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Transgressions of Fantastika

Just over two hundred years ago, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann published some of the most influential literary fairy tales in the Western cultural tradition. Born in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Russian Kaliningrad), in 1776, Hoffmann has been remembered, on the one hand, as a mentally ill and amoral figure; and, on the other, as a responsible civil servant and artist. The son of a lawyer, Hoffmann was raised in a strict middle-class family and grew to resent and critique systems of social class. Hoffmann first worked for the Prussian government and developed a reputation for being scrupulous and fair, yet, the corruption of the aristocracy troubled him. While he maintained his friendship with the wealthy and well-connected Theodore Hippel, Hoffmann distanced himself from positions of power and went as far as publishing comical sketches of Prussian officers and later abandoning civil service altogether to pursue the arts. After failing to make a career in music, Hoffmann began writing his short fiction—stories that would be remembered to this very day.

In his dissatisfaction with “neatly trimmed bourgeois conventions of his time,” Hoffmann pushed the boundaries of the fairy tale as a genre (Zipes, Introduction ix). In his provocative tales, Hoffmann blurred the boundaries between reality and fantasy, evoking uncanny connotations. Doppelgangers and animated dolls populate his tales, cajoling readers to reconsider their perceptions of reality and social convention. While Hoffmann’s work can be read in

relationship to German Romantics Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, and Novalis, tales like Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" (1814) can be read as an example of European magical realism. In Hoffmann's work, the realms of fantasy are continuously encroaching and populating the realms of the real.

Hoffmann's works were well received in his own lifetime, and he met regularly with his contemporaries to discuss culture and politics. Hoffmann's tales did not stay in Germany; they traveled quickly to the Ukraine and Russia as evidenced by his influence on Nikolai Gogol.¹ Hoffmann's influence spans time and geography and can be seen in the twentieth-century novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) by British author Angela Carter. Her novel depicts a war between reality and fantasy in a way that literalizes the symbolic tensions in Hoffmann's work.

Outside of literary circles, E. T. A. Hoffmann's stories are often best remembered for the works that they inspired. Nutcrackers, an iconic part of the Western Christmas tradition, are associated more with Tchaikovsky's ballet than Hoffmann's original *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816); for its part, "The Sandman" (1817) is most critically acclaimed as an exemplar of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the uncanny. Indeed, Hoffmann's material has served as inspiration for generations, influencing the works of authors from Théophile Gautier and C. S. Lewis to A. S. Byatt.² Thus, no matter how we remember him, whether for his originals or for the texts he inspired, E. T. A. Hoffmann has maintained an impressive influence on Western cultural texts to this day. In this special issue of *Marvels & Tales*, we will explore Hoffmann's work, as well as his profound influence, and interrogate the many varied facets of Hoffmann's two-hundred-year legacy.

In the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Maria Nikolajeva argues, "E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Nutcracker and the Mouse King' (1816) is internationally acknowledged as the first fantasy explicitly addressed to children" (50). Meanwhile, Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn position Hoffmann's work among the German Romantics (52), and argue, "Children's fantasy has far stronger roots in tales of the fantastic than it does in tales for children: the history of children's fantasy is essentially one of appropriation" of texts never intended for children, such as fables and fairy tales (11). As for the fairy tale, Zipes argues that, with *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, "Hoffmann sought to revolutionize the fairy-tale genre and wanted his readers to envision the world in a different light from how they normally saw it. His fairy tale was a provocation and a radical attempt to change the genre for children" (Introduction ix). Thus, Hoffmann's work transgresses the boundaries of conventional genre, and so perhaps, rather than questioning what Hoffmann's work is, it is more interesting to explore what Hoffmann's work *does*.

