

RECLAIMING ANDERSEN

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Helena Březinová, *Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby. Pohádky H.Ch. Andersena: mezi romantismem a modernitou* (Nightingales, Mermaids, and Toothaches: Andersen's Fairy Tales between Romanticism and Modernity). Brno: Host, 2018. 328 pp. ISBN 978-80-7577-612-9.

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales are often all too readily relegated to the realm of literature solely for children, also by the choice of book design and illustrations, suggesting that adult readers should reach for them only to cater for the needs of young readers or when nostalgically revisiting their own childhood reading experiences. Many of the fairy tales have for long been staples of popular culture and became part of general consciousness, living on in a myriad of adaptations in various media. However, these supposedly sweet and beautiful stories are frequently very distant from Andersen's original texts, as translators, adaptors, and publishers strove to dismantle their original impish ambiguity, subtle ironies and sophisticated narrative strategies, and to cover up the fact that the author intended them as much for adults as for children. Discovering Andersen's originals may surprise many who thought they had known them well all their life.

Helena Březinová's monograph seeks to redress these misconceptions, especially with regard to the Czech context where, as she demonstrates, the reader only rarely encounters Andersen in reliable translations. One of the aims of the study is to challenge the stereotypes that have become attached to Andersen's fairy tales based on loose translations and adaptations, and to reclaim their sophisticated and disquieting pleasures for adult readers. To a certain degree, the monograph, which is written in a suitably pointed and playful style, adopts a popularising approach, and presents, apart from the author's original points and interpretations, also a useful summary of international research.

The life and activities of Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) were part of the so-called Danish Golden Age, a time of intense cultural activity in the first half of the nineteenth century, also associated with the writings of Adam Oehlenschläger and Søren Kierkegaard, music of Niels Gade, paintings of Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, and sculptural works of Bertel Thorvaldsen. Andersen contributed to this flowering by poetry, drama, novels, travelogues, and autobiographical prose, but gained most recognition for his fairy tales, a corpus which includes over two hundred items of short fiction. A well-known and internationally acclaimed figure in his day, Andersen came from a poor background in Odense and rose to

prominence thanks to his ambition and tenacity. As Březinová suggests, Andersen's life is characterised by spanning two different cities, social classes and eras, and his works can be likewise situated, as the title of the monograph proposes, on a borderline of two phenomena: Romanticism and modernity.

The first part of the monograph is most closely connected to the Czech context, but may still serve as an inspiring blueprint for similar enterprises in other linguistic and cultural contexts. This "bitterly amusing" chapter, as the cover annotation advertises it, traces the Czech reception of Andersen's fairy tales through translations, some admirably successful and others bizarrely twisted. It also carefully distinguishes between genuine translations made from Danish originals by experts fluent in the language and a host of indirect translations made from other languages, and adaptations and retellings of a varying degree of looseness. For these, Březinová indicates a number of motives, from publishers seeking profit to the changing political and religious climate. By comparing different versions, she demonstrates what happens with Andersen's fairy tales in these treatments, especially with their elaborate endings where "every word has been weighed on pharmaceutical scales" (29). Thanks to a number of illustrations, the monograph also provides a unique insight into the visual culture that emerged around the fairy tales in the Czech context.

The study continues with an overview of the history of the fairy tale, working with Max Lüthi's formalist approach and Vladimir Propp's structuralist method, introducing the genesis of both folk fairy tales and artificial fairy tales, and the activities of collectors and authors. The fairy tale was a popular genre of German Romanticism, so Andersen was tapping into an established trend and drew inspiration both from folklore and from artificial Romantic fairy stories. One of his models was E.T.A. Hoffmann, from whom Andersen differs, however, by his strikingly prosaic and mundane approach to fantastic elements, as Březinová points out.

Andersen's own fairy tales spring from the Romantic tradition but discuss crucial topics of modernity. Their lightness and colloquial tone are deceptive, obscuring the radically new content with which Andersen filled the form, allowing for subversive and disillusioned meanings that might better remain unintelligible to children. They combine a number of diverse elements, employing autobiographical features, pagan and Christian symbols, numerous personifications of plants and animals, and demonstrating a belief in modern technology and progress. These short pieces, generously seasoned with biting humour, irony, and social criticism, are to be fully appreciated only when the readers grow up, and, returning to the seemingly harmless simple tales, might marvel at them, and wonder what they did to them in childhood. Already at the

time of publication, as Březinová notes, they were criticised for being indelicate and detrimental to the children's education, an attitude which apparently survived in a number of publishing houses to this day.

Březinová proceeds to summarize critical approaches to Andersen's fairy tales, from biographical and positivist readings to current research trends. For instance, she mentions studies that focus productively on material culture and circulation, based on Andersen's marked interest in time-worn objects. Andersen's artworks, especially paper cuttings, have been attracting more critical attention recently, revealing remarkable links to his writing. These are also included in the monograph in the form of several fine reproductions.

The bulk of the monograph is reserved for detailed studies of selected fairy tales. Březinová combines works of philosophy and general theory, including Walter Benjamin's concepts, and research of respected specialised Andersen scholars, such as Søren Baggesen. She comments extensively on the narrative strategies, including the typical intrusions of Andersen's narrators into the flow of the tale, a practice so disliked by some modern publishers. She draws attention to the subversive work with language and employment of metaphors and paradoxes, and on possible interpretations of the fairy tales that accentuate Andersen's response to modernity, such as the failure of the communicative function of language. She convincingly argues that remarkable parallels may be drawn between Andersen's works and those of Franz Kafka, comparing "The Nightingale" with Kafka's short story "An Imperial Message."

In the final section, the monograph includes the author's new translations of three tales that had so far been unavailable in a modern rendering, demonstrating that her critical acumen and breadth of reading is finely balanced by her practical skills as a translator from Danish. This benefit, together with the opening chapter on Czech reception, is reserved to readers with a sufficient command of Czech. Those who lack it might take advantage of the extensive English abstract. Březinová has also published on Andersen in English, including essays on the topic of troubled communication in his fairy tales (2019) and studies that bring together Andersen with Kafka (2019) and Kierkegaard (2020).

While the fact that the monograph is not written in English or German might be a source of regret to international scholars, it is at the same time a generous gesture towards the Czech public, and one that forges links between smaller languages and literatures, bypassing the lingua francas of the academic community. Although Březinová's impressive book will serve mostly Czech readers, assisting them in discovering genuine Andersen in the jungle of the literary market and helping them to appreciate the subtleties of his works, it may inspire other scholars to carry out similar examinations in other languages,

establishing whether readers have access to Andersen at all, in reliable translations made directly from Danish originals, or whether they can only access sanitised versions where all the subversive humour and strangeness have been smoothed over, and encouraging more reclaims of these quaint and quirky wonders worldwide.

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