

Angela Carter and the fairy tale

ANGELA CARTER

and the FAIRY TALE



Edited by Danielle M. Roemer
and Cristina Bacchilega

PUBLISHED BY
WAYNE STATE U

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Introduction

This project began in 1996 when we proposed “Angela Carter and the Literary *Märchen*” as a “Folklore and Literature” topic for the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The response was invigorating, resulting in two well-attended panels and lively discussion. We decided to put out a general call for papers in scholarly journals and on the internet in an effort to reach international scholars across disciplines who were actively thinking about Carter’s magic. For us, much of the pleasure of working on this project has derived from seeing a seemingly straightforward topic, “Angela Carter and the Literary *Märchen*,” transformed into a fire-breathing beast of varicolored fur and plumage. And yet the fire’s source is one: Carter’s pleasure economy of images and words as she works in “the lumber room of the Western European imagination” (Carter, “Angela Carter” 29). As she said in an interview, “I do think that the body comes first, not consciousness. . . . I often shatter pure and evocative imagery with the crude. But remember there’s a materiality to symbols and a materiality to imaginative life which should be taken quite seriously” (33). And the fairy tale as collective art has taken this materiality of symbols to heart.

This volume has no one thesis. But in presenting these contributions, we still wish to intervene in the debate surrounding Carter’s texts in a variety of ways: by providing more information—at times erudite, at times mundane—about her knowledge of and playful commitment to folk and fairy tales; by actively seeking ways to shake easy labels from her work; by placing international perspectives in conversation with one another; and by opening the way for further research into her exploration of *Märchen* worlds.

The contributions to *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* focus on Carter’s creative appropriation and adaptation of fairy-tale patterns, motifs, and content. In organizing this volume, which appeared originally as a 1998 special issue of

the journal *Marvels & Tales*, we wanted to call attention to the striking diversity of Carter's approaches to the fairy tale. This heterogeneity, though, is not without heritage. The fairy-tale genre is neither monolithic nor the product of a single branching of literary history. Many oral and literary fairy-tale traditions have developed in Europe and the United States over the centuries. Because the contributions included here do not take as their expressed subject Carter's alignment or dispute with varying fairy-tale traditions, we wish to address elements of those relationships in the following pages. We survey the literary traditions of Germany, France, and Italy and the cinematic tradition of the United States, touching on aspects of genre definition, character and plot development, and sociopolitical stance.¹ In no way do we want to suggest that Carter's tales are derivative of these traditions; rather, we believe that an understanding of her work can be deepened if perceptions of it are refracted through a variety of fairy-tale contexts.

We begin with the issue of genre definition.

From 1812 to 1857, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected, rewrote, edited, and published seven large and ten small editions of tales under the title *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, that is, "Children's and Household Tales." According to the Grimms' *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (*German Dictionary* [1852–1960]), *Märchen* (a diminutive of *Mär* [an account]) meant simply a "fictional tale" (Goldberg 407). Under this rubric, the Grimms included a variety of narrative types, producing the "most complete [and] representative collection of miscellaneous narratives" (Dégh 68) available at the time. There were tales of magic and marvels, humorous stories, animal tales, saints' legends, and pious tales from the Middle Ages. All were considered *Märchen* and, as the Grimms' title suggests, "family fare." Subsequent nineteenth-century German compilers of collections tended to follow the Grimms in placing diverse subgroups of folktales within the larger category of *Märchen*; some even adopted the Grimms' title (Bottigheimer; Köhler-Zülch). Definitional problems arose, though, when such collections were translated into English. *Märchen* was typically rendered as "popular story," "wonder tale," or "fairy tale." Interestingly, the latter term derived not from any Germanic perspective but from the earlier translation into English of the seventeenth-century French term *conte de fées*, which referred to narratives with fairies (or other supernatural beings) as characters.² The result of this translation was a rather awkward semiotic disjunction. Henceforth, English-language collections, whether translations or not, were often identified by the term "fairy tales"—a term that described only a relatively small number of those collections' constituent narratives. With time, this metonymy was accepted as convention. However, under the surface, the terminological quandary remains: In speaking of the fairy tale, to which broadly or narrowly defined corpus is one referring?³