In direct response to E. T. A. Hoffmann's writing, John Clute coined the term "fantastika" as a convenient shorthand to describe the collective techniques and purposes of Gothic, horror, science fiction, fantasy, and supernatural fiction written after 1800 as a literature that transgresses realism in order to reenvision reality ("Fantastika"). According to Clute, around the year 1800 Romantic anxieties regarding the potential dangers of Progress resulted in authors like E. T. A. Hoffmann, Mary Shelley, and Edgar Allen Poe writing "deeply stress-ridden assays of the new world" (1). Early-nineteenth-century authors rejected realism in order to foreground the anxieties of their real circumstances by blurring the distinctions between the real and the unreal. As Freud writes of "The Sandman," "It is true that the author initially creates a kind of uncertainty by preventing us—certainly not unintentionally—from guessing whether he is going to take us into the real world or into some fantastic world of his own choosing" (11). It is in the tension between what is real and what is unreal, and the resulting fantastic spaces, that Hoffmann's work finds the potential to reenvision reality. Indeed, it is the blurring of the real and unreal—the bleeding of one into the other, the uncertainty of their distinctions—that features so prominently in Hoffmann's work.

In the first volume of *The Serapion Brethren* (1819), Hoffmann philosophizes about art and higher consciousness through his protagonist: "[I]f it is the mind only that which takes cognizance of events around us, it follows that that which it has taken cognizance of *has* actually occurred. . . . [I]t was only from a lack of higher knowledge that a poet would box up within the narrow limits of his brain that which, by virtue of his peculiar seer gift, he was enabled to see in full life before him" (9–10). Hoffmann writes in *The Serapion Brethren* of the "profounder mysteries" and the "abnormal conditions" of nature's "mysterious depths" that can be experienced from art (11). For Hoffmann, art is a way of seeing and informing a clearer view of reality without the hindrances of culturally constructed norms. Here we find parallels to Plato's description of the enlightened position of the educated in his "Allegory of the Cave." For Plato, to escape the cave and see the world beyond its shadows is to see the world for what it truly is (230), and yet this education results in a transgression from what is accepted, putting the educated at risk of being killed (231). For Hoffmann, to experience art is not only similar to escaping Plato's cave and seeing the world beyond what is merely visible to the eye, but is an opportunity to reenvision what the world could be.

Hoffmann's own art—his narratives and music—opens itself to such consideration. Writing in the post-French Revolution period, a time in which ideas of what was possible were openly explored, Hoffmann's work not only challenged reality, but questioned the very idea of what is real. By inviting fresh readings and opening new portals into the real and unreal and by deploy-

ing the elements of fantastika, Hoffmann's transgressive work broadened what realities could be possible. It is this approach that resulted in the coining of the term "fantastika" and the literature of this tradition that followed.

The potential contained in fantastika literature for transgressing conventional conceptions of reality in order to reenvision it continues to be felt today. Of contemporary literature for young readers, Malin Alkestrand argues that fantasy and science fiction have "a genre-specific didactic potential, which makes it possible for them to question the status quo more profoundly than" realist literature, because "the non-realistic elements permit the books to criticize" social and institutional systems of power (110). Meanwhile, Jenny Wolmark argues that fantastika literature for a more adult market allows for the expression of "radically different forms of social and sexual relations" and therefore it is "not enough to think of these significant conceptual organizations in terms of the circularity of 're-invention,' or pastiche, since they are operating within a far more dynamic field" of a paradigm shift (15). The potential of fantastika literature to question reality, and enable readers to achieve a paradigm shift, is a transgression that follows in E. T. A. Hoffmann's transgressive legacy.

And so, when, to commemorate Hoffmann's work accordingly, we organized a celebration of the bicentenary of the publication of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* in 2016—an event that would lead to the publication of this special issue of *Marvels & Tales*—we transgressed academic convention. Rather than organizing a small, formal symposium, the organizers of the event decided to combine the critical with the creative and hold the event, not in a classroom, but in the Mumford Theatre at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

On Saturday, 3 December 2016, "200 Years of the Nutcracker" brought together the work of academics and local artists in a multifaceted exploration of Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. The event began with a formal symposium featuring current research by early-career and world-renowned scholars alike, followed by an in-conversation-style keynote between Harvard professor Maria Tatar and Carnegie Medal-winning children's author Kevin Crossley-Holland. In the second half of the day, the symposium shifted into a variety show featuring original and traditional performances based on *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. Finally, the event ended with an auction of original art responding to Hoffmann's work. It is this blend of the critical and creative that we seek to bring to this special issue.

