

*Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic: From Ancient Egypt to the Italian Renaissance.*

Ruth B. Bottigheimer.

Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. viii + 208 pp. \$85.

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Thought provoking and wide ranging, Bottigheimer's volume should be of significant interest for a variety of different disciplines, from literary studies to history of ideas. Spanning several millennia of Western culture, this work investigates the meaning of

magic in magic tales and, in particular, what characters within these literary texts perceive as magical. Bottigheimer is aware of the possible risks inherent in her challenging enterprise, also because, as she states in the final section of her book, “the mood of fairy tale studies is currently contentious” (183). It is true, as she states in the introduction, that “the nature of magic in its relationship to tale protagonists in magical tales has been little regarded” (2). Covering a tradition that goes from ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman tales to the Jewish and Muslim tradition before landing in Renaissance Italy, *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic* tries hard to avoid sweeping and thus superficial statements in the attempt to create a clear-cut categorization, although the author certainly intends to identify recurrent trends and transformations.

A well-known expert of literary fairy tales, Bottigheimer grants a crucial importance to the creation of “the technology of print,” which in her view played a fundamental role in supporting and spreading the cultural changes that took place in the Italian Renaissance. According to her, a new view of magic in literary tales in early modern Italy led to “the phenomenon of fairy tale magic as it has come down to us.” Bottigheimer goes so far as to claim that “the very conception of fairy tale magic emerges gradually at the end of the Middle Ages. Its birth as an enduring tradition is marked by the fairy tales that Straparola inserted into *The Pleasant Nights* in sixteenth-century Italy.” In Bottigheimer’s controversial view, Straparola embodies at once a new approach to tales of magic resulting from the new social and economic conditions of Renaissance Italy, and is the founder of a genre that deeply affected the subsequent Western European approach to these themes. In a well-researched chapter dedicated to early modern culture, Bottigheimer makes her position very clear by stating that “print liberated stories” (134). The printing press provoked a “sea change between 1450 and 1550” that made “religious and secular stories, saints’ lives, chivalric romances, and courtly ones” available to “the general public,” whereas before these narratives were readable only as manuscripts. She mentions the example of the tale of Beauty and the Beast, which in her view shows how “print and printing presses disseminated medieval plots over long distances, suddenly and simultaneously” (135). The concept of a “popular press,” which is so crucial to Bottigheimer’s argument, “denotes books, pamphlets, and broadsheets printed in the languages spoken by ordinary people” (136). She underscores that “hundred upon hundreds of cheap books printed for a broad market have survived from the years between 1450 and 1550” in Italy and other European countries.

In the introductory chapter, Bottigheimer holds that a first distinction between ancient and early modern magic tales resides in the different role played by divine beings. “In magic tales,” writes Bottigheimer, “gods in the ancient world and medieval fairy creatures inhabit a richly peopled world of their own,” whereas “in sixteenth-century Venice a new sort of magic tale appeared” in which fairy figures without “residence in a parallel world enter narratives in order to benefit human beings” (1). Another important distinction are the effects exerted by magic on human characters. In ancient and medieval tales, Bottigheimer contends, “magic often posed a maleficent threat to human beings, with happy endings reserved for other-worldly bliss in a heavenly

afterlife,” whereas in the Renaissance the positive effects essentially concerned the human characters (1–2). After a chapter on Jewish magic tales, the book examines the medieval Christian tradition with a special emphasis on the crucial role played by “the preaching orders in maintaining and spreading narratives from 500 and 1500” (75).

Bottigheimer’s analysis of the diverse traditions preceding the Italian Renaissance is at once meticulous and succinct, at times maybe too eager to determine a general interpretation. This is an interesting and serious volume that deserves our attention and respect, even if we may disagree with its conclusions.

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