Book Reviews

Campbell, Jessica. *The Brontës and the Fairy Tale*. Ohio UP, 2024.

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Review by Megan Burke Witzleben

Do people ever fully outgrow the fairy tales of their childhood? Jessica Campbell makes the case that, at least for the Brontës, the answer is a resounding no. While scholars have studied the impact that fairy tales had on their juvenilia for years, Campbell argues that fairy tales influenced the siblings beyond their childhood kingdoms and into the realist fiction of their adulthood. She demonstrates that fairy tales proved to be flexible models upon which they could base complex novels.

Campbell begins chronologically with a historical analysis of the Brontës' exposure to fairy tales in the Haworth parsonage, and she considers their influence on kingdoms and characters in their juvenilia. She continues thematically with Branwell's military-themed writing and Emily's and Anne's poetry. The next section, "Happily Ever After," is the only one to feature a singular text, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), because the novel so explicitly references fairy tales. Campbell shifts in the book's second half to stories that draw less directly from fairy tales. "Fairwell to Fairies," for example, considers the "supernatural bride" as the defining trope of *Shirley* (1849) while folklore, rather than recognizable fairy tales, permeates *Wuthering Heights* (1847). She concludes with the question, "What is Real?" with a compelling analysis of Anne Brontë's commitment to showing the realities of brutal households. To the extent that fairy tales influence *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), it is to reveal their complications. Lastly, Campbell loosens the definition of fairy tales to consider how the narrator of *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snow, becomes the enchanting storyteller rather than the subject of a fairy tale. Her

dreamlike sequences reveal her psychological development as she shrouds her fears of Catholicism and spinsterhood through the trope of the nun (200).

Campbell notes in closing that by the end of the nineteenth century, the "Tinker Bell" version of fairies took hold of the popular imagination, displacing a more complex variety once known to the Brontës and their readers. "With all due respect to Barrie," Campbell explains, "I have attempted in this book to conjure a different and older image of fairies and other supernatural creatures as figures of radical uncertainty, not strictly bound by any one association" (206). The older type of fairy tale that was "vital to the Brontës' oeuvre" (208) was "remarkably elastic," often lacking happy endings. They provided authors "toolkits" with which to develop truths too complex to tell through reality alone (207).

The Brontës and the Fairy Tale fulfills its promise of carefully illuminating layers of fairy tales within each of the Brontë siblings' writings. Scholars of fantasy and fairy tales will appreciate her distinctions between the genres of supernatural writing. Campbell meticulously researched the original texts, translating literary fairy tales in *The Thousand and One Nights* and French tales by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault. She consistently engages with contemporary scholarship to make the case that knowledge of the tales affects readers' understanding of character. Distinguishing between the mentions of fairy tales in *Blackwood's* and print ephemera, she considers the likelihood of the Brontës' encounters with different stories and tropes (21). "My goal," she explains, "is not to argue for specific versions of tales as the most likely sources for the Brontës; rather, I hope to provide a sense of the tapestry of folk- and fairy-tale models available in the popular culture from which the Brontës drew" (22). Her thorough close readings of juvenilia and connections to the *Blackwood's* magazines likely to be found at Haworth trace the proliferation of fairy stories in ephemera and in the era's published works (28). Though mostly concerned with

the plots and prevalence of tales themselves, Campbell also considers the larger imperial context in which they lived. For example, she analyzes how as children, the Brontës modeled Glass Town, one of their fictional worlds, on "The British Settlements in Western Africa" in *Blackwood's* to portray tyranny over Ashanti characters (34-5). This comparison indicates that the children not only read, but absorbed, the imperialist, as well as fantastical, tendencies of their time. In her section on Branwell's poetry, Campbell notes that he tried to hide any influence of fairy tales, but he nonetheless depicts fairies as metonyms for weak or wily women (55). She explains, "In the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, the supernatural is consistently endemic to the real world. For Branwell, it is often in mind but always apart—in the mystifying and ultimately incomprehensible opposite sex" (64). Because "Branwell's ideas were the ones on the rise throughout the Victorian period," readers learn about Victorian attitudes through his texts, which otherwise ostensibly cover war and political figures (69).

Citing a long list of critics including Molly Clark Hillard, Nina Auerbach, and many more, Campbell builds on their analyses to argue that as the siblings matured, they did not repeat so much as transform multiple fairy tale references to create tension in their texts. For example, when discussing *Jane Eyre*, she does not choose sides with those arguing that the story follows "Beauty and the Beast" more or less than "Bluebeard." Instead, she argues that the novel reflects both simultaneously, revealing Jane's complex relationship with Rochester as she understands her position with his. Jane constantly shifts in her perception of Rochester as Bluebeard hiding the dead bodies of previous wives (here, Bertha Mason) and the Beast, whose soft affinity with her becomes clear only after time (94-95).

At times, readers of *The Brontës and the Fairy Tale* may wish for a more precise interpretation—how do people read these stories differently by noticing the fairy tale parallels?

Campell suggests that readers notice "the work fairy tales do" (207), and states that "Paying attention to how Brontë interweaves the threads of realism and the supernatural provides new insights into the dual resolutions of the industrial and domestic plots" of *Shirley* (115), but she does not always state the "insight" or quite spell out what "work fairy tales do," other than parallel the plots and characters. Nevertheless, Campbell provides so much evidence of overlapping storytelling that one cannot help but read the novels with fresh eyes. In one of her strongest chapters likening Anne Brontë's Arthur Huntington to "Bluebeard," Campbell makes her point explicit:

> The horrifying fairy-tale union underscores Brontë's exposé of the danger real women face at the hands of their husbands. In other words, subtle evocations of "Bluebeard" throughout the novel, without compromising Brontë's realism, remind the reader that an abusive, alcoholic husband, however aristocratic he may be, is not so different from the murderous fairy-tale husband. (172)

Having painstakingly explored how Anne's Christian moralizing led her to distance herself from overt mentions of fairies, Campbell emphasizes the utility of the trope in making her points. This chapter helps reframe the danger women faced at the hands of their husbands. Women with economic independence have the luxury of marrying whomever. Until then, the real threat of abuse loomed over young brides. Such a warning may still resonate with readers today considering women's options when confronting abusive partners.

Overall, Jessica Campbell has written a compelling examination not only of the prevalence of fairy tales in Victorian print culture, but also of how this impacted the Brontës' literary imaginations. Students of the Brontës should read *The Brontës and the Fairy Tale* to see how even realist novels such as *Shirley* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflect the richness of figurative fairy

lore. Beyond Brontë enthusiasts, literary historians can benefit from Campbell's thorough research on folklore and fairy tales, both formal literary publications and print ephemera. By the end of the book, Campbell demonstrates that fairy tales and "fantastical traditions" served vital roles in the Brontës' work, and she encourages other scholars to join her consideration of their impact on other aspects of Victorian literature and culture.

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