

Fairy Tale Politics

U.C. KNOEPFLMACHER, *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 466, \$35.00.

U.C. Knoepfelmacher, the noted scholar of Victorian novels from Princeton University, likens himself to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner; he wants to buttonhole the curious reader with his fascinating study of Victorians and their fairy tales for children. Selecting seven key Victorian writers and the literary fairy tales or fantasies they published from 1850s to 1870s—the so-called golden age of children's literature—Knoepfelmacher attempts to refigure literary history. He illuminates a debate on the nature of childhood, where female authors argue against male authors and where fantasy is pitted against the didactic tradition. While Knoepfelmacher's richly detailed study will become required reading for those interested in children's literature, it should be of great interest to scholars of Victorian narratives, for he has specifically selected writers who consciously cultivated a dual audience of children and adults, and he reminds the reader that the separation of child and adult texts developed only at the end of the nineteenth century. The chief value of this work is that it situates Victorian children's literature as an integral aspect of Victorian culture.

Of the seven major authors examined in this book, only one, Juliana Horatia Ewing, wrote strictly for children and four of the other authors—John Ruskin, William Makepeace Thackeray, Jean Ingelow, and Christina Rossetti—are perhaps better known for their works for adults, although each wrote children's books. The final two writers—Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald—are the best-known examples of Victorians whose books continue to appeal to children and adults. Both Carroll and MacDonald are given two chapters apiece, which are the central and strongest sections of the volume; these provide a careful examination of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and MacDonald's "The Light Princess" (1864) and *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871).

Readers of fairy tales know things tend to get bundled into threes. Knoepfelmacher cleverly separates his Victorian Seven into two major groups by beginning his study with a close biographical reading of John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1851), followed by three male successors: Thackeray, MacDonald, and Carroll. The second half of the volume focuses on three women writers—Ingelow, Rossetti, and Ewing—who in various ways critique and creatively challenge the artistic and ideological assumptions of fairy tales and their male counterparts in order to reclaim fairy tales as a literature of their own.

Knoepfelmacher interprets Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* as a fairy tale that eliminates the female and the erotic. Written for the thirteen-year-old Euphemia Gray in 1841, who would later become Ruskin's young bride but by the tale's publication in 1851 his ex-wife, the story, Knoepfelmacher contends, is a vain effort to arrest female growth. He links this resistance to female maturation with Carroll's treatment of Alice; both men project their own versions of femininity onto a young girl. In attempting to rid his own fairy tale of aggression and sexuality—issues that remain primary objections for contemporary censors of children's fairy tales—Ruskin believed he retained the organic purity of the genre that allowed fairy tales to become ideal child reading. His "Fairy Stories" (1868) is a spirited defense of Edgar Taylor's translation of *German Popular Stories* (1823, 1826), which was frequently reprinted as an introduction to Grimm's fairy tales throughout the

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second half of the nineteenth century.

Ruskin was dismayed by Thackeray's ironic fairy tale *The Rose and the Ring* (1854) that celebrates both male and female lust. "Of all writers whatsoever of any people or language, I should most strictly forbid Thackeray" for young readers (87). Still, Knoepfmacher argues that this mock fairy tale, composed for Thackeray's adolescent daughters, is addressed more to adults and adolescents than children. He also observes that in his correspondence with young women Thackeray was more overtly sexual than Carroll ever allowed himself. Unlike Ruskin, Thackeray's comic fairy tale acknowledges that sexual desire has a place in adolescence. MacDonald loaned Ruskin the manuscript of "The Light Princess," whose overt eroticism made Ruskin feel it completely unsuitable for children, and warned the author that it was "too amorous throughout" (138). In keeping with his irreverent attitude toward fairy-tale conventions, MacDonald took Ruskin's objections and later assigned them to a prudish aunt when he published "The Light Princess" as an interpolated fairy tale in his novel for adults, *Adela Cathcart* (1864), which infuriated Ruskin.

The Carroll chapters bring out delightful punning on Knoepfmacher's part; he sees Carroll as a man who wanted to be a girl, but reluctantly came to accept Alice's growth and her inevitable journey to adulthood in *Through the Looking-Glass*. This interpretation fits well with Morton Cohen's *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (1994), which argues that one can read Alice's journey as the story of Carroll's childhood. But Knoepfmacher also argues that Carroll and MacDonald use the fairy tale as a means to recover their lost femininity and suggests that their mutual fascination with death and silence reveal a deep distrust of narrative progression and words. He maintains that the two writers' verbal wit is the result of an anti-linguistic otherworld that is identified with early phases of their respective childhoods.

Of the three terms that make up his subtitle, Knoepfmacher acknowledges that "Femininity" is "by far the most problematic" (425). Just as he sees Victorian fairy tales in a dialogic debate, Knoepfmacher's study also responds to other recent critical works and most specifically to James Kincaid's *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992). What seems to trouble Knoepfmacher in this provocative and provoking study of Victorian childhood is Kincaid's suggestion that gender is of little importance to child-loving; Knoepfmacher shows gender to be of primary concern to the Victorian construction of childhood.

But he argues, incorrectly I think, that the popularity of *Alice in Wonderland* had completely eroded the didactic and empirical tradition of children's literature, which had been dominated by female authors for more than a century, and that, in the wake of the *Alice* books, Victorian women writers found themselves both stimulated and repelled by the femininities that appeared in the fairy tales and fantasies of their male contemporaries. Knoepfmacher's use of only seven writers limits him from seeing larger literary development of nineteenth-century children's literature. The didactic tradition in children's literature never disappeared, despite the popularity of the *Alice* books. For instance, Hesba Stretton's realistic evangelical tract *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) sold ten times as many copies as *Alice in Wonderland* during the nineteenth century. While Carroll and MacDonald were the most popular writers of children's fairy tales during the Victorian period, their success did not displace women as writers of children's literature, or even as writers of literary fairy tales. Women continued to be writers of children's literature and

literary fairy tales for children.

Moreover, Knoepfmacher inadvertently blurs the distinction between folk tales and literary fairy tales in the second half of his study. While traditional folk tales may have been passed down orally by female storytellers, fairy tales were put into print by male editors and translators. But Knoepfmacher analyzes print culture rather than folklore and traditional oral folk tales. Victorian *kunstmarchen*, those literary fairy tales written in imitation of folk tales by a specific author, have a male literary tradition that Knoepfmacher overlooks. Even Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's collection of traditional folk tales was inspired by German Romanticism such as the literary fairy tales written during the first half of the nineteenth century were by Ludwig Tieck, Clemens Brentano, and E.T.A. Hoffman. This literary tradition had a profound impact on MacDonald who acknowledged his debt to Novalis and Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. The influence of Hans Christian Andersen, the children's writer most responsible for making literary fairy tales popular for children and adults in Victorian period and whose literary fairy tales were first translated into English in 1846, needs to be more fully acknowledged. And finally, if Victorian women writers of children's literature were attempting to reclaim the didactic tradition of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century women writers, Knoepfmacher needs to acknowledge that many of these earlier writers were outspoken critics of fairy tales and fantasy as children's literature.

Despite my reservations with some of the the interpretations in the second half of the volume, *Ventures into Childland* remains a brilliant and significant critical study of Victorian literary fairy tales that will challenge readers' assumptions about children's literature. By putting back into print many of the Victorian fairy tales and fantasies that he examines in this study in two previously published collections, *A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens and Other Victorian Fairy Tales* (1983) and *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (1992), which he co-edited with Nina Auerbach, Knoepfmacher has made this possible. These two anthologies are valuable companion volumes when reading this splendid critical study.

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