Book Reviews

Koehler, Julie L. J., Shandi Lynne Wagner, Anne E. Duggan, and Adrion Dula, editors. ***Women Writing Wonder: An Anthology of Subversive Nineteenth-Century British, French, and German Fairy Tales*****. Wayne State UP, 2021.**

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Popular understanding of the history of the European fairy tale begins with canonical authors like Charles Perrault (late seventeenth to early eighteenth century) and the Brothers Grimm (early nineteenth century), then proceeds to the twentieth-century Walt Disney films, and ends with feminist revisionist fairy tales written by women authors in the past fifty years. Even in fairy-tale scholarship, it has been hard to shake the narrative that male authors established the conservative fairy-tale canon and then female authors beginning in the late twentieth century subverted that canon with revisions that sought to expose and remedy the sexism of classic fairy tales. This narrative has been complicated by robust scholarship on the role of the *conteuses*—French women writers who were Perrault's contemporaries and just as important as he in establishing the literary fairy tale. As a result, discussions of the role of women in the production of fairy tales have ended up jumping from the seventeenth/eighteenth-century *conteuses* to late-twentieth-century writers like Angela Carter, without much in between. Were women writing fairy tales during the intervening years? *Women Writing Wonder* answers this question with a resounding "yes."

Women Writing Wonder: An Anthology of Subversive Nineteenth-Century British, French, and German Fairy Tales provides exactly what its title and subtitle indicate. Following an informative general introduction, the book is organized into three sections, each focused on a different country. Each section itself features an introduction providing the nineteenth-century

historical, cultural, and political context for the country at hand, and each of the anthology's twenty-one fairy tales is preceded by a brief (one- to two-page) biographical note on its author. Occasional footnotes explain linguistic nuances and supply additional context. The editors and translators clearly have sought to make the collection accessible to undergraduates, and they have succeeded admirably; the editorial apparatus is jargon-free and does not assume a specialist's knowledge of literary history. At the same time, because many of the tales themselves are not widely known even among fairy-tale scholars, the collection is valuable for specialists as well.

Anne E. Duggan and Adrion Dula, in the introduction Part I, situate nineteenth-century French women's writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, explaining that women arguably had less freedom to write as the salon culture of the *conteuses* faded and the nineteenth-century idea of "separate spheres" for men and women took hold. But write they did, and the result is a rich variety of tales of fairies and enchanters, cottagers and royals, rapacious ogres and mysterious clouds. Even the biographical introductions are fascinating; I learned that Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis held a prominent position in the household of the duc d'Orléans and that Louise Michel, a prominent socialist, took advantage of her exile in New Caledonia to collect local folklore. In Part I, we find stories including Genlis's "Pamrose, or The Palace and the Cottage" (1801), reminiscent of the *conteuses*' tales in its length, complexity, and focus on the steadfast goodness of its heroine in the face of adversity. Julie Delafaye-Bréhier's "The Story of Little Clotilde" (1817) encourages the child reader to emulate the honesty and generosity of the titular heroine rather than the duplicitousness of her sisters. Félicité de Choiseul-Meuse's "Rose and Black" (1818) features a heroine who, rather like Sleeping Beauty, gets caught in the middle of a conflict between a good fairy and an evil enchanter and is consequently born with a variety of desirable and undesirable "gifts": among others, her skin alternates each day between black and

white. The story presents blackness as ugly, but it also condemns the prince who falls in love with the girl in her white form but rejects her when she turns black.