In contrast to the French tradition, Carter's attitude toward defining the fairy tale is inclusive, recalling the Grimms' practice. Her position is stated explicitly in the introduction to her first edited volume of tales, *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*. There she defuses terminology by labeling "fairy tale" as a "figure of speech," moreover one used loosely to "describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a time and still is, sometimes, passed on . . . by word of mouth" (ix). Thus, the term "fairy tale" for Carter is primarily a convenience of familiarity. What she does then in her own space of referential potentiality—the edited collections, *The Bloody Chamber*, and other writings—is to provide her readers with a striking diversity of fairy-tale narratives.⁴ Among her literary fairy tales, for example, are ones that combine the marvelous with the gothic—"The Bloody Chamber"—and others that dabble in the macabre while trafficking in classical myth—"The Snow Child."⁵ Each of these tales told on the slant presents a powerful kinglike figure who parthenogenetically "births" his own wives/daughter/muse/lover. Conversely, one finds tales in which a woman, Rapunzel-like, seeks to escape the life that either her family or myth has authored for her ("The Lady of the House of Love," "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," and "The Erl-King"). There are animal tales blended with romance ("The Tiger's Bride"), with horror ("Wolf-Alice"), and with awe ("Peter and the Wolf") in which a human character finds greater fulfillment in the animal side of her nature. There are tales of inverted biblical allusion and dark wonder ("Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest") in which Hansel- and Gretel-like children journey into a marvel-filled forest with mystery/knowledge/danger at its center. There are also questlike tales of bawdy humor that borrow from the literary picaresque ("Puss-in-Boots") or from the culinary memoir ("The Kitchen Child"). Carter's penchant for boundary crossing is further demonstrated with *The Bloody Chamber*, which can be read as a "gleeful, subversive commentary" on her own previous translation from the French of Charles Perrault's fairy tales (Gamble 131).

Another point also needs to be addressed—that concerning the folk "purity" of the tales as they were published in the nineteenth century. Contrary to today's popular stereotype, the Grimms did not go out into the farms and byways to take down verbatim the words of peasant storytellers. Rather they found their sources as convenience led them: in literary and manuscript collections as well as in easily accessible individuals, spanning the working, bourgeois, and even the aristocratic classes (Scherf). Believing that the tales illustrated the essence or soul (*Volkgeist*) of the German people, the Grimms acted in accordance with the romantic perspectives of their day in focusing on the material rather than taking into account the socioeconomic conditions of the tales' informants. These romantic perspectives also led the Grimms to rework the obtained material, sometimes heavily, to suit the family and educational values of their bourgeois

audience (Tatar, *Off With Their Heads*; Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales*). Thus the Grimms would take notes on the basic plots of the tales and then flesh out these verbal skeletons as their own perspectives inclined them. They reinforced the Christian aspects, the homey sayings, and the violence, while deleting sexual references. The Grimms were also responsible for changing the wicked mother figure in many tales to a wicked stepmother character so as not to challenge prevailing beliefs about motherhood. The resulting tales were not primarily indicative of peasant values but of those of the German middle class. The rub of the matter comes today with continuing assumptions that the conservatism of the tales is innate to the “folk” mentality, not only in the Grimms’ corpus but, by extension, to all “real” fairy tales. This is not the case, especially not for those tales that either bridge or are firmly nestled within the domain of written literature, as we discuss below with the French *conte de fées* and the tales of Basile.

