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Introduction to the Special Issue: Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind

Francesca Arnavas
University of Tartu

Marzia Beltrami
University of Tartu

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind

We dedicate this special issue to one of the most inspiring writers of our time, Dame A. S. Byatt (1936–2023), whose brilliant and creative mind was full of fairy stories.

The slimy body of a frog turning into the attractive body of a prince; the ethereal beauty of a princess; the monstrosity of a beast's physical appearance; the strange, hybrid body of a mermaid. These are examples of how literary fairy tales famously portray bodies, and how these portrayals stick in our mind.

The literary fairy tale has always been highly concerned with matters of the body, and the way in which the body is represented sheds light on many different topics. How bodies are depicted in fairy tales can be connected to their way of representing gender, as Jeana Jorgensen and Scott Weingart have investigated in their “Computational Analysis of the Body in European Fairy Tales,” or as Jorgensen has further pointed out in her study on “Masculinity and Men's Bodies in Fairy Tales.” Often, this interrelation of body and gender has been discussed in relation to the female body, as in Laurence Talairach-Vielmas's *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, or in other studies by Jorgensen, Marina Warner, and Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz. Conceptions of what beauty means and of how fairy tales can influence our perception of what is physically beautiful and what is not, are additional thematic strands that have traditionally been attached to the topic of the body in fairy tales (see Tatar). Approaches addressing the altered, queer, and disabled body constitute new perspectives on the relationship between

the fairy tale and the body (Barounis; Schmiesing; Sebring and Greenhill). The link between eros and the body in fairy-tale narratives has been also inspected, for instance in another special issue of *Marvels & Tales*, focused on *Erotic Tales*.

On the one hand, therefore, the ways bodies have been portrayed in fairy-tale narratives have already been, and still are, relevant subjects of scholarly discussions. On the other hand, the fact that fairy tales depict and shape specific ways of thinking, and carry in their stories complex systems of beliefs, has also been recognized in fairy-tale scholarship. Carl Jung stated that “in fairy tales, as in dreams, the psyche tells its own story” (113), and Jack Zipes in his highly influential *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* has theorized how fairy-tale tropes work as units of knowledge, stored in our mind “as replicating memes” (xi). With this, Zipes intends to stress how fairy tales “stick in our brains in very peculiar ways” (xii), and he explores how they do this through the employment of concepts taken from various disciplines, such as memetics, linguistics, and genetics. In another recent special issue of *Marvels & Tales*, *Thinking with Stories*, contributors addressed the various ways in which fairy stories encourage envisioning and thinking anew about different types of conflicts (material, ideological, political, emotional). As the editors of the issue pointed out, “these stories tell how we think of the world and place ourselves in it but also project alternative worlds and encourage us to feel and think differently” (Bacchilega and Duggan 19).

In their preface to *Thinking with Stories*, Cristina Bacchilega and Anne Duggan also importantly emphasize that “thinking with stories and their scripted and generative affordances is not an intellectual or disembodied exercise” (19), but instead includes emotions, bodily reactions, kinesic responses. This is our point of departure for encouraging and exemplifying an approach that has not found a systematic development in fairy-tale studies yet. Despite the two existing strands of research that we outlined above—focusing on how fairy tales have engaged discussions about the body and the mind, respectively—what has *not* been done is to look at how fairy tales are especially relevant from an embodied cognition perspective. The aim of this special issue, then, is to forward a theoretical dialogue between fairy-tale scholarship and the fields of cognitive narratology and cognitive literary criticism.

Over the past thirty years (in works by, for instance, Mark Johnson, Raymond Gibbs, Antonio Damasio), the view of the mind as embodied has come to inform our understanding of cognition as something not abstractly happening in our brains but rather rooted in and shaped by bodily experience. Cognition as embodied means that “thinking, as humans experience it, depends deeply on our having the kinds of bodies that we have” (Garratt 2). Research across the humanities has extensively investigated the implications of embodied cognition for art and creativity in their historical development (Anderson;

Kukkonen), culturally situated instantiations (Zunshine), and relationship to narrative studies (Cave; Burke and Troscianko; Garratt; Kukkonen and Caracciolo). This special issue of *Marvels & Tales* proposes to adopt an embodied cognitive focus to look at the genre of the literary fairy tale. Our ambition is to start a theoretical conversation aiming to bridge several gaps: between fairy-tale scholarship and cognitive approaches to literature; between studies of representations of the body and inquiries on representations of the mind; and between the study of different versions of fairy tales in various epochs or media and the cognitive literary perspective as cross-medial and transhistorical tool. Therefore, this special issue holds these strands together with a number of contributions that explore the body-mind interrelation through the lens of an embodied cognition approach, focusing on fairy tales from different historical periods and media, spanning from seventeenth-century France, with Karin Kukkonen's essay, to fairy tales in contemporary video games, with Mattia Bellini's study. To look at fairy tales by holding an embodied view of cognition means, on the one hand, to examine representations of bodies and minds as irreducibly entwined and mutually constitutive, and to consider how this awareness impacts the tale and its unfolding. On the other hand, the same understanding is to be extended to the mind of the tales' recipients, in which case specific attention is devoted to how fairy-tale motifs and strategies may engage readers and shape their emotional, visceral, and cognitive responses in unique ways. These two perspectives often intertwine, and the articles included in this issue engage with both to various degrees.