Julie L. J. Koehler's introduction to Part II observes that fairy tales by nineteenth-century German women served a range of functions: "as Romantic literature, as children's stories, as letters to friends and family, and as subversive social and political commentary" (145). Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the tales of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and on the *Kunstmärchen* (literary fairy tales) written in German by men; several tales collected here were written by women close to these men. As Koehler rightly points out, so far feminist scholars have "written on the gender roles of female characters in the Grimms' stories" and examined the women who supplied the Grimms with many of their tales, but little work has been done on stories actually written and published by women (147). Some of the ones included here (such as Sophie Tieck Bernhardi von Knorring's 1801 "The Deer" and Caroline de la Motte Fouqué's 1806 "The Tears") resemble male-authored *Kunstmärchen* from the Romantic period, marked by a meandering style and highly symbolic renderings of love, nature, and magic. Karoline Stahl's "Princess Elmina" (1818) eschews the typical romance plot; the happiness of the ending lies in the heroine's reunion with her long-lost mother and restoration to royal status. "The Forest Fairy Tale" (1844) by Adele Schopenhauer (a lesbian and the sister of the famous philosopher) explicitly addresses the differing statuses of male and female fairy-tale tellers in a sly frame story. But my favorite selection is Gisela von Arnim's "Of Rabbits," actually a letter she wrote in the 1850s to cheer up an ailing nephew; it is a charming one-page narrative of a child's visit to a rabbit family, complete with simple but evocative drawings.

In the introduction to the British tales included in Part III, Shandi Lynne Wagner aptly points to both the ubiquity of fairy tales in Victorian culture and the urgency in the period of the

"woman question," an umbrella term for debates around women's role in the family, in the public sphere, and in the eyes of the law. These two facts together indicate the usefulness of the fairy tale as a genre to be taken up by Victorian women writers. Part III includes several texts that are not widely discussed in scholarship despite the fame of their authors (Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley). New to me was George Egerton's "Virgin Soil" (1894), a furious and sad realist tale about a girl pushed by her mother into marriage with a bad man. Two of the selections in Part III are poems, including a variation on "Sleeping Beauty" by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1837). LEL's poem exemplifies the subtle subversion of patriarchy and happily-ever-after marriage endings that the editors of this anthology wish to foreground. After five fairly traditional stanzas lavishly depicting Sleeping Beauty awaiting her prince, in the final stanza LEL introduces the prince, foreshadows the marriage, and concludes the poem with the lines "Ah, the heart which it [Love] must waken / Soon will mourn its rest forsaken!" (285). Indeed!

The anthology's subtitle promises "subversive" tales. "Subversion" has long been a keyword in fairy-tale studies, always with a positive connotation: much fairy-tale scholarship approvingly highlights ways in which contemporary fairy tales subvert problematically conservative features of classic fairy tales. In response, some scholars (myself included) have striven to demonstrate that not all fairy tales written before the twentieth century are more conservative than those written later. *Women Writing Wonder*'s specification that it provides *subversive* nineteenth-century fairy tales by women is clearly aimed at scholars aware of this ongoing discussion. And I share the desire to emphasize that writers have attempted to subvert gender roles and other societal and generic norms throughout history. Still, our field's tendency to privilege subversion can itself be limiting. Many stories and poems written by women in the

nineteenth century simply were not particularly subversive; that does not mean, however, that they are uninteresting. This anthology's biographical introductions to individual tales occasionally strain to locate the subversive elements. The heroine of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's "The Invisible Girl" (1833), for example, seems to me to conform quite well to nineteenth-century standards of femininity. It's true, as the editor states, that after banishment from her home, the heroine "surviv[es] in the Welsh countryside on her own," and arguably that she "saves the life of her prince" (266). But in the actual story, the heroine only spends three months on her own, and she seems to have no plans beyond waiting in a tower for her lover to rescue her: "Her only hope was that Henry would return … she feared that, as her strength was failing and her form wasting to a skeleton, she might die and never see her own Henry more" (280). To call her "a strong and resourceful female heroine" is a stretch (266). I understand the urge to characterize stories as protofeminist but wish that weren't the only surefire way to promote women's writing. "The Invisible Girl" is well worth reading; it's a relatively little-known story by a prominent author, and it combines Gothic tropes with references to "Cinderella" and "Rapunzel" in interesting ways. It shouldn't have to be subversive as well.

Undoubtedly, *Women Writing Wonder* is a welcome addition to fairy-tale scholarship. Well curated, engagingly written, and carefully edited, it is sure to find a ready audience of students and specialists.

Jessica Campbell (https://jessicaabbottcampbell.com/) is a literary scholar researching fairy tales, Victorian fiction, and the history of representations of queer desire between women. She has taught at the University of Washington, University of Nevada, Reno, and McKendree University, and she

has published articles in venues including *Brontë Studies*, *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, *Journal of Lesbian Studies,* and *Public Books*.