

Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale
By Marina Warner

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
(ISBN: 978-0-19-871865-9). 201 pp.

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What is a fairy tale? For some fairy tales are intricately linked with folklore and myth, while for others they conjure up memories of literary tales read as a child. To a modern audience fairy tales might be entangled with visual representations, from the theatrical *Wicked* (2003-) to the hugely popular *Frozen* (2014). Deciding what constitutes a fairy tale only leads to more questions: Are they intended for children or for adults? Must a fairy tale be simple amusement or does it have greater depth of meaning? All of these questions and more are considered by Marina Warner in her short guide to fairy tale. By purposely omitting the article from the title – history of fairy tale, not of *the* fairy tale – she instantly captures the complexities and the deliberate vagueness of the genre. Faced with condensing this history into two hundred pages, Warner opens the guide by requesting that the reader imagine the text as a small but detailed map (p.xiii). She explains that the map will be dominated by two prominent landmarks, Charles Perrault’s *Histoires et Contes du temps passé* (1697) and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1857). Anticipating criticism of her focus on these two giants, Warner offers a brief apology, reminding us that these landmarks ‘dominate their surroundings so imposingly that they make it hard to pick out other features near or far’ (p.xiii). Nonetheless if anyone is expected to guide readers through this complex terrain, Warner is more than capable, being Professor of Literature at Birkbeck College, London and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, as well as the winner of the Truman Capote Award (2013).

Warner begins her overview of the history of the genre by detailing what constitutes a fairy tale. She lists specific characteristics including familiar plot devices and the strong contrasts and sensations which she styles ‘sensuous phenomena’ (p.xix) that combine to present the ‘generically recognizable’ fairy tale (p.xviii). She insists that fairy tales maintain attributes of the oral tradition of folklore but are inextricably linked with literary retellings (p.xvi-xvii). In the early chapters she goes into greater detail on the nature of fairy tale, exploring the role of enchantment and supernatural agency which are so pivotal that she suggests the German term *Wundermärchen*, meaning ‘wonder tale’, is the more appropriate label for the genre (p.xxii, p.19).

She deftly moves through the varied interpretations of fairy tale, including the formalist approach which maintains that there are only seven tale types and all others are variations. Warner is against such a reductionist method, noting that it searches only for resemblance not distinction, which ultimately ‘erases historical and social conditions’ (p.xxi). Despite her misgivings about the erasure of contextual conditions through the formalist approach she also cautions against the socio-historic quest for identification that shows a ‘thirst for stable genealogies’ (p.88) which can never be appeased since the historical reality that can be extracted from fairy tales is not individual or specific, but rather a dramatization of ordinary human experience (p.91).

On the other hand psychoanalytical and feminist interpretations of fairy tale are posited by Warner as considerably more valuable for our understanding of the genre. Remarkably Warner manages to summarise complex psychoanalytical material into one chapter. It is worth noting that *A short history of fairy tale* is aimed at the specialist and layman alike and here especially she succeeds in conveying the essential components of psychoanalytical theory without becoming overwhelmed by detail or reducing the method to the point of having no impact. She begins by exploring the significance of the uncanny or, in other words, ‘reality transfigured into weirdness’ (p.119) that is central to the psychoanalytic interpretation of the tales which maintains that fairy tales reveal hidden truths about the human condition, particularly familial relations. Warner finds the psychoanalytic interpretation to be particularly fruitful but she takes issue with its premises about female nature and sexuality (p.125). This is unsurprising, since Warner has extensively researched feminist theory and fairy tales in her earlier work *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995).

For now she confines herself to detailing the subversive retellings of the tales by feminists from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Her support for feminist interpretations of the tales develops from its ‘critical reading’ of the tales, which revealed that they were not ‘primordial’ but rather ‘time-bound and class-bound’ (p.133). Warner bravely makes a convincing case that although feminist theory excavated greater understanding of the tales, it is now in danger of pushing the genre to be melded with epic and tragedy and forcing it to lose its unique forms in the interests of ‘exemplary gender molding’ (p.170). She cites the example of *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) wherein the heroine must remain ‘a role model for the independent woman’ and is not permitted to marry either the pauper or the prince, thereby denying the rules of the genre which requires a conclusion, often a happy ending loath as modern audiences are to accept it (p.170).

Refusing to break up the guide chronologically has allowed Warner greater fluidity between theories, but occasionally this presents challenges for the reader. For example it is in the historical examination of the tales that she presents an excellent overview of the first female collectors of literary tales, noting that these seventeenth century Frenchwomen edited the tales as a ‘satire about domestic cruelty and political tyranny’ (p.46). These women would arguably have been better included in the chapter on feminist theory which focuses rather too heavily on twentieth century retellings at the expense of more detailed historical analysis. Moreover, Warner tends to focus on Western European tales. Although she admits that Perrault and the Grimms dominate the history of fairy tales, her consideration of *The Tales of the Thousand and One Nights* for example is noticeably less detailed than her examination of the lesser known Italian tales by Straparola (1550-1555) and Basile (1634-1636).

Nevertheless, considering the limitations of space, Warner has created an introductory guide that will aide students and general readers in their forays into fairy tale. By including a detailed further reading bibliography she has ensured that this guide will continue to be utilised by those who seek to further explore the variety of theories and interpretations that she considers here.

Bibliography

Warner, Marina. 1995. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Chatto & Windus.