

Schwabe, Claudia. *Craving Supernatural Creatures: German Fairy-Tale Figures in American Pop Culture.* Wayne State UP, 2019.

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Review by Ethan Taylor Stephenson

The fantastic, the mythical, the monstrous are everywhere in North American popular culture today, appearing in films, television, social media, video games, toys, and clothing. Consumers are more fascinated than ever with the supernatural, and companies are as eager to monetize and profit from it. Claudia Schwabe's study accounts for this phenomenon in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century film and television, tracing how the "evil" and "monstrous" characters of Romantic German fairy tales are reimagined for postmodern audiences in ways that reflect our evolving views on alterity and diversity. She maintains that through the adaptation of characters like the automaton, the golem, the doppelganger, the evil queen, the Big Bad Wolf, and the dwarf, we are "mov[ing] toward a celebration and exaltation of fantastic Otherness, the anthropomorphization of and identification with supernatural beings, and the rehabilitation of classic fairy-tale villains and monsters" (4). What were once sources of the uncanny, the dangerous and untamed, the villainous, and the grotesque are "rehabilitated" in postmodern, North American media.

Schwabe limits her study to German fairy and folk tales of the early nineteenth century, most notably in the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Brothers Grimm, in part, because their characters and plots are most familiar to American audiences steeped in Disney culture. Schwabe's analysis extends beyond Disney, however, to recent adaptations, both animated and live action, featuring characters like the automaton (à la Hoffmann's Olympia), the Evil Witch, and the Big Bad Wolf of Grimmian lore. She draws historical connections between these once negatively

connoted figures and their postmodern counterparts. Each chapter is similarly framed, beginning with the historicization of a classic fairy-tale archetype followed by an analysis of its recent popular portrayals.

Chapter 1, “Reimagining Uncanny Fairy-Tale Creatures: Automatons, Golems, and Doppelgangers,” draws parallels between three related creatures that reflect the Dark Romantic fascination with, what Schwabe describes as, “the hidden, the dark, the subconscious, the unknown, and everything that was not open to rational comprehension” (15). She looks to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s seminal 1816 story “The Sandman,” as well as the tales of Achim von Arnim, Wilhelm Hauff, and Adelbert von Chamisso, in which the automaton, the golem, and the doppelganger precipitate violence and death because of their uncanniness. They are anathema to human psychological and social stability because they are human-like in appearance, yet remain inhuman in substance. Schwabe demonstrates how these creatures—automatons in films including *The Stepford Wives* (both 1975 and 2004 versions), Steven Spielberg’s *A. I.* (2001), and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), golems in television shows as diverse as *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-18) and *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and the doppelganger in television series like *Grimm* (2011-17) and *Once Upon a Time* (2011-18) and in the *Harry Potter* films (2001-2011)—are “transformed, dramatized, humanized, and infantilized characters, oftentimes with positive connotations and equipped with profound emotional depth that invites a spectator’s empathic response in return” (16). These creatures are made *heimlich* in the twenty-first century, as television and films posit the Other as something (or someone) that the audience can understand, accept, and even identify with.

Chapter 2, “Evil Queens and Witches: Mischievous Villains or Misunderstood Victims?,” examines the history of the evil queen/stepmother and wicked witch tropes in the Grimms’

“Schneewittchen” and related stories. The villainous women of these classic tales express little character depth, and are, as Schwabe states, “evil to the core,” serving only as the “antithesis of the heroine” (90–94). They are flattened to represent the duality—the black and white, the dark and light, the evil and good—of the Grimmian moral universe. Through her careful analysis of films such as Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997), *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *The Huntsman: Winter’s War* (2016), and the television series *Once Upon a Time*, Schwabe shows how these women are now commonly provided “backstories,” offering viewers a broader palette of character traits and a more sympathetic characterization. Recent adaptations play to our desire for characters with complicated, human motivations. We sympathize with their intricate and often painful backstories, as is the case with *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*, whose “evil” stepmother, Claudia, played by Sigourney Weaver, becomes evil only after a miscarriage. Schwabe’s point is that we want to know what has led these women to their wickedness, to understand, even if we do not always endorse, what drives their actions. Modern film and television fulfill this desire.

Chapter 3, “Taming the Monstrous Other: Representations of the Rehabilitated Big Bad Beast in American Media,” argues that the Big Bad Wolf of the Grimms’ fairy tales is either anthropomorphized and infantilized or, conversely, made sexy in modern American media. Schwabe looks to the character of Monroe, a reformed werewolf, in NBC’s *Grimm*, who, as the sidekick to the main character, “enjoys a quiet life in his suburban bachelor pad and abstains from killing humans” (174). Schwabe also discusses the episode “Child of the Moon” from ABC’s *Once Upon a Time*, which tells the backstory of Ruby Lucas, also known as “Little Red Riding Hood” or “Red,” who is cursed to turn into a wolf on each full moon. One night, Red loses control and unintentionally kills her boyfriend. She flees to the forest, where an outcast pack of werewolves

helps her control and eventually accept her lupine identity. Through these, and other examples, Schwabe maintains that this “rehabilitated” werewolf/big bad wolf has “shaken off its biologically inscribed and culturally reinforced shackles of monstrosity” for a complex, sympathetic, and ultimately self-determined identity (222). Furthermore, she claims that this transformation reflects our growing acceptance of otherness and our increasingly emphatic condemnation of discrimination based on biological differences.

The last chapter is perhaps the most pointed in its social and political implications. “Dwarfs, Diversity, and Deformation: From Fairy-Tale Imps to Rumpelstiltskin Reloaded” argues that the link between dwarfism and the grotesque in German folk tales, the conflation, in Schwabe’s words, of “deformity and disability with punishments and bad, sinful, or improper behavior,” is rejected in modern fantasy genres for a kinder and more inclusive politics (50). Schwabe looks to the heterogeneity of dwarfs in recent popular cinema, films such as Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* trilogy (2012-2014) and Tarsem Singh’s comedy *Mirror Mirror* (2012), among others. She also looks to ABC’s *Once Upon a Time* and the character of Rumpelstiltskin/Mr. Gold, who is provided a sympathetic backstory and emotional depth. She argues that diversity in casting and in characters’ personalities, body types, races, ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, and abilities in films and series like these puts the individual before the stereotype and suggests a “societal shift against disability bias and ableism” (227). Netflix’s *The Witcher* series (2019-present) and HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-19) are just a few recent examples of shows that criticize persistent social stigmas around disability, offering instead complex, problematic, and often heroic characters that challenge ableist prejudice.

The book is especially useful for its careful historical exegesis of Romantic German fairy-tale archetypes and its explanation of how and why they are subverted for modern audiences.

Schwabe provides abundant examples of contemporary film and television that both support her thesis and invite audiences to extend her reading to the seemingly endless stream of new fantasy-based media being released today. Fairy tales, overtly or not, reflect the mores of the times in which they were written. Schwabe contributes significantly to the scholarly evaluation and criticism of how modern media, especially that which purports to be fantastical, in fact, reflects and responds to contemporary social and political struggles. Indeed, the most provocative, but least explored assertion in the book, is that the study of films and television based on fairy tales, especially films and television that humanize others and challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other prejudices is more important now as bigotry in its many forms is being codified in state legislatures across the nation. This book argues for continued scholarly engagement with these issues and the further elucidation of how fairy tales, and popular culture broadly, continue to serve as vehicles for social and political action that may produce a more just and accepting America.

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