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REVIEW

Agents of narrative magic: A review of James Wade's *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011)

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In one of the remarks concluding his study of *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, James Wade explains that his goal was to create "a theoretical framework for analyzing the unique qualities that fairies bring to the worlds of their texts" (148). That is precisely what his book offers, providing readers with an informed overview of the intra-diegetic functions of fairies in medieval romance. Its particular leaning towards investigating generic structures and their flexibility, coupled with its strongly marked intra-textual focus, is something that prospective readers need to bear in mind, as Wade's monograph refrains from dealing with the place of fairies in the popular culture of the Middle Ages or with medieval folklore, not even in terms of their conjunction with the fairy realms of literature. Instead, the book focuses above all on how the writers of romance manipulated the conventions of their genre to create their own, idiosyncratic worlds governed by an "internal folklore," which Wade defines as "a unique imagining of fairies and of the Otherworld at large" (3). Such an approach leads him to stress the innovative quality of the creative strategies of medieval authors within the romance genre to the point of downplaying the possible interconnections between their creativity and the actual fairy-faith of medieval folklore. On the other hand, firmly rooted in literary texts which provide for a good basis for comparative analysis, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* manages to offer the reader important and original insights into some of the best-known medieval tales of the supernatural.

The book is divided into four chapters, the first two being of slightly lesser interest to readers concerned with fairies than the other two, but perhaps even more important with regard to the mechanics of romance. Chapter One investigates the figure of Morgan le Fay and a number of other, mostly female, characters across a variety of texts, quickly establishing the tone of the argument, which focuses more on what the role of fairies is in their respective narratives

than on what they are actually like. Wade does enumerate a number of "certain intra-generic expectations as to the essential qualities that fairies possess" (12), such as beauty, arbitrariness of action, or moral ambiguity, but his main point is that knowledge of these tells us more about the inner workings of the genre than about fairies as such. He finds particularly interesting works which only apparently feature fairies, or play with the notion of the fairy supernatural. This leads him to follow the narrative uncertainty surrounding characters such as Melior in *Partonope of Blois*, or the Gawain-Poet's Green Knight, in effect presenting the readers with problematic cases only, where the fairy nature of a given figure is either eventually denied, or remains an open question. The chapter strongly suggests that it is not to clear-cut cases of fairy characters that we should turn if we want to understand why fairies were such an inspiration to medieval authors.

A major strength of Wade's study is his wealth of examples and the fact that he feels equally at home discussing some of the best-known works of medieval English literature such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the more obscure texts such as *Eger and Grime*. Chapter One mentions, among others, the tale of *Melusine*, Marie's *Lanval* and *Richard Coer de Lion*. By contrast, Chapter Two shifts the focus to the chronicle tradition, with Wade tracing the evolution of Avalon from Geoffrey of Monmouth through Wace to Layamon and beyond. Here too the focus is not so much on what Avalon is like but whether it functions as a fairy realm is various texts and what bearing this has on the generic relationship of historical and romance narratives. It is timelessness, Wade argues, which differentiates the two, with fairies bringing into their unique textual worlds precisely the sort of atemporality that has often been hailed as a defining feature of romance. As he puts it, "fairies have a tendency to wreak havoc on historic narrative, on any narrative reconstructing states of the actual world – any narrative chronologically structured" (56). In this manner, they emerge as a major factor in the transition from chronicle to romance.

The book only really comes into its own with regard to fairies in its final two chapters. James Wade does not shy away from applying contemporary critical theory to fairy narratives and does so with considerable skill. The book is at its strongest in its analysis of *Sir Orfeo* through the prism of the thought of Giorgio Agamben, with Wade finally giving fairies their due in his reading of the tale of Orfeo, which, of all other medieval English narratives, provides us with the most comprehensive account of the fairy Otherworld. Wade sets out "to imagine a new intra-diegetic context for Agamben's theories on the state of exception" (76), and by seeing fairies as "adoxic figures of sovereign power" (76) he qualifies in an original way the long-established Boethian reading of fairies in *Sir Orfeo* as forces of fortune or fate. The observation that fairies are not subject to any moral or legal code, and may easily work any kind of magic to produce plot twists at the author's will, is here supplemented by a consistent biopolitical reading of *Sir*

Orfeo that seamlessly integrates Agamben's notions of *homo sacer*, bare life, and sovereignty with the trials and tribulations of the tale's protagonist. Wade also attempts a Kristevan reading of the story at some point and cleverly identifies the mutilated motionless bodies in the Otherworld as abjections, though he stops short of pursuing this intriguing line of thought further. One could certainly hope for more here, since abjection, "that which disturbs identity, system, order" (80), bears a strong connection to the notion of liminality, a defining feature of fairies in both literature and folklore, and an attempt at outlining the exact nature of the relationship between the two theoretical concepts would certainly have made this section of the book more rewarding.

