



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report on M. A. Thesis

“OLD TALES IN NEW SKINS”: THREE AUTHORS REINVENT THE FAIRY TALES

by Sára Benešová

Passed down from generation to generation, fairy tales have often been associated with folk wisdom and the notions of stability and continuity. Yet, despite their prevalence through time and space (both social and geographical), fairy tales have also always been open to adaptation and individual interpretation. The clash between nostalgically preserved “classic” versions and the essential plurality of the genre – including these canonical versions’ origin in diverse oral traditions – is one of the main foci of this thesis. Sára Benešová explores how representatives of three generations of 20th-century women’s writing, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, and Emma Donoghue, reimagine some of the best-known fairy-tale narratives and characters, investing them with new, subversive significance. While the focus on female experience and protagonists is the main binding feature of these authors’ approaches to fairy-tale adaptation, the thesis persuasively traces important developments within feminist literary revisionism over the last three decades of the 20th century. By considering the differences in form, structure, and tone between the three writers’ works the thesis also argues that women authors and their reinterpretations of classical material significantly contribute to the rehabilitation of the fairy-tale genre as such, making its tropes relevant to psychological and societal issues experienced by modern readers.

The overall structure is chronological, starting with a chapter on Sexton whose *Transformations* came out in 1971, and continuing with a discussion of Broumas’s and Donoghue’s collections from the late 1970s and late 1990s respectively, in which they react to the same stereotypes and intertextual material. This structure allows the candidate to comment on major shifts between the individual authors’ methods and style. Besides commenting on differences in the basic genre (Sexton and Broumas write poetry while Donoghue responds with a collection of mutually interconnected tales), the candidate pays attention to how the individual authors construe female sexuality. The substantial, thoroughly researched Introduction discusses the fairy-tale genre through questions of origin, authorship, and authenticity. Drawing on a wealth of relevantly



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chosen sources, the thesis argues that generic and thematic diversity, as well as revision and adaptation, have always been the genre's defining features. The works chosen for analysis – and the thesis as a whole – expose the absurdity of orthodox requirements for the conservation of these well-known international tales in any singular form (mostly based on their 19th-century versions), and point to the associations of these requirements with nationalistic and essentialist values.

In view of the debates surrounding some recent adaptations of fairy tales and pop-culture classics, in which these new retellings have been simultaneously hailed for their topicality and denounced for their iconoclasm, the candidate has chosen a relevant topic and methodology. The ideas are persuasively presented and supported by relevant quotations from secondary sources. Sufficient care has been taken in formatting the references in the footnotes and bibliography.

The thesis fulfils the formal requirements of an M. A. thesis and represents a valuable contribution to the topic of feminist fairy-tale revisionism. I therefore recommend it for defence and propose to grade the work “excellent” (1), depending on the opponent's report and the candidate's performance at the defence.

Suggested topics for discussion during the defence:

- The thesis identifies connections between Sexton, Broumas, and Donoghue, including how the latter two were inspired by Sexton in their approach to revisionism. What/who were Sexton's major influences in her own takes on the Grimms' fairy tales? Do you see any notable inheritors of the authors and works you discuss in recent/contemporary poetry/prose?

Mgr. Daniela Theinová, Ph.D.

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