At the outset of this introduction, we proposed a few images of bodies in fairy tales (the frog-prince, the graceful princess, the beast, the mermaid), bodies that scholars have studied thinking of metamorphosis, gender, conceptions of beauty, and related issues (e.g., pursuit of normative standards versus fear and disgust for monstrosity), queerness, and disability. The same thematic foci are explored in our special issue, but they are dealt with and interpreted in novel fashions, through the outlook of the mind-body interrelation, pointing to what this viewpoint can add to fairy-tale interpretation, and, conversely, how these fairy-tale bodies can expand the discussion on embodied cognition.

We believe that the genre of the literary fairy tale is a particularly significant venue for the examination of embodied cognition. The widespread presence in fairy tales of the themes mentioned here (metamorphosis, gender, beauty, monstrosity, queerness) already strongly suggests ongoing reflections on the interconnection between mind and body. Yet, the undeniable correlation of the fairy-tale genre with the marvelous allows its readers to stretch the boundaries of the realistic imagination. In the mental and physical act of reading a fairy tale, we explore and enjoy bodies that do not actually exist, not simply because they are fictional but because they are often fantastic or

not realistic; we discover how specific body-minds would act in and react to marvelous circumstances; in doing so we are encouraged to notice differences from as well as unexpected continuities and similarities with real bodies and minds. The wonderful and weird bodily and cognitive make-ups we find in fairy tales make it possible to experiment and reflect on the complex relationship of mind and body, thus lending it visibility and substance. Familiarity with the marvelous creates the perfect conditions for readers not to question the impossibility of certain body-minds per se, and rather to reflect on the continuities (and discontinuities) that still hold between physical features or external appearance and mental states and capabilities. Confronted with a mermaid, for instance, instead of simply turning away from the sheer impossibility of a creature half-human and half-fish, readers are given the chance to explore through the tale what new desires and possibilities for action as well as limits and frustrations this hybrid condition might bring about. In this sense, the literary fairy tale offers the ideal cognitive playground to actively engage with an unusual body-mind nexus, to imaginatively confront it, and to potentially draw new insights and conclusions. Authors like A. S. Byatt, whose fairy tales are analyzed by contributors Marzia Beltrami and Naomi Rokotnitz, frequently exploit the pliability and protean nature of the fairy tale to offer especially provocative and mentally challenging takes on the nature of our embodied cognition.

Our special issue focuses on Western fairy tales, but we believe this approach can be extended and applied to manifestations of the fairy-tale genre in different geographical and cultural contexts. An embodied-cognition perspective may be particularly useful also for a comparative approach aiming to study how different cultures and traditions interpret the mind-body connection through the employment of wonder tales. In their approach to the Euro-American fairy tale, contributions to our special issue span across different epochs and media and provide a chronological trajectory starting with the analysis of fairy tales by the French *conteuses* of the seventeenth century (Kukkonen), touching on the Victorian fairy tale (John Pazdziora, Francesca Arnavas), comparing a Victorian fairy tale to a postmodern one (Anna Kérchy), and then focusing on postmodern metafictional fairy tales (Rokotnitz, Beltrami). We conclude with an analysis of embodied cognition in fairy tales as reused in video games, with Bellini's article.

The articles cumulatively address the topics of metamorphosis, gender, beauty, monstrosity, queerness—enriching and expanding them through the embodied-cognition theoretical viewpoint. In particular, Kukkonen's contribution focuses on two French tales, "Plus Belle que Fée" and "La Chatte Blanche," to show how the literary trope of metamorphosis hints at new ways to conceptualize the mind-body relation emerging at the time. This historically situated