Revisiting *Eger and Grime* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and providing a reading of the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, Wade also mentions in Chapter Three the stories of Walter Map from *De Nugis Curialium* and Thomas Walsingham's late-fourteenth-century *Chronica Maiora*. He does so sparingly, and his sole interest in doing so seems to be to underline the "adoxic" nature of fairies, or fairy-like creatures, even beyond the textual worlds of the romance genre. Here the reader may feel the limitation of the scope of Wade's project, for in reaching beyond romance the book highlights for a moment the potential inherent in this act and raises questions about whether other observations made about fairies in the course of the argument also hold across generic boundaries. Perhaps some of them hold even more for non-romance texts than they do for particular romances. One may be prompted to make this assumption given what Wade has to say about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* at one point. Having established that the Green Knight/Bertilak may be viewed as a fairy – a reasonable supposition in itself at any rate – he assumes the Knight to be an "adoxic agent," just as any other fairy, which brings him to conclude that Bertilak "instigates … the exchange of winnings game … independent of Morgan le Fay's intentions" (100). One has to wonder how any reader of the romance, which leaves the matter an essential mystery, may ever know this. Since the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* strongly emphasizes the subservience of Bertilak's actions to Morgan's purposes, it appears that what Wade does is that he generalizes his observations and extends them over to cover the Gawain-Poet, who, in this respect as well as in many others, does not easily conform to generic expectations. Questionable readings such as this, nevertheless, only underline the interpretive productivity of Wade's approach, which thus reveals not only continuity in the images of fairies and modes of narrative playfulness employed by romance authors, but also unwittingly points to individual departures from the general creative strategies this book competently outlines.

Bringing together two important narratological functions of fairies – those of gift-giving and taboo imposition – and appreciating their interrelatedness in the final Chapter of the book has to be applauded. Wade lucidly notes that there is

an essential "connection between gifts and taboos, as fairy mistresses rarely give the former without imposing the latter" (110). The interplay between these two and desire, especially scopophilic desire, and the recourse to Derrida's aporetic understanding of the gift as something by its very own definition unattainable, are some of the hallmarks of Wade's study. So is the overall picture of the tale of Melusine, addressed throughout the book. *Melusine* appears to be a special case, which other tales of fairy encounters can be measured against. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that whereas in other, similar stories we share the human protagonists' ignorance as to the rationale behind certain prohibitions and injunctions imposed on them by fairy agents, seeing them as arbitrary and unmotivated, in the case of Melusine we know very well something that her husband does not: that forbidding him to see his wife on particular days is not her whim but a result of a curse, whose effects are beyond her control. This raises far-reaching questions whether other tales, where the ignorance about the motives of the fairies applies to characters and readers alike, have not evolved from fuller accounts in which the taboo has an actual logic to it, which only those bound to observe it fail to see. Moreover, if breaking the taboo performs the crucial narrative function of pushing the action forward, what shall we make of texts where this act actually concludes the narrative instead of propelling the action, as in Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Euridyce*, a work Wade does not deal with, probably because it is generically quite distinct from what he sees as proper romances. *Fairies in Medieval Romance* often raises such questions, although its focus on the creation, rather than reception, of romance narratives, leaves it to the reader to pursue these lines of thought.

On the whole, despite its purely literary and narratological focus, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* is a major contribution not only to romance criticism but also to the studies of fairies in the medieval imagination. Readers interested mostly in fairy-faith and its medieval manifestations in folklore and popular culture will naturally find it somewhat lacking, but given the dearth of book-length academic studies of fairies, the publication is most welcome. Early modern scholars have long enjoyed *The Anatomy of Puck* by Katharine Briggs (1959), and Anglo-Saxon studies have already dealt with the issue by means of Alaric Hall's *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England* (2007). James Wade's monograph opens up new perspectives for the study of elves and fairies in Middle English literature and culture.