Carter was well aware of the extent of the editing/rewriting performed by many previous collector/editors, particularly those of the nineteenth century who wished to turn fairy tales “into the refined pastime of the middle classes, and especially of the middle-class nursery” (*Old Wives’* xvii). As a result, she avoided rewriting, collating, or deleting material, including the sexual, from her edited collections. Her explicitly literary fairy tales, even those that share “roots in the pre-industrialized past” (xvii), are another matter. Carter as well as other professional authors are of course free to draw on whatever heritage they wish. The intermixing of folk (however folk may be defined), literary, and, in the twentieth century, mass media versions of fairy tales, sets in motion, in Carter’s words, the transnational and “endless recycling process” (xi) of storytelling. It is the “user-friendly” (xxi) nature of the tales which allows them to participate in a powerful “public dream” (xx).

In considering some of Carter’s relationships to French fairy-tale tradition, we move from the topic of functional genre definition to that of character development and the sociopolitical functions of the tales themselves. Beginning in the 1630s in Paris, educated and accomplished women of the aristocracy organized gatherings called salons in their homes for the purpose of intellectual discussions of literature, art, and concerns on love, marriage, and proper manners and morals. Highly valuing wit and invention, these women, and eventually some men, were, in Jack Zipes’s words, “constantly seeking innovative ways to express their needs and to embellish the forms and styles of speech . . . that they shared” (*Beauties* 2). As one source for new material, the salon participants turned to those tales of magic and marvels they had learned as children, which they then elaborated upon and experimented with in sophisticated ways. By the last decade of the century, salon participants began writing down their narratives for publication, and thus was born the literary *conte de fées*.

In 1690 salon participant and author Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy embedded her invented magical tale "L'Isle de la Félicité" (The island of happiness) in her novel *Histoire d'Hippolyte, Comte de Douglas*. Her example quickly prompted a spate of literary fairy tales by other authors. Often lengthy and characterized by intricate plots, these narratives' "glitter and artificiality" were intentional constructs, intended to "contest the emerging association of fairy tales with the primitive" (Harries 153). In addition, the *contes de fées*, like the oral tales still being told at salons, had specific sociopolitical functions. Informed by female perspectives and featuring female characters, the *contes* offered their creators opportunities to critique conditions of the day, particularly the social institution of forced marriage and the general lot of women in a predominantly male-controlled world.⁶ Thus it was no accident that in the tales ultimate power was held by the female stock character known today as the fairy godmother, who was described as having control not only of her own life but of others' as well. There was also good reason, though, for these authors to mediate their social commentary through the veil of fantasy. The efforts of these highly literate women, among them some of the best writers of the day, were necessarily conducted within a wider, markedly patriarchal system, one which advocated the "taming of female desire according to virtues associated with male industriousness" (Zipes, *Fairy Tale* 28). As a result, that system regarded the *contes de fées* as "deeply disturbing and suspect" (Harries 169). The work published by these women was criticized and dismissed as early as the 1690s. For example, in 1699, the Abbé de Villiers published the booklet *Entretiens sur les contes des fées* (Dialogues on fairy tales) in which he praised Charles Perrault—"a well-known member of the Academy" and one of the "fraternity of learned male authors"—for imitating so cleverly the "style and simplicity of 'nurses.'" On the other hand, Villiers criticized the women writers of *contes de fées* for their "lack of learning" as well as for their invasion of the literary marketplace where, Harries summarizes, "lazy and ignorant women readers read the productions of lazy and ignorant women writers" (154). For the most part, by the mid-1800s, the French women's work had been overlooked in the developing fairy-tale canon in favor of the more acceptable male author Charles Perrault.⁸ This dismissal occurred despite the fact that the women had produced two-thirds of the *contes de fées* written between 1690 and 1715 (Seifert 84).⁹

Relative to the *contes de fées*, we can see Carter's literary fairy tales not as departures from some simpler fairy-tale tradition but as intensifications and modifications of previously instituted and sophisticated narrative modes. The adult wit and glittering style of Carter's writing are, of course, her own but precedents were established during the *ancien régime* with the inventive style of the French women. Even certain metanarrative qualities in Carter's work were anticipated by the *contes de fées*. The *contes* were typically self-referential, making

