

ZOLTÁN KOCSIS

University of Szeged, English & American Literatures and Cultures Doctoral Program

Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind
by Francesca Arnavas and Marzia Beltrami, editors.

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This special issue of the journal brings together an impressive number of distinguished scholars in order to enrich the field of cognitive narratology, which is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses a wide range of approaches. This patchwork, which supports the foundations of a rising discipline, is reflected in the structure of this special issue. Therefore, the editors do a great job with the opening of the issue by outlining its ambition to tie together the various contributions that compose its core pillars in order to crystallize the initial chaos that appears in the case of an interdisciplinary research field. They explain how combining cognitive narratology and literary criticism with fairy-tale studies allows for fresh insights into how the bodies and minds of audiences interact with the text. Themes that are brought as examples, such as metamorphosis, monstrosity, gender, and queerness, highlight and set the stage for contributions that range from historical analyses to studies of modern media and even creative experimental pieces. As a result, *Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind* offers an ambitious interdisciplinary adventure into an emerging academic field where interpretation, classical and postclassical narratology, cognition, and corporeality converge. Novelty emerges regarding this special issue as the contributing authors revisit traditional fairy-tale scholarship by examining not only the fantastical transformations of the characters of fairy tales but also the profound, embodied processes that animate these narratives. The editors set the stage by arguing that fairy tales are not merely disembodied stories but vibrant, sensory experiences that reveal how our bodies and minds are inextricably linked.

The most important notion to review is the goal set by the editors and authors of the introductory chapter, Francesca Arnavas and Marzia Beltrami. They propose that the goal of this special issue is to forge an interdisciplinary dialogue that rethinks traditional separations between body and mind, that is, the great “Cartesian divide”. The editors and contributors therefore sought to demonstrate that fairy-tale narratives are not just abstract stories but embodied experiences that describe transformations, metamorphoses, and sensory details in order to shed light

on the underlying processes that affect the audience of these literary works of art and to initiate a challenge to the traditional separations between physicality and thought. As a result, through this interpretation, fairy tales open up new ways of understanding human cognition and the processes that affect both our bodily and psychological experiences. In summary, by merging fairy-tale scholarship with cognitive narratology and embodied literary criticism, the goal of this special issue is to expand the field of interpretation and offer the readers a new way of looking at narratives, thus inviting fresh perspectives on how our physicality and mental processes interact in both historical and contemporary contexts.

One of the strengths of this issue lies in its diverse array of contributions. In the introductory essay, Arnavas and Beltrami articulate a vision where cognitive narratology meets literary criticism, drawing attention to themes like metamorphosis, queerness, and the interplay between intuitive and deliberate thought. This framework is then enriched by articles that traverse a broad historical spectrum. For instance, topics range from seventeenth-century metamorphosis narratives by La Force and d'Aulnoy to contemporary explorations of embodied cognition in video games. An illustrative example of this undertaking is Karin Kukkonen's detailed examination of metamorphosis in early modern fairy tales, in which the author reconfigures the conventional reading of these texts as well as situating them within a larger dialogue about embodied knowledge and social interaction.

Regarding the academic context, this special issue is a substantial contribution to the field of cognitive narratology. The authors use a wide variety of literature and primary sources, thus rooting the project firmly in its broad context. In the introduction, the contextualization of the project clearly shows that fairy tales have long engaged with questions about the body and mind. Therefore, Arnavas and Beltrami argue that reading a fairy tale is not just an abstract, intellectual act—it is also a sensory, embodied experience. By situating traditional themes, such as beauty and transformation, alongside contemporary concerns (like queer and disability theory), the editors propose an embodied-cognition perspective as a tool to rethink narrative strategies across historical periods and media forms. The authors throughout the special issue draw from a vast array of academic literature on the theory of the embodied mind, referencing, among many others, Miranda Anderson's *The Renaissance Extended Mind* (2019), Andy Clark's *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (2008), Jack Zipes' *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006), Kylee-Anne Hingston's *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction* (2019) and Peter Garratt's *The Cognitive Humanities: Embodied Mind in Literature and Culture* (2016). In what follows, I highlight the most interesting aspects of the individual contributions.

In her article, “Metamorphosis: Embodied Narrative at Play in the Seventeenth-Century Fairy Tale”, Karin Kukkonen examines how seventeenth-century *conteuses*, such as La Force and d’Aulnoy, use metamorphosis not merely as a plot device but as a means to explore the continuity—and occasional tension—between body and mind. Kukkonen argues that the sudden transformations typical of these narratives (for instance, a man turning into an eagle) serve as a metaphor for the interplay between intuitive, embodied responses and more deliberate, reflective cognition. Kukkonen’s work also highlights the social and cultural practices (such as salon games and the concept of sprezzatura) that support these narrative innovations.

