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The Pleasures of Metamorphosis: Japanese and English Fairy Tale Transformations of "The Little Mermaid" by Lucy Fraser

Abstract

Lucy Fraser employs her vast knowledge of Japanese and English literature and pop culture to present an intertextual and cross-cultural analysis in her book *The Pleasures of Metamorphosis: Japanese and English Fairy Tale Transformations of "The Little Mermaid."* Fraser accomplishes this daunting task by approaching the various English and Japanese interpretations that adapt and subvert Andersen's fairy tale not only through transcultural parallel readings, but through the framework of pleasure, which Fraser argues can "bring together texts that might otherwise be separated by differences in language, background, time period, genre, and medium and by the borders of 'high' and 'low' cultural forms" (1). In reading pleasure as a framework, the audience is invited to consider not only the author's depictions of pleasure as experienced by the characters, but also the "metatextual messages about the pleasures of fairy tales and fairy tale transformations," thus creating an avenue for questioning how these pleasures were originally intended and how they are consumed by readers (2). By analyzing Japan's many iterations of "The Little Mermaid," ranging from literature, art, and film, through the lens of pleasure and *shōjo*, Japanese girl culture, Fraser examines "the journey of Andersen's Danish fairy tale into English and Japanese, believing that such a cross-cultural approach contributes a more global outlook to the field of Anglophone fairy tale studies" (184).

Additional Keywords

mermaid, undine, andersen, disney, ghibli, ponyo, japanese, ningyo

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

across oceans to be transformed in ways its author could never have imagined; her final transformation, from mermaid to ethereal being, is one that perfectly encapsulates the very essence of the transformative nature of fairy-tales.

Lucy Fraser employs her vast knowledge of Japanese and English literature and pop culture to present an intertextual and cross-cultural analysis in her book *The Pleasures of Metamorphosis: Japanese and English Fairy Tale Transformations of "The Little Mermaid."* Fraser accomplishes this daunting task by approaching the various English and Japanese interpretations that adapt and subvert Andersen's fairy tale not only through transcultural parallel readings, but through the framework of pleasure, which Fraser argues can "bring together texts that might otherwise be separated by differences in language, background, time period, genre, and medium and by the borders of 'high' and 'low' cultural forms" (1). In reading pleasure as a framework, the audience is invited to consider not only the author's depictions of pleasure as experienced by the characters, but also the "metatextual messages about the pleasures of fairy tales and fairy tale transformation," thus creating an avenue for questioning how these pleasures were originally intended and how they are consumed by readers (2). By analyzing Japan's many iterations of "The Little Mermaid," ranging from literature, art, and film, through the lens of pleasure and *shōjo*, Japanese girl culture, Fraser examines "the journey of Andersen's Danish fairy tale into English and Japanese, believing that such a cross-cultural approach contributes a more global outlook to the field of Anglophone fairy tale studies" (184).

Fraser's journey begins by focusing on the "prehistory and history of 'The Little Mermaid' in Japanese and English," thus providing context for the "fairy tale history" of mermaids in both languages and a cross-cultural analysis of these fairy tale transformations (16). Andersen's mermaid is a direct descendent of the sirens of Homer's *Odyssey*, temptresses who bewitched the unwitting with their beauty and melodious voices (16). While earlier depictions of sirens saw their allure focus more heavily on their supernatural wisdom and their ability to communicate with the dead, these interpretations gradually gave way to the dark mystique of the siren as simultaneously synonymous with "sex and death" (17). Fraser wryly observes that while mermaids vary between being temptresses or "reluctant wives," they share a common factor: "all of them seem to be drawn to relationships with human men" (18). The nineteenth century would see a divergence in mermaid tales that would lead to stories of romantic mermaids, particularly that of Friedrich de la Motte Fouque's tragic *Undine*. Like Andersen's later mermaid, Undine too is "an elemental creature" whose wish for a soul can only be fulfilled through marriage to a human man (18). Mermaids and their association with death feature prominently in these stories, "their love affairs tend to end badly, often with one partner's tragic demise" (20). Despite winning over her beloved knight and becoming a dutiful wife, Undine

ultimately loses him to a human girl, leading to Undine planting a kiss of death upon her ill-fated lover.

The East have their own history of mermaid mythology, featuring water-dwelling creatures that seem "distanced from the human world than Western mermaids" (20). Fraser notes that the Japanese word for mermaid, *ningyo* (人魚), is gender neutral and comprised of two Chinese characters, "human" and "fish" (20). The earliest interpretations of these human-fish hybrids, during the Heian period (794-1185), saw them prized not for otherworldly beauty but rather for their usefulness to humans (20). Japanese folklore told of the fantastic properties of mermaid flesh, the consumption of which could grant one with eternal youth and longevity (20). One of the best-known tales in this theme is that of "Yao bikuni," the earliest version of which was recorded in 1449. The story tells of a young girl who, upon eating mermaid meat, lives for eight hundred years, retaining her youth and outliving her father and many husbands to eventually become a Buddhist nun (20-21). Yet, "even before Japan had much cultural exchange with the West," *ningyo* would take on a far more erotic association within Japanese folktales (21). The eighth century would see the *ningyo* go from bizarre human-fish hybrids to beautiful, pale-skinned women, captured by lonely fishermen to fulfill their sexual desires (21). *Ningyo* stories following the theme of *ongaeshi*, the repayment of a debt, follow the Japanese folkloric tradition of "grateful animals"; a favor is repaid by the grateful mermaid gifting herself to her savior as a bride (21-22). As illustrations of mermaids were imported from Holland during the late eighteenth century, Eastern and Western associations of mermaids with beauty, death, and eternal life collided and would see themselves reinforced not only by Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" but by later interpretations in animation and film (23).

