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## ***Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale*** **Tale by Jessica Tiffin**

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Book review of *Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale* by Jessica Tiffin.

### Additional Keywords

Science Fiction; Disney Films; Jean Cocteau; Neil Jordan; Tanitha Lee; Sheri S. Tepper; A. S. Byatt; Angela Carter

Western conceptions and applications of justice of all kinds are well contextualized in Oziewicz's work.

—Zachary Dilbeck



**MARVELOUS GEOMETRY: NARRATIVE AND METAFICTION IN MODERN FAIRY TALE.** Jessica Tiffin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009. 253 p. 9780814332627. \$59.95.

THIS WIDE-RANGING EXAMINATION OF MODERN FAIRY TALES, fairy tale-retellings, and fairy tale film provides a theoretical framework that positions the study of fairy tales within narrative theory, where fairy tales have been too often ignored or minimized in favor of the examination of the realist novel. Although Tiffin's book has exerted a significant influence on film studies and criticism of Angela Carter's short fiction since its publication in 2009, readers and critics of mythopoeic literature in general would also be well-served by familiarity with it. Especially in the opening chapter, Tiffin makes the case that "the patterns of fairy tale [...] are akin to the patterns of religious myth," and that "the patterns evoked by fairy tale are profoundly linked to human development and consciousness" (11). Although Tiffin does not, at length, discuss Tolkien, Lewis, or Williams, she does address numerous other authors with mythopoeic inclinations, particularly A.S. Byatt and Terry Pratchett. Tiffin's book provides a theoretical and critical grounding that serves to define the fairy tale as genre and suggests a number of pathways for analysis for mythopoeic literature.

In her opening chapter, Tiffin provides a useful summary of the trajectory of fairy tale criticism, from the rigid typological systems of Propp and Aarne-Thompson to the psychoanalytic approach of Bettelheim. In its place, Tiffin offers an elegant definition of the fairy tale, which is "characterized [...] by its deliberate removal from the real," and by its "characteristic simplicity [...] the extent to which it resists detail" (13). Most importantly, according to Tiffin, it is the "metafictional awareness" of fairy tale, more than any other trait, that differentiates it from other narrative (4). While responding to critics and researchers of the fairy tale, particularly Jack Zipes and Maria Tatar, Tiffin also situates her work within the discourses of critical theory, invoking the observations of Baudrillard, Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno. As a result, Tiffin's discussions of fairy tale have equal relevance to students of folklore and theoretically-informed literary criticism.

Tiffin acknowledges that her study faces challenges of selection in that “[w]hile the scope of this study is broadly comparative” she “could not hope to give a comprehensive account of modern fairy tale in all its manifestations” (25). She limits her focus to “texts that *are* fairy tale” rather than those that are just “*using* it” (29). In the remaining chapters, Tiffin examines six writers and a variety of fairy tale films, both animated and live action. James Thurber, Angela Carter, and A.S. Byatt each have their own chapters, while one chapter examines Tanith Lee, Terry Pratchett, and Sheri S. Tepper, writers classed together because of their shared residency in the “SF ghetto”—the “Science Fiction Ghetto” named by Ursula K. Le Guin (142). Tiffin dedicates two chapters to film: one to art-house and Disney adaptations of classic fairy tales and one to fairy tale parodies that became popular in the early 2000s. Although some of the material in three chapters was published elsewhere, Tiffin expands her arguments significantly beyond their original scope.

Of all the writers that Tiffin discusses, James Thurber is, perhaps, the most unexpected, although since the 2009 reissue of *The 13 Clocks* with its original illustrations, accompanied by a preface by Neil Gaiman, Thurber's fantasies have experienced a resurgence of interest, albeit in the popular press rather than among critics (Bolle). Thurber, according to Tiffin, provides a notable example of the intertextuality of fairy tales because of his work in other genres, particularly satire. She claims that “Thurber's highly self-aware sense of meaning and structure is continually used to highlight and exacerbate the relationship between the real and unreal” (34). Although Tiffin does not make any claims toward explicitly feminist criticism in her introduction, she cannot avoid gender issues, particularly since the idea of “a problematized heterosexual relationship is central to Thurber's writing” (35). While the focus of this chapter is ostensibly on Thurber's fairy stories, Tiffin inevitably addresses his work in other forms and offers readings of other works, particularly his cartoons.

Tiffin's analysis of Angela Carter, likewise, grapples with feminist criticism “by focusing on the ways in which” Carter's “explorations of fairy tale and feminism hinge on her use of self-aware narrative technique [...] particularly her use of language, intertextuality, and the redeployment of symbol in innovative ways” (67). After a survey of criticism of Carter's texts, Tiffin provides sustained readings of Carter's narrative techniques in the tales of *The Bloody Chamber*. In addition, Tiffin places Carter's fairy tales within the context of her essays in *The Sadeian Women*, clearly situating Carter's fairy tales within postmodern considerations of sexuality and the representation of sexuality in pornography.

