

***Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies.* By Cristina Bacchilega. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. Pp. xi + 208, index, references, 0-8122-3392-1 cloth.)**

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feedback from his undergraduate students. Yes, such responses are ethnographic, but more data of this kind needs to be generated, with a particular attention to responses from outside of the academy.

So how is this criticism a strength? Because of the ethnographic context Santino is operating within, *New Old-Fashioned Ways* would operate well on an undergraduate syllabus in Folklife or Custom courses. The book contains many examples of familiar and enjoyable representations of the phenomena discussed, and there is enough academic merit and interesting points for seminar discussion to engage an undergraduate student. Santino uses popular culture to engage his students in the larger social and cultural nexus that surrounds us. And left at that level, this work is both valuable and important.

## References

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***Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies***. By Cristina Bacchilega. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. Pp. xi + 208, index, references, 0-8122-3392-1 cloth.)

The title of Christina Bacchilega book, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, is a tad misleading, which is perhaps one of the reasons why I was disappointed with it. From the title, I expected an "against the grain" reading of the *Märchen* canon to include marginal voices and to problematize the hegemonic interpretations of gender and society by the bourgeoisie. As Bacchilega herself notes, one of the main projects of this work is to "establish a typology of contemporary fairy tale transformations which would move towards a critical systematizing of their proliferation and yet resist closed classifications" (5).

Alternatively, for those who do not speak “postmod”: what are the narrative strategies whereby contemporary *Märchen* open themselves up to problematization and alternative interpretations?

As the author notes: “In the middle ages, folk tales served *more* of an emancipatory function because they expressed the problems and desires of the underprivileged; in modern times, the fairy tale has more often than not been ‘instrumentalized’ to support bourgeois and/or conservative interests” (7). Rather than accept this interpretation of the contemporary fairy tale, Bacchilega has examined four *Märchen* in their modern literary variants in order to problematize the assumption of a bourgeois or conservative (and in this case, both are synonyms for misogynist) readings. The author expands on her role:

The primary task of a critical narratology then, is to make visible a narrative's *imposition* by unfolding its strategic *proposition* of meaning—its subjectivity. Achieving this task involves tracing the network of subject roles, positions, and actions within a text, and then measuring this specific ideologically produced subjectivity against narrative and social norms. Shying away from the humanistic link between “subject” and “individual human being,” [Mieke] Bal identifies a “subjectival network” which articulates narration (who speaks?), focalization (who sees?), and agency (who does?). Distinguishing among these aspects of the text's subjectivity breaks up the text's apparent coherence, and allows its features and symptoms to be interpreted in relationship to the social (17, emphasis in original).

Even Bacchilega's introduction is not as honest as it could have been; for had she continued this project, the resulting work would have been a difficult read (as postmodern analyses demand), but would have given us a greater insight into how *Märchen* open themselves up to alternative subjectivities (cf. Neal and Robidoux).

The first big problem with Bacchilega's project is that she limits herself to, as she herself defines it, “late twentieth-century literature and media for adults” (4). What the author means by this is an elitist form of high literature (and media) which assumes an educated and bourgeois audience. Works studied include predominantly literary artists like Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, and loftier film artists like Neil Jordan and Jane Campion. Bacchilega does not interrogate more vernacular forms of popular culture like the romance novel or the horror film; media forms which, I would argue, speak to a more vernacular, rather than elitist, audience, and require acceptance from that audience for their success.

Structurally, the book is also problematic. In a series of four case studies, examining Snow White (27-48), Little Red Riding Hood (49-70), Beauty and the Beast (71-102), and Bluebeard (103-138), Bacchilega rewrites arguably the same essay, with changes in only the signifiers, leaving the signified the same. Although ostensibly about different *Märchen*, and using different examples and different themes in those examples, each of the essays has the same conclusion: that modern literary versions of *Märchen* potentially open the text up to alternative perspectives, so long as the author desires it.

In each chapter, we are presented with a mini Historical-Geographical outline of the history of published sources of the story, and then are given an overview of the “postmodern revisions” (35) that high literary authors have offered. Each chapter concludes with an identification of some salient aspect of problematization that these “postmodern revisionists” have developed.

As if to tip her hat in a more interdisciplinary direction, Bacchilega cites film and television examples of the dynamics she is discussing. And like her analyses of the literary works, she once again chooses considerably more elite versions of the tales than might have been expected: Neil Jordan’s adaptation of Angela Carter’s *The Company of Wolves*, the CBS television series “Beauty and the Beast,” and in perhaps the greatest stretch in this work, Jane Campion’s *The Piano* as Bluebeard narrative. As the author notes:

Jane Campion’s *The Piano* radically asserts the initiatory value of “Bluebeard” tales precisely by subverting commonplace interpretations of sexuality and disobedience in the “forbidden chamber”. As it thematizes agency and voice, inscribes duality within a historical and cultural script, and provocatively exploits a specific form of doubling, mimicry, to contradictory effects, the film emphatically affirms the strong, though dangerous, power of carnal knowledge (129).

Bacchilega does not discuss any of the adult film or television versions of the *Snow White* story, but this might be because either *Snow White: A Tale in Terror* was released after this book had gone to press, or because the film was marketed as a “horror” movie, the author may have ignored it altogether.

Bacchilega’s actual project, to explore how “the revised magic of postmodern fairy tales overtly problematizes mimetic narratives, gender identities, and humanistic conceptualizations of the subject, calling into question the naturalized yet normative artifice of the tale of magic,” (140) is ultimately successful, or at least plausible, within the context of literary theory. However as folklore, the author does not include any ethnographic data, including those

studies on women *Märchen* narrators and their narrative strategies (cf. Dégh). Nor are the works Bacchilega cites indicative of any vernacular literary or media experiences. As feminist literary theory, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* is, I am sure, a fine work, but neither what I expected, or wanted to read. That is not Bacchilega's fault. The dodgy folkloristics, however, is.

## References

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***Blackouts to Bright Lights: Canadian War Bride Stories***. By Barbara Ladouceur and Phyllis Spence, editors. (Vancouver, B.C.: Ronsdale Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 299, \$16.95, ISBN 0-921870-33-7 pbk.).

*Blackouts To Bright Lights* is a timely book, in that it was published on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Writings concerning the Second World War brides in the United States form an extensive bibliography, but unfortunately, the same is not true for their counterparts in Canada. The major exceptions include Joyce Hibbert's *The War Brides* (1978), Ben Wick's *Promise You'll Take Care of My Daughter* (1992), and the film *War Brides In Canada* (1984). These, with the scant local and provincial publications, including recollections and memories, plus provincial histories, supplemented by occasional newspaper articles and a few academic studies, notably, Melinda Jarratt's "The War Brides of New Brunswick" (M.A. Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1995) form the basis of the Canadian bibliography. *Blackouts To Bright Lights* fills a void of information and the popularity of the book is indicated by its third printing in January, 1996.