John Patrick Pazdziora’s article, titled “Queer Disabled Bodyminds in the Fairy Tales of Dinah Mulock Craik and Oscar Wilde”, explores how fairy tales by Wilde and Mulock Craik reaffirm the legitimacy of bodies that deviate from normative standards. It examines the ways in which these texts use specific body and mind relations and representations to challenge established ideas about beauty, ability, and identity. For instance, the author deconstructs the image and representation of the monster, which is synonymous with the other in society, the abnormal, marginalized groups, thus illustrating the capabilities of fairy tales in shaping both our bodily (or gut) reactions to these people and the norms of society. As a result, Pazdziora sheds a light on how the interplay of physicality and cognition in these narratives opens up alternative discourses on pain, marginalization, and the possibility of transformative care.

In “Love, the Moon, and the Body: George MacDonald’s *The Light Princess* and *Little Daylight* as Reflections on the Embodied Mind” by Francesca Arnavas, the focus is on how George MacDonald reworks fairy-tale motifs. Rather than the typical passive “sleeping beauty” trope, MacDonald’s narratives depict princesses, who, through their embodied actions, subvert expectations and engage with desire and self-realization. Based on these observations, Arnavas argues that these texts reveal a more dynamic conception of embodiment; consequently, this concept also highlights that the body’s actions and the mind’s intentions are inextricably linked. Furthermore, the conclusion emphasizes the revitalization of the genre of fairy tales through George MacDonald’s texts that empower the heroines by playing with the concept of embodiment, active subjectivity, and the reimagining of the sleeping beauty trope.

Marzia Beltrami’s “‘Feeling Thought’: Exploring the Materiality of the Mind in A. S. Byatt’s Fairy Tales” delves into A. S. Byatt’s distinctive fusion of intellectualism with the physical, sensory world. Using the notion of the “feeling thought” (a term borrowed from T. S. Eliot), Beltrami examines how Byatt’s fairy tales blur the conventional divide between mind and body. According to Beltrami, in Byatt’s work, thinking is not a disembodied process; instead, it is intimately connected

to materiality, whether in the texture of a landscape or the tactile experience of emotion. The article also highlights the importance of the dualism that is tied to the mind and the body, while providing a cognitive literary criticism on A. S. Byatt's works.

“Writing and Drawing *The Three Dresses* (Creative Practice as Research)” by Jess Richards explores a narrative that is told from the unusual perspective of three dresses (made of snow, darkness, and mirrors). In the narrative, the three dresses voice the inner life of a persecuted young woman. Upon reviewing the narrative, Richards employs a mix of artistic practices (for example, freezing and melting a china doll) to literally capture transformation, thus highlighting how material processes can embody and express emotional states. This work stands out for its experimental approach to storytelling, where inanimate objects become vibrant carriers of experience and which display agency.

Anna Kérchy's article, “Conceptualizing the Embodied Cognition of Uncertainty in Two Terrifying Tales: Lucy Lane Clifford's *The New Mother* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*”, delves into how fear and uncertainty are embodied experiences within these two dark fantasy narratives. Both *The New Mother* (1882) and *Coraline* (2002) blend gothic horror and cautionary fairy-tale elements, using monstrous maternal figures to explore childhood anxieties and the destabilization of home as a safe space. Clifford's *The New Mother* follows two young sisters who, lured by a mysterious girl with a pear drum, lose their real mother and are confronted by a terrifying substitute with glass eyes and a wooden tail, reinforcing a cautionary moral lesson about disobedience and the dangers of misinterpreting reality. In contrast, *Coraline* portrays its young protagonist as an active agent of her own survival, as she resists the Other Mother's suffocating love and monstrous control in an uncanny alternate version of her home. Kérchy highlights the embodied experience of fear in both stories, pointing out how physical reactions, such as increased heartbeat, shivering, and sweating, mirror the characters' psychological distress and contribute to the reader's immersion in the horror. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, she connects these fears to Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny) and Melanie Klein's ideas on maternal ambivalence, showing how these monstrous maternal figures oscillate between care and threat. Furthermore, Kérchy contrasts the narrative strategies employed by both authors; while Clifford's text relies on gaps, omissions, and understatement to amplify uncertainty, at the same time Gaiman's *Coraline* employs an omniscient narrator and “psychonarration” (a metaimaginative storytelling method to explain the unconscious psychological processes occurring in the mind of the protagonist) to give readers insight into the protagonist's internal struggle with fear and cognitive dissonance. Ultimately, Kérchy argues that while *The New Mother* enforces a rigid cautionary message about obedience and punishment, *Coraline* presents a modern,

empowering perspective in which fear is not simply something to be avoided but a challenge to be faced, encouraging young readers to embrace uncertainty as part of self-discovery, reflecting a broader philosophical engagement with the nature of existence, identity, and perception.