In her chapter on A.S. Byatt, Tiffin offers an insightful reading of the struggle among literary critics to “integrate” Byatt's “self-aware explorations of

narrative" with her "recurring interest in realist narratives such as history and biography, or even science" (102-103). Byatt, according to Tiffin, reinvigorates the frame tale as a narrative mechanism, but her use of fairy tale is not an interest in the form "for its own sake," but simply "one item in the formidable toolbox with which she approaches the mechanisms of literature as a whole" (129). Although Tiffin does not explicitly suggest a resemblance between C.S. Lewis and A.S. Byatt in terms of critical interests or narrative concerns, it is impossible to ignore the similarities between the two authors in her formulation, since "Byatt began a doctoral dissertation on religious allegory in seventeenth-century texts" (105). As a result, critics of Lewis's work may find provocative analogues in Tiffin's arguments about *Possession* and its embedded tales.

While Byatt's work, according to Tiffin, represents an approach that is "literary in the extreme" (127), the proliferation of authors writing for a mass market suggests "the possibility that here may be modern incarnations of 'folk' culture even within a technologized age of mass culture" (133). Tiffin focuses on three mass-market authors of fantasy and science fiction, Lee, Pratchett, and Tepper, whose work represents "self-aware writing which consciously takes on the problems of generic stereotyping" (143). Although "fantasy romance," as Tiffin names works cast within the mold of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, is not necessarily the same as fairy tale, Tiffin notes substantial resemblances: "the central motif of pattern," "otherworldly settings" that "to some extent reproduce fairy tale's sense of a different landscape," and often superficial characterization that suggests that "true development is enacted on the landscape and the quest itself" (143). Moreover, all three writers that Tiffin discusses in this chapter maintain a clear metafictional awareness, particularly Pratchett, who "comes remarkably close to the self-consciousness demonstrated" by the markedly more literary Byatt. Tiffin's analysis of these three authors provides a framework useful for the analysis of many contemporary writers of mass-market fiction, particularly fiction marketed to young adults. Since the publication of Tiffin's book, fairy-tale inspired science fiction for young adults has proliferated, the most notable example being Marissa Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles*—*Cinder*, *Scarlet*, *Fairest*, *Stars Above*, and *Winter*—which recast fairy tale narratives as space operas populated by cyborgs.

The last two chapters address film versions of fairy tales, both animated and live action. According to Tiffin, "the medium of film offers problems as well as possibilities for the fairy tale," most significantly "because of the power of the film medium, and the striking fit between some narrative aspects of fairy tale and the narrative function of film" (183). First, Tiffin considers fairy tale films that offer sincere adaptations, and then devotes the final chapter to parodies of fairy tale, particularly the *Shrek* series. These last two chapters grapple with the tension between folk expression and mass culture and

deftly integrate readings of widely varied films, from Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête* (1946) to Disney's hybrid live-action/animation *Enchanted* (2007). Tiffin concludes that "despite translation of fairy tale into different mediums, fairy tale retains some aspects of its original identity as a folk expression, endlessly adaptable and continually mutating as it is reflected across cultures and time" (219).

Tiffin's work offers a substantially and fully theorized foundation for exploration of fairy tale, mass-market literature, and film, and suggests the resemblances between fairy tale and other literature with "mythopoeic qualities" (Bacchilega 22; qtd. Tiffin 74). Her discussions of metafiction are grounded in clear definitions and examples that offer an exemplar of close reading in service of theoretical arguments.

—Felicia Jean Steele

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**THE PLEASURES OF METAMORPHOSIS: JAPANESE AND ENGLISH FAIRY TALE TRANSFORMATIONS OF "THE LITTLE MERMAID."** Lucy Fraser. Wayne State University Press, 2017. 221 pp. ISBN 978-0-8143-4244-2. \$34.99 (pbk).

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION IN 1837, DANISH AUTHOR Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tale "The Little Mermaid" has captivated audiences of all ages and led to adaptations spanning various media and cultures. Audiences are most familiar with Walt Disney's treatment of the story, yet many are unaware of the dark nature of the original text. Andersen's tale of the titular mermaid tells a story of feminine sacrifice at the hands of a masculine world. Her transformation from creature of the sea to a human on land sees her lose her voice, and her identity, all in pursuit of love and a soul. Andersen's mermaid suffers from an inequality that mirrors gender inequality in our own world. "A mermaid has not an immortal soul, nor can she obtain one unless she wins the love of a human being. On the will of another hangs her eternal destiny" (Andersen 167). It is no surprise that the mermaid's painful transformation and the cruel treatment she suffers due to her status as the "Other" has resonated deeply with readers and writers of fairy-tales and fantasy literature. "The Little Mermaid" has traveled