“self-conscious commentaries on themselves and on the genre [they were] part of” (Harries 161). They functioned, as Harries puts it, as “fairy tales about fairy tales” (161). By her own admission, Carter too wrote “stories about fairy tales” (qtd. in Makinen 5), although her metanarrative art has been little studied. Nor has the relationship of her narratives to those of Perrault or the French women authors been examined closely.¹⁰ It is appropriate that Carter chose to reframe some of Perrault’s tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, given the long-standing, positive reception of his tales. However, also given three centuries of patriarchal disdain for the “proto-feminist” efforts of the salon and *contes* women, it is ironically apropos that Carter, a feminist, should now speak through Perrault’s tales.

In addition, certain character types popular in seventeenth-century narratives parallel some of those that Carter appreciated. Like those in Carter’s collections of oral tales as well as in her literary work, the female protagonists of the salon tales and the *contes* could be “wise, clever, perceptive, occasionally lyrical, [and] eccentric” (Carter, *Old Wives’* xxii). Such a character is Finette of Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier’s “The Discreet Princess” (1695–98) who, in contrast to her sisters Babbler and Nonchalante, is said to evidence “great judgment,” “a wonderful presence of mind,” and “good sense”—qualities, admittedly, that could serve different functions in the seventeenth century as compared to the late twentieth or twenty-first century. Women’s skill in speaking well—however the quality of that skill is defined—is apparent in Carter’s female characters. For example, the Red Riding Hood protagonist of Carter’s story “The Company of Wolves,” who knows when she confronts the (were)wolf antagonist that she is “nobody’s meat” (219). Other character-types undergo a transformation under Carter’s influence. For instance, the traditionally benign figure of the French fairy godmother can be inverted, with Carter, into the malevolent crone of “The Snow Pavilion” or into the aging movie queen of “The Merchant of Shadows,” a woman who is actually her own husband.¹¹ Additionally and most importantly, like the salon narrators and the authors of the *contes*, Carter was drawn to the fairy tale as a vehicle of sociopolitical commentary. And like the characters created by the seventeenth-century authors and indeed like those women themselves, Carter’s fairy-tale protagonists often face conditions of enclosure. To be sure, *The Bloody Chamber* has been criticized by some for its interest in motifs of entrapment (Duncker). However, just as female protagonists in *Chamber* typically find themselves within actual or perceived perimeters, they just as typically discover alternatives to them. In her lack of patience with essentialism and master narratives, in her penchant for inter- and intratextuality, and in her insistence on blurring the “boundaries which purport to fix reality one way or another” (Lappas 128), Carter produced a counterdiscourse to enclosure, always mindful though that a recognition of boundaries must precede their modification and dissolution.

Other fairy-tale traditions bearing upon Carter's fiction are the American tradition, specifically the productions of the fairy-tale film industry as it has been influenced by Walt Disney, and the Italian tradition, particularly the writings of the early seventeenth-century Neapolitan Giambattista Basile. Over much of the twentieth century, Disney created his own niche within a fairy-tale tradition long dominated by male collector/editors, authors, and illustrators. In the opinion of some, however, Disney was not only a descendent of this male line but one who capitalized upon it in markedly ideological and financial ways.

In Zipes's view, what was important to Disney was not the enhancement of the fairy-tale tradition or the visual exploration of oral/aural relationships between traditional storytellers and their audiences. Rather, what guided Disney's perspective was the desired impact that he as a "creator could have on as large an audience as possible in order to sell a commodity and endorse ideological images that would enhance his corporate power" (*Happily Ever After* 87). By the 1930s Disney had established key elements of his perspective with his animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*: first, the selection of a familiar story line that by virtue of its simplicity would highlight the technical artistry and innovation of the film itself; and second the reinforcement of a patriarchal code that associated model male characters with action and power and marginalized model female characters by linking them with domesticity and disempowerment (71). Admittedly, Disney's innovations in animated film were remarkable. However, in Zipes's opinion, what Disney actually promoted was the "domestication of the imagination" (92). His fairy-tale films offer an "eternal return of the same" with their one-dimensional, stereotypical characters, their thematic emphasis on "cleanliness, control, and organized industry," and their encouragement of "nonreflective viewing" (*Fairy Tale* 94–95). And Disney's wider corporate efforts provide an emotionally comfortable (but lucrative for their producers) blending of the material and the marvelous through the merchandising of fairy-tale film-related books, clothing, records, and toys as well as the attractions of theme amusement parks.