use of fairy tales as cultural practices able to extend the capacity of the human mind is discussed in relation to one of the research strands in the embodied cognition debate, namely, the extended-mind hypothesis (Menary). Indeed, Kukkonen claims that “the use of the ‘marvelous’ in these fairy tales is not only a reaction to the (male-dominated) poetical debates of their days, but also an intervention for literature as a mode of thinking more generally” (170). Pazdziora’s essay analyzes how in selected fairy tales by Oscar Wilde and Dinah Mulock Craik the socially stigmatized (queer and disabled) body is reaffirmed via specific body-mind representations. Arnavas further reinforces Pazdziora’s claim that Victorian fairy tales deal with matters of embodied cognition in a novel fashion. More specifically, she investigates how George MacDonald’s “The Light Princess” and “Little Daylight” reelaborate motifs taken from “The Sleeping Beauty” by reversing the trope of the princess’s sleeping body-mind and depicting instead the two princesses’ vivid and lively activities, in particular for what concerns sexuality and womanhood. Kérchy chooses to start from a Victorian fairy tale, Lucy Lane Clifford’s “The New Mother,” comparing it to the contemporary novel by Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*. In both narratives, Kérchy tackles the topic of embodied cognition by concentrating on the narrative strategies employed to express “a fear-induced, largely incomprehensible uncertainty” (219) that the young protagonists mentally and physically experience when encountering uncanny monstrosity. Rokotnitz’s article takes on distinctly philosophical concerns and looks at A. S. Byatt’s fairy tale “A Stone Woman” from a phenomenologically informed perspective and specifically crediting the “brain-body-narrative nexus” as theorized by Hannah Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese. While looking also at the complex portrait of the protagonist’s metamorphosing body, Rokotnitz analyzes first and foremost the body of the reader: she pinpoints seven narrative and stylistic strategies through which Byatt exploits various sensory-motor cues to trigger the reader’s affective schemata and, thus, their active participation in the reading experience. Also focusing on A. S. Byatt, Beltrami’s article examines how the English author uses the fairy-tale genre to interweave reflections on the embodied mind and on materiality in quite unique ways. Through a discussion of Byatt’s display of impossible creatures, metamorphic bodies and fantastic clashes of scale, Beltrami argues that Byatt uses the marvelous frame to make the irreducible unity of the body-mind nexus strikingly visible to her readers. Finally, Bellini investigates the connection between fairy tales and embodied cognition by analyzing how in Telltale Games’s *The Wolf Among Us* the bodies of fairy-tale characters are represented, how types of mind and worldviews are intertwined with these representations, and how the specific affordances of the video game enable players to actually embody fairy-tale characters. This embodied experience made possible by the medium sheds additional light on

how fairy-tale characters may facilitate interesting considerations on contemporary conceptions of beauty, appearances, and idealized versus stigmatized bodies.

Our special issue also includes a creative piece, “The Three Dresses” by writer Jess Richards, a “Cinderella” adaptation in which the dresses Cinderella wears at the ball are endowed with their own voices, embodying the persecuted girl’s experience. The three dresses are made of snow, darkness, and mirrors: their materiality is intertwined with the states of mind they carry within them, vividly expressing through their own substance Cinderella’s thoughts and emotions. The story poignantly represents the dimension of embodied cognition, interlacing the materiality of the dresses (working as extended minds of both the seamstress and the Cinderella character) with the bodily reactions of Cinderella when she wears them, and with her emotional distress. In her own introduction to the story, Richards also stresses the embodied aspects of the act of storytelling itself, describing her creative process and how she made the tale and the dresses come alive through specific, material artistic practices: for instance, as she writes about the snow dress talking, she first froze and then melted a china doll, filming the melting process.

Artist Anna-Maria Amato has created a visual piece inspired by fairy-tale imagery (especially by Hans Christian Andersen’s stories) to illustrate the thematic focus of our special issue. In her artwork, *In My Heart and Mind*, the complex interrelations of mental and bodily reactions are expressed through the dynamic figures of the dancers, who embody in their revealing movements specific emotions and cognitive states.

With this special issue, we hope to open up a path toward more research and scholarly contributions on cognitive approaches in dialogue with fairy-tale scholarship. Since talking about cognitive approaches nowadays necessarily involves the embodied-cognition perspective, our focus on literary fairy tales and the embodied mind embraces the most recent conceptions of the mind in cognitive studies, one that “encompasses rational and abstract thought, imagination, emotion, somatic reflexes and responses” (Cave 14). If we do indeed “think with bodies,” we want to lay full emphasis on the fact that thinking with the fantastic bodies of fairy-tale creatures can stimulate novel, exciting ways of using speculative fiction to reflect on our own body-mind interconnection. Damsels with no gravity, stone women, metamorphic bad wolves, mothers with glass eyes, eagle-princes, snow-princesses, moon-princesses, mermaids: while long-standing figures of our imagination, the marvelous bodies scrutinized in this special issue hold an inspirational power exerting a potent grasp on our minds, because they point at something very real to us: the irreducible co-constitution of our bodily, mental, and emotional experience.

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