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**Fairy Poetics: Revisiting French Fairy Tales as (Post)Modern Literary Machines**

Jean-Paul Sermain, *Le Conte de fées du classicisme aux Lumières* (Paris : Desjonquères, 2005). Pp. 286. €24 paper

Jean-Paul Sermain, *Métafictions (1670–1730) : la réflexivité dans la littérature d'imagination* (Paris: Champion, 2002). Pp. 461. €70 cloth

Régine Jomand-Baudry and Jean-François Perrin, eds., *Le Conte merveilleux au XVIIIe siècle: une poétique expérimentale* (Paris: Kimé, 2002). Pp. 434. €9 paper

Donald Haase, ed., *Fairy Tales and Feminism. New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press). Pp. 268. \$28 paper

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Over the past four or five years, a number of important publications in French have revisited a corpus of texts which are simultaneously world-famous and underrated. Everybody “knows” the *Beauty and the Beast*, *Blue Beard* or *Little Red Riding Hood*; many scholars have studied them from an ethnological or psychoanalytical point of view. Cultural Studies scholars have enjoyed tracking down, under their various and unsuspected guises, the narrative patterns and gender roles characteristic of the fairy tale. Yet, until now, few literary scholars have attempted to assess the *literary* stakes of this body of texts in terms of poetics. As a matter of fact, because of their very popularity, these tales have paradoxically been often excluded from the canon of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century French literature. In a deep misunderstanding of their true nature, the fairy tales have been portrayed as a leftover of pre-Enlightened mental frameworks. Such prejudices were shaken by several pioneers of the 1970s and 1980s (like Jacques Barchilon, Raymonde Robert, Jack Zipes or Ruth Bottigheimer), or by closer readings of exceptional authors (like Crébillon fils) and texts (like Diderot’s *Bijoux indiscrets*). They are now about to be dramatically reversed by a new generation of French scholars, who manage to reinscribe the works of Perrault, d’Aulnoy, Hamilton, Gueulette, Moncrif, Pétis de La Croix, Voisenon, Bibiena or Le Prince de Beaumont not only within a rich, clever and highly self-conscious theoretical reflection on literary poetics, but also within an astute and timely dialogue on the promises, limitations, and stakes of Modernity.

For the fairy tale, far from being a relic from the Dark Ages, is a *quintessentially modern genre*—one of the rare genres that could claim no paternity among the Ancients, and therefore had to invent its own rules and agenda. It is the unfolding of this highly modern literary project, “the most advanced literary venture of the period” (8), which is described in Jean-Paul Sermain’s latest book, *Le Conte*

*de fées du classicisme aux Lumières* [The French Fairy Tale from Classicism to the Enlightenment]. The opening chapter provides the reader with a neat periodization of the “Literary Revolution” brought by the fairy tale. When it emerges and meets instant success between 1690 and 1705 through the work of Charles Perrault and a group of mostly women writers, the *conte de fées*, baptized as such in 1698, can be described as a typically (post)modern remix of various pre-existing materials, sampling bits and pieces taken from folkloric elements, from the literary tradition of short stories (and their various framing techniques), from the newer genre of the novel, as well as from the meta-discursive poses popularized by *Don Quixote*. A second wave, between 1705 and 1730, is marked by Galland’s translation-adaptation of the *Arabian Nights*, and by the Oriental craze it generates among French writers, who color their fictions with characters, beliefs and fantasies imported from the Arab world, Persia, India, or China. The last phase, between 1730 and 1756, is one of diversification: countless writers from all horizons find in the now well-established but ever-scandalous genre of the *conte de fées* a space of freedom where their unbridled fantasy, their sharp critical sense, their polemical tendencies, their self-irony, their libertine as well as moralistic agendas can address and redress all sorts of issues.