Much of the art featured in this special issue was on auction during the "200 Years of the Nutcracker" event and is featured in this special issue as an exploration of the different facets of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*'s narrative and themes. On the cover of this special issue is this event's logo, designed by Rileigh Young with the aim of celebrating Hoffmann's fairy tale. Young's

piece was used not only on the day of the event, but also in the marketing material alongside Katie Owen's *Stahlbaum und Mausekönig* (Stahlbaum and the Mouse King). Owen's hand-drawn work captures the feelings of the uncanny in its representation of the tale's characters overlapping one another. Moving on from the uncanny, the art represents a range of other emotions in the tale. Gary Dougherty's *Mouse King*, a grotesque seven-headed beast, displays the action and adventure of Hoffmann's story. The grandfather clock of Jack Bateman's *Nutcracker Nightmare* is ominous and terrifying, whereas Victoria Ayre's painting *Journey to Candyland* offers a vision of the story's more tranquil, peaceful scenes. Finally, Heather Colbert's *Mouse Queen* sculpture brings all of these emotional tensions together in its representation of terrifying, regal villainy. Even though not part of the art auction, the work of illustrator Maria Mikhalskaya evokes the chill of winter and the strange proportions of threatening forces.

The essays, likewise, demonstrate the diversity within Hoffmann's work and the extensive impact of his legacy, and are organized in three leitmotifs. We begin with the influence of Hoffmann's particular techniques—specifically, unreal spaces, uneasy feelings, and unequal access. Maria Tatar's "Inventing Portal Fantasies: E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*" suggests that Hoffmann's use of secondary worlds influenced later works of children's fantasy literature, and argues that portal fantasies are far from escapist. In "Candytown and the Land of Cockaigne: Gastronomic Utopia in *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* and Other Children's Literature," Sarah Hardstaff analyzes how Hoffmann's representation of gastronomic excess and inequality has influenced the Cockaigne tradition in contemporary children's literature. The collection continues with an essay on Hoffmann's position as a Romantic. Claudia Schwabe, in "Orientalism in *Kunstmärchen*: E. T. A. Hoffmann's Escape to the Mythical Realm Atlantis," analyzes Hoffmann's Romantic construction of an Orientalist Atlantis. For Schwabe, Hoffmann deploys Orientalist imagery over and against Western bourgeois sensibilities.

The final two pieces in this special issue are creative reflections. Kasper Cornish discusses the musical legacy of Hoffmann's narrative through Tchaikovsky's composition, and his own experiences choreographing *The Nutcracker* ballet. In "Choreographing Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*: A Creative Reflection," Cornish discusses the history of the ballet and the kinetic adaptations of Hoffmann's work. Finally, in "Illustrating *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*: A Practitioner's Reflection," Maria Mikhalskaya speaks to her process for creating the illustrations of a Russian publication of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*.

In all of the essays, reflections, and artworks presented in this special issue of *Marvels & Tales*, E. T. A. Hoffmann's work demonstrates a transgressive influ-

ence across time and cultures that reimagines and broadens fictional worlds in unprecedented ways. From the fantasy worlds of Lewis Carroll and C. S. Lewis to the social critiques of Angela Carter and Suzanne Collins, Hoffmann-influenced fantastika literature has transgressed the real in an attempt to reenvision reality. And, indeed, reality has been reenvisioned. E. T. A. Hoffmann's work has helped reshape the public imagination so that we may continue to transgress the boundaries of possibility and further reenvision our realities. It is our hope that by honoring Hoffmann's legacy this special issue will spark discussion about Hoffmann's influence on fairy-tale studies more broadly.

Notes

1. Charles Passage demonstrates Hoffmann's popularity in Russia in the time of Nikolai Gogol. Svitlana Krys traces Hoffmannian allusions in Gogol's earlier Ukrainian horror narratives.
2. A. S. Byatt's contribution "Dolls' Eyes" to *The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease* (2008) employs the eerily and questionably inanimate figure of the doll in ways that echo Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1817).

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