

Tales of Fancy and the Politics of the Periodical

The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale. Caroline Sumpter. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 254 pp.

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<1> In this exacting and compact study, Caroline Sumpter examines how nineteenth-century periodicals “reinvented” the fairy tale and, in the process, assured it a permanent role in Victorian culture. She seeks to explore the paradox whereby the press, which was “assumed to be extinguishing fairy belief” (2), actually sustained the circulation of these tales by situating them in greater political and social contexts. Although the book’s focus on print media may initially strike the reader as myopic, Sumpter provides a reasonable and satisfying explanation: such exclusivity allowed her to investigate the ways in which the links between oral and print culture were obscured during this period as well as to analyze the fluid and contradictory contemporary definitions of the fairy tale itself (4).

<2> Indeed, much of her first chapter is devoted to outlining the complex origins of this genre (as seen in the histories and theories of Andrew Lang, Edgar Cohen, and W. B. Yeats) and its slippery ties to various socio-economic groupings. She examines Charles Dickens’ negotiation of the role of fancy and fantasy in *Household Words*, arguing that in this publication the fairy tale is “not simply a celebration of freedom of imagination” but also served as a “consolation for seemingly intractable social problems, and protection from the wolves of class unrest that seemed to lie in wait” (27). Some writers resisted this ever-expanding definition of the fairy tale, Sumpter further contends, but many more recognized that the so-called “classic” version was becoming increasingly elusive as the form was consistently re-imagined for a growing middle-class readership. Although in this chapter (and throughout the book) readers may find themselves frustrated with the author’s failure to proclaim and adhere to a more precise definition of ‘fairy tale,’ I would remind them of Sumpter’s own admonition that “to seek a definition of the nineteenth-century fairy tale that smoothes over ... contradictions is to ignore the political investments that made them culturally important in the first place” (31).

<3> In her second chapter, Sumpter shifts her focus to three of the publications particularly popular with the younger members of middle-class readership, namely *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, *Good Words for the Young*, and the *Monthly Packet*. These monthlies “[displayed] an interest in the fairy tale that was not simply reducible to commercial or didactic motives” and were in part

“inspired by the folkloric researches that their first child audiences shared as common knowledge” (34). By analyzing their engagement with Romantic primitivism, evolutionary metaphors, and anthropological theories, Sumpter successfully demonstrates how in these magazines the “child could be simultaneously cast as an impressionable individual in need of instruction, a critical reader, and the passive object of a powerful myth of origins” (35). This is not to say that consumers of these periodicals quietly accepted such a formulation or the content that promoted it, for as Sumpter also shows, adult as well as juvenile readers sometimes wrote back to the editors in protest about how and why certain fairy tales were deployed in service of various political, religious, and social themes. In the case of *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, editorial interaction with ‘magazine children’ (young subscribers and aspiring contributors) “helped readers conceptualize textual consumption, correspondence, and domestic and professional creative writing as complementary pursuits” and “created a spirited dialogue about the meaning of fairy tales” (64).

<4> Chapter 3 explores how two of the new adult shilling monthlies of the 1860s, the *Cornhill* and *Macmillan’s*, experimented with the fairy tale genre in their responses to Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and in their engagement with the ‘science’ of comparative mythology (68). Sumpter gives special attention to Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (1862-63), arguing against critics like Brian Alderson by pointing out the variations between the published book and the story serialized in *Macmillan’s* (80). Noting, for example, that “there is no ... Irishwoman — or benign fairy — to guide Tom in the serial text,” she argues that “Tom’s transmutation into a Water Baby may be a fairy tale offered in the face of society’s moral failures, but it is still an uneasy consolation” (80). And though this work undermines its own fairy-tale rhetoric, perhaps, Sumpter further suggests, “the latent meanings of *The Water-Babies* may not have been so inconsistent to their author: the fairy tale as a symbol for belief and the Divine is expected to be taken as ‘true’” (87). Unfortunately, this engaging discussion is swiftly followed by the chapter’s rather deflating conclusion. Asserting that *Cornhill* and *Macmillan’s* used the fairy tale “to disturb and to expose social justice but not necessarily to find lasting political solutions,” Sumpter ends by saying “for the enigma of class relations, there seemed to be no satisfactory happy ending: fantasy as well as realism could keep that problem in suspense” (86). Such a summation left this reader less than hopeful about the study’s ability to retain its rhetorical momentum.

<5> From the adult and juvenile monthlies of the mid-nineteenth century, Sumpter next moves on to the left-wing periodicals of the 1890s. She looks specifically at how Keir Hardie’s weekly *Labour Leader* and John Trevor’s monthly *Labour Prophet* used classic and adapted fairy tales in their publications’ children’s sections to secure and mold a younger generation of torch-bearers. It is “in the socialist press’s preoccupation with fairy tale and folklore,” Sumpter contends, “that wistfulness is often evident, revealing attempts to hold on to dreams of a future that can transcend political as well as biological unrest and disorder” (130). Whether the *Labour Leader’s* and *Labour Prophet’s* invocation of the (politicized) fairy tale actually worked to empower rather than restrict readers is uncertain. Although they may have “provided a counter-point to the unquestioning deference to middle-class authority implicit in many contemporary children’s texts” as well as enabled young readers and workers to theorize their roles in the labor force, “the simplifications inherent in fairy-tale ascriptions of good and evil promoted a rather uniform socialism” (127). What is clear through this chapter’s valuable investigation into the

“intersection between Victorian children’s literature, working-class culture and socialist educational practice” are the lengths to which labor movements went to create a politicized aesthetic that was both familiar and revolutionary (88).

<6> In her final chapter, Sumpter hones in on the role of the fairy tale in *fin-de-siècle* little magazines in an attempt to “explore the ingenious ways that [various] artistic communities reclaimed the fairy tale: for folk culture and for the avant-garde, in defence of both decadent and anti-decadent sensibilities, and in service of national identity and emergent gay culture” (131). The 1890s contributions of Laurence Housman justifiably form the foundation of this section, as said writer, author, and illustrator was simultaneously involved in many popular as well as avant-garde ventures. Particularly interesting in this chapter is Sumpter’s analysis of the fairy tale’s intervention in the Arts and Crafts movement. Via its use of elaborate illustrations, she argues, this brand of *fin-de-siècle* fairy tale both satisfied a nostalgia for the innocence of childhood and emerged as an “expensive art [production], often marketed to adults or middle-class juveniles, certainly not to the child of the ‘fields and woods’” (139). Also highly compelling is her discussion of Housman’s literary homage to Oscar Wilde, particularly her claim that the former’s “visual and verbal fairy-tale productions” reveal “rather different perspectives on homoerotic expression after the Wilde trials than the more familiar narrative of wholesale censorship and sexual repression” (172). This is a wonderfully rich chapter.

<7> *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* should be commended not only for addressing a previous lacuna in Victorian studies, but also, and perhaps, more importantly, for the profitable connections it makes to other contemporaneous topics of study such as emergent scientific theories, labor politics, gender, and nationalism. In responding and contributing to various critical conversations, Sumpter proves that successful interdisciplinary scholarship and specialist Victorian monographs need not be mutually exclusive. Her multifaceted analysis of the uses and abuses of the fairy tale genre across a host of nineteenth-century publications may serve as a model to other scholars seeking to construct an authoritative study without sacrificing diligent attendance to evidentiary detail and close readings.