Throughout the following chapters, Jean-Paul Sermain reminds us why the *conte de fées* was constitutively on the side of the *Modernes* (in the Quarrel they had with the *Anciens*): far from cashing in on the innate credulity of simple women and children—as literary history would have us believe—this unprecedented genre is the most advanced incarnation of a hyper-skeptical frame of mind, in full synch with the most scandalous texts written by Pierre Bayle. Far from simply embellishing old tales taken from “the people,” comforting that group in its superstitious sleep, the likes of Perrault and d’Aulnoy invented new literary forms and a new vocabulary which expose to everyone the mechanisms and consequences of superstition, both capturing its power and denouncing its manipulations (chapters 2, 3, and 9). In order to develop this highly suggestive thesis, the author on the one hand offers precise analyses of narrative structures, revealing their complexity and cleverness in chapter 4, showing how deeply ambivalent the tales are towards their explicit moral agenda in chapter 5, how subtly they modulate the reader’s participation in the constitution of their meaning in chapters 6 and 8. And on the other hand he weaves in a discussion of the relations between the *conte de fées* and the other genres of the period (the novel in chapter 4, libertinage in chapter 7, the fantastic in chapter 10). The overall method is well captured in the book’s statement of purpose: “it is through an analysis of the literary choices specific to the classical *conte* that we attempt to characterize and understand its imaginary, which offers an original worldview that the other fictional genres cannot express” (184). By the time we reach the Conclusion, we see much more clearly how the great success enjoyed during its short life by the fairy tale—presented here as “the Enlightenment’s rebellious son”—simultaneously expressed, exacerbated, and elaborated upon the series of crises (in language, in literature, in experience, in politics, in religion, in history) that characterized the French 18<sup>th</sup> century (256).

In order fully to measure the magnitude of Jean-Paul Sermain’s analyses, one must set his book on the *Conte de fées* against the background of his previous publication, the already influential *Métafictions (1670–1730) : la réflexivité*

*dans la littérature d'imagination* [Metafictions: Reflexivity in Literature of Imagination]—one of the most important essays in 18<sup>th</sup>-century studies published in France over the last 20 years, which begs for a speedy translation and publication in English. In this ambitious work, of equal relevance to literary theory and literary history, Jean-Paul Sermain invites us to read the narratives written in France between 1670 and 1730 (and beyond, since the paradigm he describes remains valid for most of the Philosophes' rhetorical strategies) in light of the concept of *metafiction*, which simultaneously “defines a narrative material (the *fiction*) and the literary process through which this fiction becomes visible and offers itself to interpretation—the novel thus functioning as a *metafiction*, as an invitation reflexively to focus on the discourse of fiction” (87). Metafictions both stage and denounce “fables,” i.e. discourses of belief which lose their power of seduction and adhesion when they are identified as such: as soon as I am led to realize that my belief is a matter of discourse (rather than simply reflecting “reality as it is”), the belief threatens to vanish.

Jean-Paul Sermain shows how the centrality of metafiction in the Enlightenment's narrative and pragmatic strategies results from a convergence between several series of factors: the rationalist drive leading philosophers to suspect appearances and build cautious interpretative procedures (Descartes, Spinoza, Bayle, Fontenelle, 23–32); the wide and deep influence of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* over French literature (to which the author had devoted a previous book), providing a model for a fable which denounces the delusional power of fables (52–56); the sudden crystallization of the novelistic genre around issues of “vraisemblance” after 1670 (56–63); the classical imperative of clarity, which paradoxically turns the ideal of transparency against itself, since the very goal of elucidation draws the reader's attention to the deceptive powers of signs (73–84). Metafictions thus engage the novelistic genre on the tracks of reflexivity and suspicion: for decades to come, novels will offer the modern readers an experience in self-distancing, whereby fiction opens the safest way to reach truth by making the interpreter aware of the fabulatory nature of all truth-claims.

After spelling out such a theoretical framework, Jean-Paul Sermain devotes the rest of this heavy book to the analysis of various corpuses, which allow him to verify, enrich, refine and modulate his over-arching thesis. Utopian narratives, allegorical fictions, anti-novels are analyzed both as genres and in the singular inventions of specific writers, providing the reader with a most impressive and encyclopedic gallery of literary portraits, for works which have often passed under the radar of most specialists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The last three chapters of the book are devoted to the description of the fairy tale as the quintessential illustration of the idea of metafiction, since its specific form of writing “develops as a reflection upon its own fiction” (433). Novels and tales are thus to be articulated in terms of complementarity: “*Look for the invention!*, the novel whispers, while working hard to hide it; *Look for the invention's meaning!*, the tale screams out, while seemingly void of any. Two complementary ways to focus on the problem of fiction” (359).

