

GIUSEPPE GATTO, *La fiaba di tradizione orale*, Milano, LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2006

This book is an invaluable introduction to the study of the *fiaba*, lit. “fairytale” or “tale of magic” (although much of it applies also to the folktale in general). Gatto specifies that he is not concerned with literary tales such as Andersen’s, but with the traditional fairytales: those which “whatever their origin, have become part of the oral tradition and of the social practice of collective narration” (p.11). The book is divided in three parts, the first two dealing with the different facets of the fairytale and with the history of scholarship in the field, and the third containing a set of texts drawn on in the previous discussion.

In the first part, “Aspetti della Fiaba” (Features of the Fairytale), Gatto introduces concepts of types, versions and variants; he explores the social dimension of telling, and he focuses on the storyteller (and the scope of his freedom) in relation to his audience (a cooperative audience) and to the traditional text, whereby “his variations must be coherent with the tradition from which both he and his audience come” (39). He then describes the formal characteristics of fairytales (such as openings, codas, absence of concepts of space and time); and finally he explores issues connected with fixing a text and transcribing it. Each page is richly woven with quotations and comparisons which bring to the readers a wide range of the earlier literature about the tale’s text (e.g. Olrik, Bogatirëv, Jakobson, Todorov) in accessible terms.

In the second part, “La Fiaba: Documentazione e Studio” (The Fairytale: Documentation and Study), Gatto begins by considering the problem of the origins of fairytales. He presents the first written documentations of fairytale themes (Cupid and Psyche, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice) – in texts from Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages; he proceeds to the first collections of tales (Straparola, Basile, Perrault, Grimm brothers) and focuses on the work of the Grimm brothers as marking the beginning of scholarly interest in fairytales. He then moves on to considering the various perspectives from which scholars attempted to explain the origins of fairytales (mythological, anthropological, ritualistic theories). He continues the survey of studies of tales with the Finnish school, the psychoanalytical interpretations, from Freud to Dundes, passing through the works of Róheim and Bettelheim, and the structuralists, with an extremely clear explanation of Propp’s *Morphology* and of how it interacted with the works of others such as Lévi-Strauss, Dundes, Bremond, Greimas, Meletinskij, and Maranda; the section ends with a most comprehensive account of Holbek’s *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (1987).

Finally, in the third part Gatto provides a selection of 27 meaningful texts, which range in time from Herodotus to a version of *Godfather Death* (ATU 332) collected in Friuli, in the North of Italy, in the twentieth century.

The book ends with a huge multilingual bibliography of great value and incredibly large scope.

In this relatively slim book, Gatto succeeds not only in introducing the student to a number of complex studies and giving a clear panorama of how these relate to each other in terms of time and ideas, but he also makes this journey captivating reading. He achieves this by encouraging the student to see the ‘serious’ and somehow scientific face of fairytales and abandon some of the still current misconceptions about them, such as that they are for children (only), or that they were purely for entertainment and didactic purposes, thus revealing the fairytale as a powerful means of expression for ideas that could otherwise hardly be expressed (46). Gatto guides the reader through an almost

empirical discovery of the genre, starting from what everyone commonly knows. So, at the beginning of the book he encourages the reader to think of the Disney version of *Snow White* and then puts forward a number of “similar” stories, from oral tradition and written sources, underlining the differences and similarities. The notion of taletype is deliberately not introduced yet but, thanks to this variety of texts, by the end of this section, the reader is likely to have begun to question the concept of a “standard” or “original” version and is possibly wondering how to define the versions in the book as opposed to the popular “idea” of *Snow White*. Therefore, by the beginning of the second chapter, “Tipi, varianti e versioni” (Types, Variants and Versions), the reader is ready to understand these concepts as they are notions made necessary by the diverse texts presented in the previous chapter. This device of opening the book through immediately introducing the reader to examples of variation in oral narrative is one of the ways in which Gatto is able to stimulate the reader to engage actively in critical enquiry into the fairytale.

Just as stimulating for the reader is the fact that Gatto presents the various theories in dialogue with each other, but in doing so he does not simply report other people’s thoughts: his examination of schools and interpretations is always followed by his own critical evaluation, which takes the contributions of these theories into account while also signalling their limitations. This is important, given that in some literature about oral narrative it is easy to get the impression that certain scholarly works are accepted as flawless. Gatto’s approach encourages the reader to provide an original contribution in what is perceived as an evolving discipline. As well as being ideal for beginners, the book is just as valuable for experienced folklorists, since Gatto’s capacity for synthesis and analysis is impressive and his insights, nourished by his wide reading in many fields, are often inspiring.

*La Fiaba di Tradizione Orale* provides an invaluable teaching aid. It is highly desirable that the book should be translated into English in order to make it more widely available.

Licia Masoni – Edinburgh