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Twice upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale

By Elizabeth Wanning Harries



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Fairy tales, often said to be "timeless" and fundamentally "oral," have a long written history. However, argues Elizabeth Wanning Harries in this provocative book, a vital part of this history has fallen by the wayside. The short, subtly didactic fairy tales of Charles Perrault and the Grimms have determined our notions about what fairy tales should be like. Harries argues that alongside these "compact" tales there exists another, "complex" tradition: tales written in France by the conteuses (storytelling women) in the 1690s and the late-twentieth-century tales by women writers that derive in part from this centuries-old tradition.

Grounded firmly in social history and set in lucid prose, *Twice upon a Time* refocuses the lens through which we look at fairy tales. The conteuses saw their tales as amusements for sophisticated adults in the salon, not for children. Self-referential, frequently parodic, and set in elaborate frames, their works often criticize the social expectations that determined the lives of women at the court of Louis XIV.

After examining the evolution of the "Anglo-American" fairy tale and its place in this variegated history, Harries devotes the rest of her book to recent women writers--A. S. Byatt, Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, and Emma Donoghue among them--who have returned to fairy-tale motifs so as to challenge modern-day gender expectations. Late-twentieth-century tales, like the conteuses', force us to rethink our conception of fairy tales and of their history.



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Editorial Review

Review

"In this elegant study the scholar Elizabeth Wanning Harries gives their due to the countesses--the 17th century French ladies . . . who entertained their salons with witty, sophisticated fantasies about imaginary princes and princesses. . . . Harries suggests, with culture today fragmented into myriad products and market niches, fairy tales may be our only universal point of reference, the only cultural language we speak in common."--**Amanda Heller, *The Boston Globe***

"To read Harries's study is to have that all too rare experience of recognizing that this book needed to be written and is full of truths."--**Choice**

"This is a highly readable work which engages with important questions in feminist literary criticism and fairy-tale research and offers a valuable and well-argued rereading of the history of the fairy tale."--**Karen Seago, *Marvels and Tales***

From the Inside Flap

A significant contribution to cultural studies in its splendid elaboration of the French fairy-tale tradition and in its effort to connect that tradition with works ranging from Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood* to Anne Sexton's *Transformations*. Harries's work fills the gaps in our knowledge about the countesses and seeks to understand why the stories that emerged from French literary salons failed to remain in the canon even as they established the generic conventions of literary fairy tales.

From the Back Cover

"Professor Harries is very conversant with most of the pertinent literature for her topic, and she is an original thinker who is not afraid to question conventional assumptions about the development of the fairy tale. Her book will be useful to readers inside and outside the main field of scholarship."--**Jack Zipes, University of Minnesota**

"A significant contribution to cultural studies in its splendid elaboration of the French fairy-tale tradition and in its effort to connect that tradition with works ranging from Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood* to Anne Sexton's *Transformations*. Harries's work fills the gaps in our knowledge about the countesses and seeks to understand why the stories that emerged from French literary salons failed to remain in the canon even as they established the generic conventions of literary fairy tales."--**Maria Tatar, Harvard University**

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