Since *Le Singe de Don Quichotte* (Oxford, 1999), through a reflection pursued in the two books reviewed here, Jean-Paul Sermain has been shedding a significantly new light on the “postcritique” situation characteristic of Modernity. While the myths, on which the constitution and reproduction of any society rest,

have been increasingly denounced as “fables” (and therefore rejected) by philosophers and novelists alike, the fairy tale offers an attitude which “does not attempt to dissipate the ghosts of the Past, but rather invites us to question our relationship to them” (*Métafictions*, 371). The point is not—foolishly, deceptively, *mythically*—to break away from delusory myths, but to invent new modalities whereby necessary delusions can be healthily managed, since “the subject of History is a creative subject, who can only act through anticipation and symbolical adhesion” (431). Fairy tales, in their unique articulation between their irresistible appeal and their obvious extravagance, provide Modernity with a highly precious “experience in reduplicating oneself,” pushing the reader simultaneously to be a naive believer and a critical mind (439)—a *narrative* experience of self-distancing sorely missing from the (pre-modern) adherence to *religious* faith.

Such narrative experimentations in being a modern are also at the core of a collection of studies published by Régine Jomand-Baudry and Jean-François Perrin under the suggestive title *Le Conte merveilleux au XVIIIe siècle: une poétique expérimentale* [18th-Century Tales of Marvel: Experimental Poetics]. Two dozens of contributions map the various ways in which the tales brought back from Fairyland during the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as experiments with the limits of what can be written, narrated, thought, described or suggested. Through the systematic analysis of forewords and liminary paratexts, Jan Herman shows that, by having to find excuses, explanations, and justifications for the exacerbated extravagance of their supernatural marvels, these tales opened up a space in which the age of Enlightenment could reflect upon the limits of what can pass for truth, as well as upon the virtues of fiction. This analysis is echoed by an article in which Carmen Ramirez surveys the central vocabulary writers of the period had at their disposal in order to map the marvel, from Isidore of Seville to entries in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*. Jean Sgard also explores the truth-power of fairy tales by investigating the various levels of their allegorical dimension: from the simple application of the fairy world upon historical figures (Louis XV) to more complex references to current historical events (religious conflicts) and all the way to “virtual allegories,” open-ended narrative machines calling for endless interpretative experimentations. Philip Stewart, for his part, sheds light upon textual marvels by comparing them to their visual counterparts: by remaining remarkably close to the figurations of the actual world, illustrations of fairy tales help us measure both the narrow limits of the period’s visual imagination and the constrained freedom enjoyed by the writers of marvels. Apart from addressing issues of representations and meta-fictionality, this collection of essays also offers an impressive number of valuable thematic investigations into the philosophical, ethical, or political questions with which the 18<sup>th</sup>-century fairy tales grappled. Jean-François Perrin presents and analyses a corpus of tales of metempsychosis: he thus convincingly teaches us to read Oriental tales such as Crébillon’s *Sopha* or Moncrif’s *Rival Souls* as overdetermined meeting points between Eastern influences, poetic playfulness, and Western philosophy, since such narratives deeply resonate with the disturbing consequences of Locke’s or Condillac’s puzzles about the notion of personal identity. Instead of the transmigrations of soul, Aurelia Gaillard studies the transformations of bodies in the fairy universe, and finds in them narrative experiments, biopolitical in nature, whereby the tales explore the imaginary possibilities opened up by the scientific

experiments of Vaucanson. Twenty other chapters focus on a few famous authors (Fénelon, Galland, Lesage, Fougeret de Monbron, Caylus, Mercier, Crébillon fils, who is discussed in four chapters) as well as on more obscure writers, most of whom happen to be women (d'Aulnoy, d'Auneuil, Murat, de Lassay, de Lussan, de Villeneuve, de Lubert).

