

RE-ORIENTING AND DISORIENTING FAIRY-TALE STUDIES

Re-Orienting the Fairy Tale: Contemporary Adaptations across Cultures.

Edited by Mayako Murai and Luciana Cardi. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020. Pp. 424. ISBN 978-0-8143-4536-8.

Reviewed by Katarina Labudova
katarina.labudova@ku.sk

In *Re-Orienting the Fairy Tale: Contemporary Adaptations across Cultures*, editors Mayako Murai and Luciana Cardi have gathered contributions from scholars exploring the possibilities for de-orientation, de-centralisation and de-Westernisation of the fairy-tale genre to create space for more inclusive and more complex approaches to fairy tales. The thought-provoking title challenges readers to expand their existing socio-cultural and methodological frameworks and examine fairy tale material from innovative theoretical perspectives that review, “re-orient” and “disorient” fairy-tale studies: “Disorienting fairy-tale studies thus implies decentering the Euro-American literary fairy-tale tradition and questioning the hierarchical divide between Western tales and other wonder tales” (3). In their “Introduction” to the volume Murai and Cardi discuss the disorienting and re-orienting of the cultural hegemonies at the basis of fairy-tale scholarship, revealing “the dominant power structures that still tend to perpetuate colonial tropes and neutralize cultural differences” (4). Murai and Cardi urge scholars to “investigate the complex dynamics shaping both textual and cultural translation, the power relations that regulate the movement of cultural capital across the globe, and the specific characteristics of the sociocultural contexts affecting the production, transmission, and transformation of fairy tales” (4).

Fourteen contributors apply decentering, dis-/re-orienting strategies (including indigenous and culturally marginalised perspectives, ecocritical and ecofeminist theories, age studies and childhood studies, and analyses of fairy tales in relation to visual and performing arts, not only literary texts) to de-hierarchise the oversimplifying cultural concepts of Euro-American-centric fairy-tale studies. The first part of the volume, “Disorienting Cultural Assumptions”, aims to both disorient and re-orient the relations between the Western and non-Western cultures.

In “Fairy Tales in Site: Wonders of Disorientation, Challenges of Re-Orientation,” Cristina Bacchilega discusses literary and visual texts. Bacchilega reflects on “adaptations that play in the Orient and Orientalism and on non-Euro-American tales that provide a contrapuntal reading of the genre” (26). Discussing visual art

by Su Blackwell, and adaptations by Neil Gaiman and Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, she concludes that adaptations of fairy tales participate in the fight for social justice:

Fairy tales and wonder tales are too often dismissed as simple stories for children, supernatural remainders of the past, or innocuous entertainment. But historically and in their contemporary adaptations, these tales disorient and re-orient us, guiding us in the forests and urbanscapes of our dreams and nightmares, beckoning us to journey across inner and social barriers, projecting alternative futures, and affecting our sense of what is possible. (32)

“*Mo’olelo Kamaha’o 2.0: The Art and Politics of the Modern Hawaiian Wonder Tale*” by ku’ualoha ho’omanawanui offers an informative description of Hawaiian oral traditions that contain elements of wonder. The critic focuses on the *mo’olelo kamaha* category, particularly “within the context of re-orienting non-European wonder tales” (39), to provide new insights and challenge “the western concept of wonder tale” (39). The chapter examines the development of *mo’olelo kamaha’o* adaptations by Indigenous artists: “Like other Indigenous Pacific peoples, Hawaiians have continually resisted such effort [of the settler colonization] by continuing to affirm our own intellectual and creative traditions through new modes of storytelling that reflect the original *mo’olelo* of our illustrious *kūpuna* (ancestors)” (41). The author emphasises the visual aspect in oral storytelling traditions which is revitalised (not only) in graphic novel and stage productions: “Contemporary Indigenous adaptations and retelling of *mo’olelo kamaha’o*, such as those for Māui, are responses to earlier settler colonial adaptations that disoriented the original *mo’olelo*. Thus, there is power to disorient, as well as re-orient stories” (74). This is important for Indigenous peoples, as the stories are a significant part of their identity.

In “Re-Orienting China and America: *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China* and Its TV Adaptations,” Roxane Hughes discusses how the “erased history and cultural heritage” of ethnic American writers is recovered. By analysing two 1980s American adaptation of Yexian variants of Chinese “Cinderella,” Hughes unveils the stereotypical Westernised and Orientalised adaptations of the Yexian tale that seem to “cater to the taste of an American audience deeply influenced by Disney and quite prejudiced against Asian populations” (101).

Natsumi Ikoma’s “Monstrous Marionette: The Tale of a Japanese Doll by Angela Carter” analyses Angela Carter’s short story “The Love of Lady Purple,” which is usually read as a retelling of Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty.” Besides the lineage of dolls and their metamorphoses in Western literature (e.g. Pygmalion’s Galatea, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Olympia, Pinocchio), Ikoma sees yet another source of inspiration for Carter’s tale in *bunraku* puppet theatre: “Although Lady Purple is manipulated by strings, the performance style comes from *bunraku* puppet theater in Japan, in which

puppets are controlled by three male masters and voiced by male singers, all of which are within a definitive hierarchy” (120). Angela Carter’s story is thus ambiguous and challenges the readers’ stereotypes and (mistaken) assumptions about the world.

Part II, “Exploring New Uses,” critically examines new uses of fairy tales in the contemporary context for entertainment and education.

Hatsue Nakawaki’s “Japanese Heroine Tales and the Significance of Storytelling in Contemporary Society” interweaves the storytelling practice of the *mukashibanashi* tales from Japan with fairy-tale analysis. It emphasises the importance of fairy tales in education: “As time passes and storytellers change, *mukashibanashi* will be reselected and transformed. In today’s society, telling tales of various women – and at the same time men, or humans beyond gender distinctions – and of various forms of happiness are needed” (161). The essay calls for inclusive and positive portrayals of marginalised groups (women, children, the elderly).