Fraser's cross-cultural analysis begins where many of today's audience first encountered mermaids on film, with two of the most successful animated interpretations of Andersen's tale: Disney's 1989 musical classic, *The Little Mermaid*, and Studio Ghibli's 2008 masterpiece *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. "Animated adaptations of 'The Little Mermaid' often express desire and pleasure through motion"; Disney's Ariel sings of her desire to walk and run, while Studio Ghibli's Ponyo runs across the waves to be with her prince (39). While Fraser notes that these films "offer pleasures that do not demand an audience with knowledge of the fairy tale context," she examines the way these films not only relate to contemporary engagement with the fairy tale genre, but also the way they are used to "socialize children into gender roles" (39-40). While many of the interpretations examined by Fraser in this book are geared towards adults, Andersen's story and these animated films, are generally associated with children (40). Therefore, Fraser argues that "the issue of

gendered roles and gendered imagery in fairy tales is vital to current debates around the uses of the genre" (40).

Children's entertainment, and fairy tales in particular, have a history of being used as a means to socialize and educate children, and the pleasures presented through the animated medium have a socializing drive in the context of gender roles (40). Studio Ghibli's *Ponyo* begins her journey as a bright-red fish with a human face, more in line with early Japanese *ningyo* than with Andersen's mermaid (47). It is only after she meets a human boy, Sosuke, and licks a drop of blood from a cut on his finger, that her metamorphosis into a human girl begins (48-49). In his role as mini-patriarch, Sosuke is attentive of the now-human Ponyo, and delights in instructing her on language and the practical uses of everyday items (59-60). Fraser notes, perhaps with bemusement, that there is something to be said about the fact that Ponyo's transformation comes about from the potion she steals from her father, and the blood she steals from a human boy (60). While both films shy away from the pain experienced by the mermaid in the source material, Fraser contends that children are apt to pick up on the gender signaling within these stories. Disney's *The Little Mermaid* tells the story of Ariel, a rebellious young mermaid with dreams of experiencing the human world. Ariel soon defies her father, King Triton, and falls in love with the human Prince Eric. While Ponyo's pleasures are driven by childlike curiosity and hunger, romantic love "seems to be the *only* permissible desire for Disney's sixteen-year-old protagonist" (53). Much like Andersen's story, Prince Eric is the ultimate master of Ariel's fate, and, having won his love, she is granted legs by her father and weds the prince (61). While the film is propelled by Ariel's desires, "it is her father who traces a path of learning and growth" (61).

Fraser goes on to examine the literary short stories that reinterpret Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." Authors Oscar Wilde and Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's respective tales, "The Fisherman and his Soul" and "The Mermaid's Lament," focus on the male protagonist of Andersen's story (70-71). Both stories subvert the original by having the *male* protagonist be the one to make sacrifices for the mermaid; Wilde's Fisherman sets out to rid himself of his human soul in order to marry his mermaid love, while Jun'ichiro's Chinese nobleman falls in love with a captured mermaid and makes it his mission to return her to her native Mediterranean waters (72-73, 75-76). Fraser also examines parodic tales such as Kurahashi Yumiko's *Otona no tame no zankoku dowo* (Cruel fairy tales for adults [106]). Her story titled "Ningyo no namida" (The mermaid's tears), follows a trajectory much like Andersen's; the mermaid rescues the prince and falls in love, acts on her desire to be with him by leaving the ocean, and returns after the prince weds another woman (107-108). Yet Kurahashi's tale "diverts from Andersen's tale in both narrative style and details of the plot" (108).

Kurahashi employs the style of classic fairy tales as free of the perceived excesses of “characters’ psychology or description of nature” (108). She dispenses with Andersen’s fanciful opening of a lavish sea palace, instead stating quite simply that her tale begins at the bottom of the sea (108). Kurahashi’s mermaid is subject to bodily parody; despite being described as beautiful, the *ningyo* is the inverse of Andersen’s mermaid by having a fish’s head and human legs (108). This inverted mermaid comes across as less human and more doubly animal; she has neither the head nor heart with which to experience love, and the baser, sexual lower half of a human (109). Instead of kissing the prince upon rescuing him, Kurahashi’s mermaid has sexual intercourse with his unconscious body, a reversal of the masculine bodily invasion seen in fairy tales such as “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White” (109). By subverting Andersen’s mermaid story, English and Japanese authors challenge the gender roles presented by the original and focus instead on the pleasure of the mermaid.

Fraser’s inclusion of Japanese language texts provides a rich tapestry of interwoven tales for comparative study, both through the lens of “The Little Mermaid” and that of *shōjo* in literature. One possible obstacle for English-language readers would be that many of these texts have yet to be translated from their native Japanese, a hurdle that could potentially hinder a Western audience’s engagement with the texts. Though they come in the form of secondary sources, Fraser’s own translations and carefully detailed summaries pay respect to these brilliant additions to fairy-tale studies. In the transformative spirit of the texts, Fraser’s work has allowed these mermaids to become one with the ether of literature, unbound by the limitations of language and culture.

—Bianca L. Beronio

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GIRL WARRIORS: FEMINIST REVISIONS OF THE HERO’S QUEST IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE. Svenja Hohenstein. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2019. 255 p. ISBN 978-1-4766-7664-7. \$39.95.

With the proliferation of remakes, reboots, and re-adaptations currently dominating the American film industry—and thus, the global