While the link between womanhood and exclusion from the canon is of course not surprising, the deep and intricate relations between fairy tales and gender does deserve a closer look, and it has indeed received a lot of attention over the last decade. As a matter of fact, the exhumation of this neglected corpus can largely be credited to women's studies, one of the countless collateral benefits of the expansion of the canon actively pursued by this movement over the past 30 years. Now that the dust has settled on the pioneering works in this field (by Lewis Seifert, Marina Warner or Patricia Hannon), an excellent collection of essays published under the title *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* offers a very manageable panoramic view on this multifarious nexus of issues (which includes representation of gender in fairy tales, female authorship, women as readers of tales, as educators through tales, and so forth).

Donald Haase, the volume's editor, starts with a remarkably clear and synthetic presentation of how, starting from 1970, "fairy-tale studies has developed into a coherent discipline that has been profoundly influenced by feminism" (XIII). Lewis Seifert, in his essay "On Fairy Tales, Subversion, and Ambiguity: Feminist Approaches to Seventeenth-Century *Contes de fées*," narrows in on the French domain and provides a very useful survey of the debates and publications which immediately preceded the books and generation of scholars discussed in this review. Along the way, he stresses "the differing critical, editorial, and readerly priorities on either side of the Atlantic," marked by the fact that "more of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *contes de fées* are available in English translation than in the French original" (with the exception of Perrault's tales, widespread in French paperback editions, 69). Fortunately a new complete edition of the *Cabinet des fées* (41 volumes originally published between 1785 and 1788) is soon to be released by Champion, starting in 2007, with a brand new critical apparatus prepared by some of the scholars mentioned above; this both contradicts and confirms Seifert's point: while there is a clear revival of scholarly interest for the fairy tale on the French side of the Atlantic, this scholarly edition will, unfortunately, remain beyond the means of the average reader.

At least one other chapter of this volume, which also addresses feminism and fairy tales in contemporary Latin America or India, will be of particular interest to 18<sup>th</sup>-century scholars. In her usual thought-provoking manner, Ruth Bottigheimer argues in "Fertility Control and the Birth of the Modern European Fairy-Tale Heroine" that the type of gender roles portrayed and promoted in 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century fairy tales should be understood in light of the fact that "Western European women gradually lost control over their own fertility between 1450 and 1700" (40). After stressing the change in attitude between the early Renaissance, in which women "scheme to admit men to their beds," and the "frightened damsels" staged by the fairy tales of the Classical Age, where "boys and men intrude their bodies into the private space of terrified girls or women" (49), Bottigheimer links the revival of the (Aristotelian) "natural passivity" of femaleness to their growing

inability to deal with *the consequences* of sexual penetration (rather than to the imaginary surrounding *the act itself*). It is a hypothesis that also sheds light, further down the road, on the heritage of the fairy tale found in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century sentimental novels, focused on their anxieties of “seduction.”

Bottigheimer’s argument helps us measure the originality of the French wave of scholars surveyed in this review: in a radical break away from using the fairy tales as historical documents, they read them as literary objects, or even as active subjects of knowledge. Pursuing his reflection on the experimental poetics at work in the fairy tale, Jean-François Perrin in 2003 launched a new journal entitled *Féeries* devoted to “studies on wonder tales from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century,” published once a year with each issue focusing on a special theme. The first one collected eight articles on the function and patterns at work in the framing structure that collects several tales into one collection (*Le Recueil*), with theoretical considerations by Jean-Paul Sermain, Anne Defrance, Raymonde Robert, and Jean-François Perrin, as well as case studies on Lhéritier (by Jean Mainil), Pétis de la Croix (by Christelle Bahier-Porte), Gueulette (by Catherine Langle), or Le-prince de Beaumont (by Sophie Latapie). The second issue focused on *Oriental Tales*, and tracked the various waves of publications, adaptations, parodies, and re-inventions that followed the publication of Galland’s translation of the *Arabian Nights* at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, adding Montesquieu, Caylus, Melon, Beckford, Dumas, and Flaubert to the authors discussed in the journal. The third issue, which came out in 2006, addresses the nexus between *Tales and Politics*, while the fourth promises to collect contributions on *Tales and the Theatrical Stage*. On top of scholarly articles and critical reviews, *Féeries* also offers critical editions of short tales and documents relative to them, never republished after their first printing, like André-François Deslandes’ *L’Optique des mœurs opposée à l’optique des couleurs* (in issue 2). The well-established journal *Marvels & Tales* thus has a French counterpart that makes its past issues freely accessible in full-text online (along with English summaries).