In “Who’s Afraid of Derrida & Co.? Modern Theory Meets Three Little Pigs in the Classroom,” Shuli Barzilai shows how a pop-up version of the picture book “Three Little Pigs” can be used to teach modern literary theory: “The challenges posed by Derrida, the Big Bad Wolf of modern theory, appear far less threatening when the playfully liberating aspects of his approach to texts and contexts are foregrounded” (195).

Aleksandra Szuhajew’s “Adults Reclaiming Fairy Tales through Cinema: Popular Fairy-Tale Movie adaptations from the Past Decade” focuses on popular Hollywood action films (e.g. *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Blancanieves*, *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters*) that draw on dark fairy-tale scenarios. She suggests that these films can attract an adult audience and offer not only entertainment but also a chance to discuss the cultural history of the tale, cinematic techniques, and the role of the fairy tales “in a globalizing cultural community” (228). These adaptations, Szuhajew argues, create “a forum for exhibiting social and other issues” (229).

Nieves Moreno Redondo’s “Trespassing the Boundaries of Fairy Tales: Pablo Berger’s Silent Film *Snow White*” disorients and deconstructs stereotypes embedded in the Spanish cinematographic tradition. It examines cultural stereotypes “unconnected to the literary and sociocultural environment in which fairy tales developed” (258). The closing section, “Promoting Alternative Ethics and Aesthetics,” maps out interdisciplinary research which combines new approaches to analysing fairy tales with insights from other disciplines (age studies, child studies, film studies, ecofeminism and ecocriticism).

In “Re-Orienting the Fairy Tale, Revising Age?” Vanessa Joosen re-orientes fairy tale scholarship from a children-centered approach to age studies.

Michael Brodski’s “Re-Orienting Fairy-Tale Childhood: Child Protagonists as Critical Signifiers of Fairy-Tale Tropes in Transnational Contemporary Cinema”

combines childhood studies and film studies to discuss transnational live-action fairy-tale movies. This chapter re-orientates and challenges the traditional notion of childhood innocence: “By means of a more nuanced fairy-tale criticism approach to the motif of childhood, the dominant Eurocentric tendency toward always accepting the Western models embedded in many traditional texts could be also revealed” (304). Thus, the author challenges not only the construction of child protagonists in traditional fairy tales but also the construction of other models.

Lucy Fraser’s “Alice on the Edge: Girls’ Culture and ‘Western’ Fairy Tales in Japan” examines how Carroll’s Alice is appropriated in Japan and the development of “a series of ‘conversations’ across national borders and about gender” (310). Carroll’s *Alice* has influenced Japanese girls’ culture but there is also a complex interaction between Japan and the West: “This wholehearted appropriation, in turn, has informed complex literary productions from beyond the realm of girls’ culture” (329).

In “Magical Bird Maidens: Reconsidering Romantic Fairy Tales in Japanese Popular Culture,” Masafumi Monden shows how Japanese popular culture reinterprets and subverts the romantic fairy-tale genre and femininity in fairy tales. The chapter discusses the modern views of female heroines in the romantic fairy tales (fatalistic and passive), and it shows the process of changing and reimagining these stories in the Japanese anime series *Princess Tutu* (2002–3). A special aspect of this chapter is that it focuses on a medium which utilises the conventions of *shōjo manga*, magical girl anime, and ballet, producing *Princess Tutu* as an example of cultural syncretism. The author concludes that “*Princess Tutu*’s (re)introduction of a harsh, almost brutal reality to the story subverts more modern conventions of the genre, offering a clever alternative to the common criticism of fairy tales as primarily reinforcing heteronormative, patriarchal, and anthropocentric romantic ideologies where the passive good girl is always rewarded with a happy ending” (358).

Katsuhiko Suganuma’s “When Princess(es) Will Sing: Girls Rock and Alternative Queer Interpretation” explores the intersection of fairy-tale studies, popular music, and queer studies. It analyses a “productive dialogue between fairy-tale retellings and formal critical studies developed in Japan” providing an “intertextual analysis of fairy tales in relation to popular music” (363). To illustrate the queer potential of fairy tales (traditionally seen as reproducing heteronormative discourse), Suganuma tracks the story of the Japanese female band Princess and the lyrics of their popular songs. Suganuma’s analysis of the song “Diamonds” demonstrates the re-orientation of the fairy tale and its potential for gender subversion as well as queer interpretation.

The closing chapter, Daniela Kato’s “The Plantation, the Garden, and the Forest: Biocultural Borderlands in Angela Carter’s ‘Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest,’” concentrates on non-human life forms in fairy tales. As Kato emphasises, in fairy tales “animals and plants often display wondrous forms of agency: wolves and birds

speak and seduce; trees and flowers shift from one shape to another and crucially influence the course of events by producing either miraculous gifts or poisonous curses” (384). The chapter offers a radical decentering of human subjectivity. Reading Angela Carter’s short story from an ecofeminist perspective, Kato criticises the space the forest occupies in the traditional nature-culture binary hierarchy.

The volume *Re-Orienting the Fairy Tale*, brought together by Mayako Murai and Luciana Cardi, is a stimulating academic publication: intellectually inspiring and challenging, it raises intriguing questions, utilises new approaches and re-orientates old material towards new readers. It aims at stretching the boundaries of fairy-tale studies by disorienting Western, Euro-American narcissism, while applying new approaches and re-orienting traditional perspectives. The volume keeps its promise to open the world and the reader’s mind and embrace a far more inclusive understanding of fairy tales in new contexts, adaptations, media, and cultures.