essays in Fairy Tales and Feminism do offer some new and compelling reinterpretations. Of particular note in this regard are the essays by Cristina Bacchilega, Kay Stone, and Cathy Lynn Preston. Bacchilega and Preston both address the ambiguities of gender, genre, postcolonialism, and postmodernism: the former examines fairy-tale elements in the Western construction of India, while the latter investigates the impact of popular culture on understandings of “the real and the unreal . . . the authentic and the unauthentic . . . the authoritative and the non-authoritative as they blur genre boundaries” (p. 210). Stone, on the other hand, offers something of an autoethnography, exploring the role of context and memory in her own storytelling and the changes wrought in tales from iteration to iteration.
The single most troubling aspect of this volume does not lie in the essays themselves, which on the whole are quite good. Rather, it lies with the selection of authors represented here, who, as I have said, are some of the most prominent names in the discipline. Ordinarily, this would represent an advantage—a boon to any volume. But if the goal of this particular book is to present new approaches to feminist readings of fairy tales, would not a smattering of outside voices—of young scholars, or non-Western scholars, or scholars who do not ordinarily deal with such material—be more appropriate? *Fairly Tales and Feminism: New Approaches,* from its title, promises fresh insight and innovation on a subject that now has more than thirty years of history, but how can it deliver when it is, itself, bound to that history’s auteurs?


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Jack Zipes makes a strong claim when he asserts that Laura Gonzenbach’s 1870 collection *Sicilische Märchen* is “perhaps the most important collection of fairy tales, legends, and anecdotes in the nineteenth century, more important perhaps than the Brothers Grimm” (p. xii). He follows, however, by making an equally strong allowance, that although Gonzenbach—unlike Wilhelm Grimm—“did not intermediate as censor, philologist, and German nationalist,” she “may have edited the tales somewhat to bring out her own progressive views about women. We do not know this for sure” (p. xii). We do not know it at all, except for circumstantial evidence like her unusually progressive upbringing. Other evidence of her editorial work or personal relationships with informants was lost when the Gonzenbach family papers were destroyed in the 1908 Messina earthquake. We do know the names of her dozen or so informants, almost all women from the peasant or lower middle classes. It is also likely that she adopted “a suitably literary voice” for her versions from the Grünst, and possibly also from French fairy-tale collections (p. xv). After she collected her Sicilian tales, Gonzenbach immediately translated them into literary or “high” German. We don’t know the manner with which she recorded the narratives. However, Zipes suggests that we should consider the transcriptions to be accurate by pointing out that, in their abrupt narrative style and use of folk speech, the language of the transcripts is similar to that of the Sicilian tales recorded in dialect by Gonzénbach’s near-contemporary, Giuseppe Pitrè. Here they are made accessible for the first time in an English scholarly edition, with an apparatus that is as appealing to the generalist as it is rigorous in its comparisons to variants in other European tale collections from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries.

Beyond these claims, Zipes pushes his discussion further. What if we viewed some of the great female-vindicating types in the European tale tradition—“The Maiden in the Tower” (AT 310), “The Wishes” (AT 403A), “The Kind and Unkind Girls” (AT 480), and of course “Cinderella” (AT 510A) and its incestuous half-sister “The Dress of Gold, of Silver, and of Stars” (AT 510B)—through a more feminist frame than that provided for those “highly stylized and censored tales of the Brothers Grimm that were constantly changed and edited by Wilhelm” (p. xii)? Zipes offers such a frame when he reorders Gonzénbach’s collection and dispenses with the plodding plot-motif order imposed by Reinhold Kohler, who wrote the introduction to the two-volume original. Zipes defends this change by noting that there is an ongoing struggle for appropriation, adaptation, and authenticity whenever tales are translated and printed” (p. xxx). He has moved a handful of especially empowering variants of woman-centered tales (here titled “Sorfarina,” “The Green Bird,” “The Snake Who Bore Witness for a Maiden,” “The Sister of Muintifiuri,” “Betta Pilusa,” and the titular tale “Beautiful Angiola”) from the middle of the book to the front.

The effect is breathtaking. Sorfarina, the heroine of this edition’s first tale, believes that