The publications reviewed here are only a few demonstrating a renewal of interest in fairy tales among French scholars. Three recent monographs devoted to Madame d’Aulnoy invite us to reconsider the genre as a whole: Anne Defrance, *Les Contes de fées et les nouvelles de Mme d’Aulnoy* (Genève: Droz, 1998); Jean Mainil, *Madame d’Aulnoy et le rire des fées* (Paris: Kimé, 2001); Nadine Jasmin, *Mots et merveilles. Les contes de fées de Mme d’Aulnoy* (Paris: Champion, 2002), while a brief but dense book offers a very up-to-date synthesis on the most famous French writer of fairy tales: Marc Escola, *Charles Perrault. Contes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

The reliance on poetics and the epistemological turn unite this new school of French scholars; they provide a very timely reconsideration of a still underrated corpus. The complex relationship between the bounded disciplines of science and the boundless extravagance of literary fantasy certainly deserves a closer look in an age where nano- and bio-technologies translate into human reality the types of marvels that used to be the privileges of dwarves and fairies. Twenty-some years after the post-modernism debate an approach rooted in the poetics of metafiction can shed a new light on what Jean-François Lyotard called *metanarratives*, inspiring us to imagine better ways healthily to manage them, rather than foolishly be-



lieving they can simply be rejected. If there is one lesson to be drawn from all the books discussed in this review, and one message imparted by these (Post)Modern literary machines known as fairy tales, it is that incredulity can never be achieved as a rational given but needs to be cultivated through the wildest inventions and flights of the imagination.

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**Virtuous Peasants and the Value of Error: Two New Works on Thought and Culture in Eighteenth-Century France**

Amy S. Wyngaard, *From Savage to Citizen: The Invention of the Peasant in the French Enlightenment* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004). Pp. 252.

David W. Bates, *Enlightenment Aberrations: Error and Revolution in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). Pp. xiii, 262.

These two recent works provide fresh insights into the political and intellectual culture of France at the end of the eighteenth century. Amy Wyngaard's book *From Savage to Citizen: The Invention of the Peasant in the French Enlightenment* examines the notions of the French peasant held by the social and intellectual elite, and how they shifted for several political and aesthetic reasons throughout the eighteenth century. David W. Bates' *Enlightenment Aberrations: Error and Revolution in France* looks at the function of error and uncertainty in Enlightenment and Revolutionary political discourse. Together they open up new questions about the formation of French identity in this crucial period in its history.

From its title one might expect Wyngaard's work to be an eighteenth-century version of Eugen Weber's seminal *Peasants into Frenchmen*, but this is not the case. Apart from a few comments confirming how wretched their daily existence really was, real peasants are almost entirely absent from this book. Wyngaard's focus is on the peasantry as a "cultural projection" that over the course of the eighteenth century "came to represent the core of France and what it meant to be French"(13). This new ideal of the peasantry was a significant shift away from their portrayal in the previous century as savage brutes intended as objects of ridicule and scorn. The peasantry, and how it was represented in art and literature, was a central part of a political and social discourse among forces that real peasants had very little interaction with, and who used the peasant as an ideal to promote their competing views of the social order.

For the bourgeois who were vying for a higher standing in French society, the peasant was co-opted as a powerful symbol of social mobility, representing "simplicity, honesty, and hard work, [and] articulated a new value system grounded in ideas of merit and virtue, that challenged traditional aristocratic codes and dominance"(31). Through a detailed examination of the early eighteenth-century plays of Marivaux and the paintings of Watteau, Wyngaard reveals a "destabiliza-