

La Fiaba di Tradizione Orale

By Giuseppe Gatto. 2006. Milano: LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto. 230 pages. ISBN: 88-7916-314-0 (hard cover).

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As its structure evidences, this book is an introduction to the genre and study of the tale of magic or fairy tale. Part I, “Aspetti della fiaba” (Features of the Fairy Tale), discusses tale types, the tale’s narrator in relation to the narrative text and the narrative context, the genre’s main formal features, and issues of transcription. Part II, “La fiaba: documentazione e studio” (The Fairy Tale: Documentation and Study), presents summary but incisive information about the genre’s history from Ancient Egypt to the various collections published in Europe in the nineteenth century, followed by a lucid exposition of various approaches to the study of the fairy tale: anthropological, comparative, structuralist, psychoanalytical, and performative; it culminates in Bengt Holbek’s *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. Part III, “Testi” (Texts), consists of twenty-seven tales ranging from the Egyptian “The Two Brothers’ Tale” (combining elements of ATU 302B, ATU 303, and ATU 318) and the Latin “Cupid and Psyche” (ATU 425B) to a number of “Cinderella” versions (ATU 510), ending with two versions of ATU 332 “Godfather Death,” one from Friuli in the North of Italy and the other from the Balkans.

Giuseppe Gatto, the author of this slim but substantive volume, is clear from the start about the scope of his study: “le fiabe di tradizione orale, . . . solo quei racconti che quale che sia la loro origine sono entrati a far parte della tradizione orale e della pratica sociale della narrazione orale collettiva” (tales of magic/fairy tales in the oral tradition . . . [are] only tales that, whatever their origin, have become part of the oral tradition and the collective social practice of storytelling), and not tales that are specifically for children or literary creations by the likes of Lewis Carroll or Hans Christian Andersen (11). However clear he makes his intention, his study cannot sustain these sharp distinctions all the way because of the interdisciplinary history of folktale and fairy-tale studies and because of the book’s primary focus on Euro-American contexts. In English, the term “fiaba” in Gatto’s title translates into “tale of magic” or “fairy tale”-- and his examples are appropriately confined to the ATU 300-749 grouping; however, since he is focusing on the oral tradition, we could also say more broadly that this is a book about the “folktale,” especially since some of the most important scholarly books he discusses include but are not limited to the fairy tale (for example, Stith Thompson’s *The Folktale*). And while Gatto emphasizes the “oral tradition,” his focus on Europe results in the inclusion of more literary texts by Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm, of course. He references a range of studies about narrators and narrative performances by Richard Bauman, Linda Dégh, Aurora Milillo, Fabio Mugnaini, Anna-Leena Siikala, and Katherine Young, but Asian, African, South American, and Pacific examples of oral traditions are scarce if not absent. This is not a problem with the author’s methodology as much as with the conceptualization of fairy tales in relation to storytelling traditions across the world: folktales are found all over, but the fairy tale as a genre has been studied primarily as a Euro-centered storytelling tradition belonging to the past and thus best documented in printed texts and bedtime stories for children. Fortunately, Gatto’s book does not approach these problems in a schematic or reductive way, but lives with these paradoxes while sticking to his purpose.

In reading *La fiaba di tradizione orale*, a novice in folklore or fairy-tale studies will learn not only what a tale type is, but how the Finnish School was indebted to the comparative and philological sciences of the nineteenth century, how scholars have or have not internationally influenced one another, and how the essential features of a fairy tale vary from approach to approach (most notably, functions or plot). That a good number of texts are presented in full in Part III makes the book particularly useful in the classroom: Gatto includes several versions of a few selected tale types, and the versions are from different time periods and cultures.

A fairy-tale scholar, however, can also very much benefit from this terse and insightful compendium, perhaps not so much from what it says as from what it does. Admirably, this text does not present the study of the fairy tale as a developmental narrative where the better theories supersede the flawed ones: the point is to understand these approaches in relation to one another and to the philosophical and socio-political milieus from which they emerge. This reading with-the-grain of scholarship is particularly productive when it comes to the chapter “La Struttura--Dopo Propp” (Structure--After Propp), where Gatto discusses Claude Lévi-Strauss, Elli Köngäs Maranda, Tzvetan Todorov, Alan Dundes, Claude Bremond, Algirdas Julien Greimas, and Moiseevič Meletinskij in critical conversation with one another (and Propp of course). “La ‘Interpretation’ di Holbek” (Holbek’s ‘Interpretation’) is also an excellent chapter distilling a major but all too often not-fully read text and one that has not been much discussed in the USA. Furthermore, Gatto’s treatment of comparative, structural, and psychoanalytical studies of the fairy tale shows respect for these different approaches, which is important especially as they combine with one another in Holbek’s work.

Is this a study that purports to be objective? I wouldn’t say so. Gatto is quite present as a “narrator” of this introduction to the study of the fairy tale, but mostly in his framing the discussion or identifying salient traits of a critical study. Some debates interest him more than others: not the question of origins, but the relationship between folktale and myth (not surprisingly, since his larger scholarly interests include religious rituals and folkloric traditions), the relationship between orality and writing, and the social significance of formal features of a narrative. He also makes no bones about occasionally stating his own position; for instance, having surveyed Sigmund Freud’s ideas as relevant to the interpretation of fairy tales as well as studies by Géza Róheim, Alan Dundes, Bruno Bettelheim, Nicole Belmont, and Francisco Vas da Silva, Gatto declares, “personalmente provo un certo disagio di fronte a una interpretazione delle fiabe in chiave di archetipi universali e atemporal” (personally I feel a certain discomfort with interpreting fairy tales in relation to universal and ahistorical archetypes) and simply references Marie-Louise von Franz’s work for those who have an interest in Jungian analysis (113).

Regrettably, the bulk of this study concerns structural, psychoanalytical, and comparative approaches to the fairy tale; performance-oriented studies are more in the background; and socio-historical and feminist studies are hardly mentioned, though they are included in the very impressive bibliography, but only as contributing to the study of the Grimms or the rewriting of fairy tales. This is a pity, since a novice, after reading this book, would thus only have a strong grasp of approaches to folk/fairy tales up to the 1980s; however, one does come away with a very up-to-date list of studies published in Europe that are grounded in more current thematic--sociological or feminist--and performative concerns but are not identified as such in the discussion (Satu Apo, Nicole Belmont, Isabel Cardigos, Fabio Mugnaini, Catherine Velay-Vallantin). Though not discussed, the work of Jack Zipes is amply referenced; Marina Warner’s is not.

In addition to critical studies, the bibliography includes journals (including *Estudos de Litteratura Oral*, *Fabula*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Féerie*, and *Marvels & Tales*), special issues devoted to the fairy tale, and reference works in several European languages. I find the international and multilingual scholarly scope of Gatto’s study to be one of its merits; another is the sophistication and clarity with which he presents complex materials, synthesizing for his readers without infantilizing us. Gatto’s volume should also be considered as part of a strong core of contemporary Italian folktale/fairy-tale studies, including works not only by Pietro Clemente, Glauco Sanga, or the late Aurora Milillo, but also by Renato Aprile, Cristina Lavinio, Alessandra Levorato, Michele Rak, Luisa Rubini, and others. And finally, even if flawed, this is a volume that deserves wider distribution and would do well to be translated into English. The market in the USA seems to be privileging encyclopedias--important indeed--and handbooks, but an introduction to the tale of magic that does not oversimplify would be useful too.