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Folklore and the Fantastic

A review of

Jason Marc Harris, *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Ashgate, Aldershot, Hampshire, 2008), ISBN: 0754657663, ix + 235pp. Hard Cover. £50.

Jason Marc Harris in *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* confidently proposes to look at how ‘nineteenth-century writers imitate, revise, and transform preternatural folkloric material into narratives of the literary fantastic’ (1). In practice, Harris focuses on texts by George MacDonald, J.M. Barrie, Robert Louis Stevenson, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, James Hogg, William Carleton and William Sharp – practitioners of the fantastic who all enjoyed significant rapport with the folklore of their period and utilised various folkloric motifs in their fiction. Yet while moderately successful as a piece of literary criticism, *Folklore and the Fantastic* is overall a rather uneven study which has a large number of editorial errors that severely affect its credibility.

The book opens with an introductory chapter that surveys the nineteenth-century definitions, critical contexts and debates in literary fantasy, fairy tales and folklore, and introduces the author’s concern to investigate what he terms ‘folk metaphysics’. In chapter 2, Harris turns to a closer analysis of fairy tales, with specific interest in their ideological components. Looking at the fantastic and supernatural literature of the mid to late nineteenth century offers a wonderful opportunity to track and contextualise motifs that were being contemporaneously unearthed and catalogued in folklore studies, yet Harris seems overly reliant on recent motif-indexes in his criticism. However he does make some good points regarding the differences between *volksmärchen* (folk fairy tales) and *kunstmärchen* (literary fairy tales), pointing out how both traditions were not as mutually distinct as critics such as Jack Zipes have argued, and also demonstrates how Victorian social issues such as the woman question and Christian socialism began to appear in literary fairy tales.

Chapter 3 examines the book-length fantasy fiction of MacDonald and Barrie, which, in contrast to some critics who argue that they are simply escapist, Harris suggests articulate a dystopian concern that human social life has been starved of spiritual ideals. In his analysis Harris unlocks many of the folkloric origins of MacDonald’s fairy tale motifs and highlights both the didactic and ironic aspects of Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1911). Chapter 4 again deals with MacDonald, this time focusing on the adult fantasies *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895). Harris shows how MacDonald distinguishes Victorian ideology, Christian and capitalist, from the childlike, imaginative and feminine-utopian values which he discerned in folk metaphysics. Staying with Scottish authors, in chapter 5 Harris turns to Hogg’s use of legends and folklore as part of ‘a rational critique of the abuses of feudalism’ (103). Harris is at his best in chapter 7, convincingly showing how Stevenson used folklore to subvert notions of British imperial dominance in tales such as ‘The Beach of Falesá’ (1892) and ‘The Isle of Voices’ (1893). Chapter 8 looks at Carleton and Sharp as ‘simultaneously tradition bearers of local culture and cosmopolitan expositors of Irish and Scottish folkways to the curious British reading public’ (163) and reads their utilisation of folklore as part of this intermediary status.

Perhaps of most interest to scholars in Irish studies will be chapter 6, ‘Ghosts, “Grand Ladies”, “The Gentry”, and “Good Neighbours”: Folkloric Representations of the Spirit World’s Intersection with Class and Racial Tensions in Le Fanu’. Certainly,

aside from the overwhelming critical attention paid to 'Carmilla' (1872) and *Uncle Silas* (1865) as exemplars of the vampire tale and sensation novel respectively, Le Fanu's rich interaction with Irish folklore is an area, as Harris points out, ripe for new evaluations. Harris reads Le Fanu's work to good effect, demonstrating through examinations of 'Laura Silver Bell' (1872) and 'The Child that Went with the Fairies' (1870) how Le Fanu used folklore 'to articulate the psychologically destructive potential of racial and class tensions; folk beliefs exert a historical claim upon communities and a psychology of guilt and anxiety that defies rational pretensions' (129). Yet at points Harris becomes needlessly speculative ('abduction by aristocrats was a French urban legend in the mid-eighteenth century, and perhaps Le Fanu had heard such a narrative when he crafted his tale of anxiety for the nineteenth' (132); 'Tracey's unawareness of the vampiric fairy tradition is an important neglect because it is no anomaly; many readers are unaware of the rich lore depicting blood-drinking fairy beings; and might not Le Fanu himself have known of such traditions?' (135)). By methodically going through the whole of Le Fanu's oeuvre, including the articles which appeared under his editorship in the *Dublin University Magazine*, some awareness about Le Fanu's knowledge of such traditions could have been attained. Furthermore, Le Fanu's friend Patrick Kennedy, an important folklore collector who was *the* crucial link between the later Le Fanu and Irish oral culture, does not get a mention at all.

Taken chapter by chapter, this study does throw light on the use of folklore in fantastic fiction, but unfortunately many problems stand out. Despite some brief references to postcolonial theory, Harris never satisfactorily addresses the fact that all the authors he examines were either Irish or Scottish. Does this mean that Irish and Scottish writers enjoyed a more privileged relationship with the folk-perspective than their English or Welsh counterparts? In his conclusion Harris does attempt to set up an oppositional structure between the imperial centre and its Celtic fringes, but this comes rather late and merely throws into relief the fact that only the Stevenson and Carleton/Sharp chapters comfortably fit under this rubric. One wonders, given that Irish-Scottish studies have gone from strength to strength, why Harris did not simply go for broke and primarily examine the extensive cultural interaction between writers of the Celtic Renaissance and the oral culture of their regions. On the other hand if he were to broaden out this area to make it thoroughly 'British' there would be no shortage of English and Welsh candidates ripe for examination: Thomas Hardy, M.R. James and Arthur Machen spring to mind.

Throughout this study Harris relies rather too much on secondary reading and has a habit of using second-hand quotations: for example, quoting Robert F. Geary, he writes: "'Jack Sullivan notes that 'a desire to have it both ways – to be both mystical and scientific – is characteristic of the supernatural fiction of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods'" (13). Why not simply read and quote from Sullivan's widely-available *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood?* Another problem is the sheer number of inconsistencies, misspellings and typos, a full catalogue of which would represent an indictment of the publisher's copy-editing. For instance, on page 56 *fin de siècle* appears as '*fin de siecle*' while on page 58 it has become '*fin du siècle*'. These errors consistently interrupted my reading of a book that has many interesting points to make, and reinforced a general impression that with more balance, less haste and stronger editorial guidance the result would have been more successful.