

Dmitry Pyshkin

Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale: Myths of Sexuality

(BA thesis, ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2017, 72 pp.)

Opponent's review

The title is indeed aptly chosen, as the thesis offers an analysis of the way Carter maps and explores both culturally sanctioned (“sexuality of subjection and domination”) and alternative (“sexuality of reciprocity”, “sexuality of otherness”) models and representations of sexuality within the framework of her revisions of the fairy tale, a genre with a socializing function recognizably providing its audience with convenient – and “naturalized” – behaviour patterns. In that respect Dmitry Pyshkin finds an affinity between the fairy tale, especially its “bourgeois” version as produced by collectors and editors such as Charles Perrault or the brothers Grimm, and Roland Barthes' concept of myth as a secondary semiotic system which, too, reinscribes a historically contingent situation as “human nature”. The folk tale that provided the material for editors of these authoritative narratives is, by contrast, seen as much more fluid due to its oral mode of existence, and therefore capable of accommodating precisely the potential alternative, unofficial versions. In his reading, the genre of fairy tale in this dual capacity provides Carter both with the “myth” to analyse and expose, and the means with which to accomplish this task.

The study works with an impressive range of secondary sources, outstanding for a BA level. The twin emphasis on myth and sexuality works well and furnishes a productive interpretative model; the specific analyses of individual tales and the motifs employed in them are generally perceptive and convincing.

Nevertheless, the structuring of the piece leaves something to be desired. While the title announces the main concerns as “myth and sexuality”, the opening chapter focuses only on the theories of the former and on the history of the fairy tale, while the theoretical discussion which informs and explains Carter's perspective of sexuality appears piecemeal in the individual chapters analyzing specific tales. There is some logic to this arrangement, as each of the analytical chapters is devoted to one model of sexuality; however, I cannot help thinking that at least a general outline of relevant concepts and problems, with details kept in their current position, would make the argument of the thesis easier to follow.

In contrast, the chapter on myth and fairy tale introduces rather too many perspectives (historical /socio-philosophical / Barthian; problems of terminology / history of the fairy tale), not of them directly relevant and often confusing (what starts as a discussion of terminology is announced as an issue of genre definition, which is never directly addressed, though – pp. 13-15). The sharp contrast drawn between folk tale and myth is potentially problematic, if both are said to be means to know oneself and the world (p.10; p.18)?

Occasionally, the textual analysis imposes a slightly too rigid a reading on the material: Is it indeed necessary to read the reference to the girl in ‘The Company of Wolves’ as a “closed

system” as meaning that she is “defined and perceived” through her body in which she is closed? Is there a possibility of an alternative reading within the configuration of the tale? Paradoxically, there are also issues left untouched or underexplained: How does the heroine in ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’ “grow to realize and reject their object position and afford alternative model of experience”?

In conclusion, the thesis is a competent piece of research and literary analysis. It fulfills, and in some respects exceeds, all requirements for work on the BA level and I recommend it for defence with the provisional grade of very good to excellent (**velmi dobře až výborně**) depending on the result of the defence.

V Praze dne 5.9.2017

.....

Helena Znojemská, Ph.D.