Naomi Rokotnitz's article, "From Affective Schemata to Authentic Becoming: How Reading about Bodies Can Shape Our Mental Landscape and Philosophical Outlook; Postcritique and A. S. Byatt's *A Stone Woman*", explores how literature engages readers on both cognitive and embodied levels. She challenges traditional literary critique by embracing a postcritical perspective that considers how texts shape emotions, perception, and bodily responses. Through an analysis of A. S. Byatt's *A Stone Woman*, Rokotnitz examines how the protagonist's physical metamorphosis from human to stone provokes deep reader engagement via sensory and affective cues. She connects Byatt's storytelling techniques to cognitive science, particularly theories of embodied cognition, showing how reading about bodily transformation can alter readers' perceptions and self-awareness. Byatt's tale is also framed within existentialist philosophy, suggesting that personal transformation (whether this transformation is being literal or metaphorical) can lead to an authentic way of being. Ultimately, this article argues that literature does not merely inform but also enacts change within the reader, fostering a dynamic interaction between body, mind, and narrative.

Finally, Mattia Bellini's "Fairy-Tale Bodies and Embodying the Fairy Tale in Telltale Games' *The Wolf Among Us*" examines the representation of bodies and the concept of embodiment in the video game titled *The Wolf Among Us* (which is an adaptation of Bill Willingham's Fables comics). Bellini explores how fairy tales traditionally construct and reinforce societal norms about physical appearances, associating beauty with virtue and deformity with villainy. *The Wolf Among Us* subverts these conventions by portraying bodies as sites of oppression, suffering, and social struggle. The game's use of "glamours" (magical spells that allow non-human fables to appear as regular humans) serves as a metaphor for exclusion and the pressure to conform in society. Bellini also highlights the interactive nature of video games, arguing that embodiment in *The Wolf Among Us* extends beyond narrative representation to the player's lived experience. Players' interaction with the game through decisions shape the protagonist's, Bigby Wolf's, moral and psychological development throughout the narrative. As a result, the game reinforces or challenges traditional fairy-tale archetypes based on the interaction by the players. The study concludes that the game presents a postmodern and often pessimistic perspective on bodily identity, questioning the cultural hierarchies imposed by fairy-tale traditions while engaging players in a dynamic process of meaning-making.

The thematic scope of this special issue centres on how fairy-tale narratives embody and mediate the relationship between body and mind, demonstrating how metamorphosis, sensory experience, and the “marvellous” transformations can act as sites for reimagining embodied cognition. Additionally, the volume is commendable for its ambitious attempt to link cognitive narratology with feminist, queer, and disability theories, thus expanding the conceptual reach of fairy-tale scholarship. Furthermore, together, these writings traverse a broad historical, societal and even a diverse media spectrum, starting from the early modern French *conteuses* through the Victorian narratives to contemporary digital interactivity. However, this interdisciplinarity also presents limitations in the form of a dense theoretical framework, rooted mainly in cognitive literary studies, which can lead to an uneven cohesion among the contributions, while the predominant focus on Western traditions leaves cross-cultural perspectives on embodiment underexplored.

Nevertheless, the different articles jointly and persuasively argue that storytelling is, at its core, an embodied act and that fairy tales, in particular, invite readers to revisit the entrenched dualisms of mind and body. By situating transformations and sensory experiences at the centre of interpretive practice, the contributors successfully establish a fertile framework for reconsidering how narratives shape, reflect, and compose human cognition. The issue thus initiates an important academic discourse rather than proposing a definitive synthesis, offering a stimulating foundation for future research at the intersection of cognitive narratology, embodied experience, and fairy-tale studies.

Overall, *Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind* is a diverse, thought provoking and rich collection of scholarly articles that successfully initiates a discourse regarding the body, the mind, and narratives. Its strength lies in its innovative reconceptualization of fairy tales as dynamic sites for exploring human cognition, even as its scope invites further research and more inclusive, cross-cultural perspectives. Therefore, the titular special issue is a must-read for scholars interested in the emerging field of cognitive narratology or the evolving relationship between literary form and embodied experience.