In contrast to Disney's penchant for the "eternal return of the same," Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*The tale of tales* [1634–36]) incorporates an eclectic range of styles and themes drawn from various traditions. Nancy Canepa comments that, in *Lo cunto*, "high and low cultures intersect to create an 'open,' heteroglossic text in which linguistic and cultural hierarchies . . . are rearranged" ("Quanto" 40). Mixing high and low cultures, for example, Basile's noble characters speak in the Neapolitan dialect, which, prior to *Lo cunto*, had been associated in written literature with "peasants, vagabonds, fools, and other butts of laughter" (41). He further challenges literary and social hierarchy with his collection's frame narrative, which begins as a tale of a princess who cannot laugh (but eventually does) and progresses into a series of fairy tales

told to satisfy the aural cravings of a prince's wife who is pregnant (but who is subsequently deposed and, with her child in utero, killed). In this way, Basile's interest in leveling hierarchy is coupled with the motif of emergence, not of a child but of a literary domain, a pairing that effects, via his collection, the "entrance of the fairy tale into the authored canon of Western literature" (42).

Another example of Basile's interrogation of hierarchy is his version of "Puss-in-Boots," a tale retold by both Walt Disney and Angela Carter. In Basile's version, "Cagliuso" the title character inherits only a cat from his beggar father. The wily feline proceeds, through deceiving others, to gain for Cagliuso fame, fortune, and a princess for a wife. Later, to test her master's assertions of gratitude, the cat plots another deception, this time directed at Cagliuso himself. Her master fails the test, and the indignant and poorly repaid cat cries, "This is all the 'thousand thanks' for the rags I lifted from your back that were only fit to hang spindles on? . . . Go, and a curse be on everything that I have done for you, for you're not worth spitting on!" (Penzer 157). In its imbalanced ending, Basile's tale contrasts with both Disney's and Carter's. Apparently borrowing the motif of dual romance from Disney's 1922 short animated film *Puss in Boots* (Zipes, *Happily Ever After* 35–36), Carter's human hero links up with his sought-after young woman, but Puss also establishes a romantic relationship with the cat of the young woman's household. The happy endings for human and animal mirror each other.¹²

Though opting for the emotionally satisfying conclusion like Disney's, Carter's "Puss-in-Boots" sets Basile and Disney in dialogue with one another as well as with her own narrative. Both Basile's and Carter's cats illustrate the wily servant character-type who believes he or she can accomplish almost anything—an expectation Carter exploits in ebullient fashion. Her tale begins with Puss, the narrator, singing his own praises with allusions to the comedic/operatic character of Figaro. Puss exclaims, "Figaro here; Figaro, there, I tell you! Figaro upstairs, Figaro downstairs . . . he's a cat of the world, cosmopolitan, sophisticated . . . A tom, sirs, a ginger tom and proud of it" (170). This is a cat who believes he has no equal and who astounds even himself at times, as when he finally accomplishes the "famous death-defying triple somersault en plein air, that is, in middle air, that is unsupported and without a safety net" (171). Despite his egocentricity, Carter's Puss betters Disney's female cat who, though resourceful, relies more on twentieth-century technology (a hypnotic machine) than on innate skill (either physical or verbal) in achieving impression management.

In contrast to Disney's staid commitment to depictions of "clean" living and other "family values," both of Carter's primary male characters—feline and human—enjoy a reputation for frequent and raucous sexual escapades. The bawdy humor of Carter's story borrows from Basile, in part from his frame