

Luca Sarti, *Voci di Erin: Il fairy tale irlandese nel terzo millennio fra identità, tradizione e nuove narrazioni* (Napoli: Unior Press, 2024), 291 pp., ISBN 9788867193103

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“Still I keep building castles of fairy gold in the air: we Celts always do.”
Oscar Wilde, *Villa Giudice*, Posillipo (1897)

What role did fairy tales – often considered juvenile and trivial – play in the articulation of Irish cultural identity, and what role do they play in contemporary Irish literature? A possible answer to such a complex, stratified, history-based and context-related question can be identified in Luca Sarti’s *Voci di Erin: Il fairy tale irlandese nel terzo millennio fra identità, tradizione e nuove narrazioni* (“Erin’s Voices: The Irish Fairy Tale in the Third Millennium. Identity, Tradition, and New Narratives”). All quotations from the text are here translated into English). The monograph revives the eerie appeal of traditional Ireland while offering an original contribution to the study of fairy tales and their modern retellings. At the core of *Erin’s Voices* lies the argument that fairy tales remain central to the construction of national identity, which, in the case of the Emerald Isle, is a multi-layered conceptualisation that requires specialistic knowledge.

The book comprises two parts which act as two sides of a diachronic mirror: the first explores notions of “Irishness” in the 19th century, while the second is dedicated to 21st-century re-elaborations of select tales inherited from the ancient Celts. With the aim of delineating and de-constructing the concept of Irish identity, the author reviews Ireland’s postcolonial dimension by embracing the intricacies of the critical debate. Though considered as too “unexotic” (22), too white, too anglicised, and too geographically close to its colonisers to be deemed a proper colony, Ireland is inscribed in the annals of British imperialism as what Sarti has termed a “phantom colony” (36). Indeed, typically colonial practices can be distinctly pointed out: the atrocities endured by the Irish people, the eradication of the native language, and the overall barbarous treatment inflicted under British rule that led to wars, famine and diaspora. The colonisation of Hibernia, which began in the 12th century with the Anglo-Norman invasion, lasted for over seven centuries until 1922, when the fight for independence led to the institution of the Irish Free State — although Ireland formally became a republic only in 1949, following years of tensions and civil wars, with the Republic of Ireland Act.

Ireland is still divided today, with the Northern region of Ulster being a part of the United Kingdom; its partition is the result of many different cultural, political and religious factors. An exploration of Irish national identity therefore means to revisit its turbulent historical past. In this respect, Sarti’s assessment correctly positions Ireland in the postcolonial discourse. It also provides striking examples of subaltern derogatory expression. Amongst these are the racist cartoons of the British satirical magazine *Punch* (1841-2002) in which the Irish and its patriotic heroes are portrayed as monstrous or “terrifying simian creatures” (46). An example is the illustration “The Irish Frankenstein” (1882), which targets the legendary Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Home Rule League, whose influence on the Irish people, according to James Joyce, “defies the critic’s analysis” (“The Shade of Parnell”, 1912). Joyce, who, at the age of nine wrote his very first poem “Et tu, Healy” (1891) marking the occasion of Parnell’s death, was fascinated by this ambivalent heroic figure. In the words of the Irish modernist, Parnell was morally assassinated and betrayed by his fellow countrymen: “they did not throw him to the English wolves: they tore him apart themselves” (“The Shade of Parnell”, 1912). Indeed, if ambivalence is one of the key aspects that problematises the chronicles of Irish trauma, it also serves as a useful analytic lens through which the past can be further questioned and examined. What is now one of the world’s great economic powers (following the boom of the mid-1990s that came to be known as “The Celtic tiger”), was then a fragmented nation with a history which, to paraphrase a famous passage in *Ulysses*, is quite nightmarish (“History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” [James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 2.377]).

Sarti’s elucidations propose a compelling framework for understanding the cultural role that folklore retained during the Celtic Revival, a discussion of which is fundamental to laying the groundwork for any investigation on Irish identity. As Sarti remarks, “the term *Celtic Revival* – or *Celtic Renaissance* – refers to a series of movements marked by a renewed interest for Celtic culture, language and arts, which emerged between the 19th and 20th

centuries” (55) and constitutes a pivotal moment for the preservation of Irish folklore. As the majority of the population spoke English, a big part of the revival included the absorption of ancient Irish literature into what became the Hiberno English, “a hybrid language influenced by *Gaelige*” (63). Among the main promoters of the so-called “Celtic Twilight”, led by the national poet laureate W. B. Yeats, were also Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge and Lady Speranza – the latter being the literary pseudonym of Jane Francesca Agnes Wilde, the Irish activist, writer, translator, and mother of Oscar Wilde.

Irish myths and legends were given new-found life in the anthologies, collections of poems and plays of the revivalists, who transfixed the oral tradition of folk tales into the raw material that inspired their artistic production. Drawing on existing scholarship, Sarti remarks that “it is possible to identify the folk tale as a narrative space that derives from oral tradition, while the fairy tale can refer to both a category of orally transmitted popular stories – the so called tales of magic referenced in the ATU index [the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales] – and a genre of prose which can be based on this oral tradition” (77). Notably, the author highlights how Irish fairy tales often diverge from more familiar European models, frequently resisting the conventional “happy ending”: their protagonists are not the Disney-fied representations of benign magical beings, they are instead mischievous creatures like *banshees*, *changelings* and *Tuatha Dé Dannan*, a kind of fairies that were conceived as the Gods of Pagan Ireland and/or “fallen angels” (87). The emphasis on the darker, more unsettling qualities of Irish fairy tales, as opposed to standardised representations of the current collective imaginary, adds further depth to the analysis, underscoring the distinctiveness of the Irish tradition that is still perpetuated today.

The final chapter, arguably the most intriguing section of the monograph, is dedicated to modern retellings and collections of fairy tales for both children and young adults. Here, Sarti explores how fairy tales are re-imagined to meet contemporary concerns, often related to gender, identity, and disability. His preliminary presentation of select works by Eddie Lenihan, Una Leavy, Marie Heaney, Ita Daly, Malachy and Kathleen Krull act as an introductory section to the original readings of Deirdre Sullivan’s *Tangleweed and Brine* (2017). Sullivan’s feminist adaptations reveal how traditional narratives can be altered to challenge patriarchal structures. Particularly noteworthy is the case of the Irish Cinderella story, “Fair, Brown, and Trembling,” readapted by Sullivan in “Sister Fair”, where the original plot pattern of the three sisters is repurposed to fit the anxieties of our time, ultimately proving the transformative potential of retellings. As Sarti observes, “Sullivan demonstrates how fairy tales, while offering a temporary escape from reality, actually help us understand it” (240) showing how a shift in perspective can generate new meanings and cultural resonances.

Benefitting from a careful balance between historical contextualisation and a pondered engagement with postcolonial theory and folklore studies, the study shows that Irish fairy tales are not static relics but living narratives that continue to shape and influence postmodern literary responses and impulses. *Voci di Erin* represents a significant contribution to the study of Irish literature and folklore, and Sarti’s emphasis on the continued vitality of storytelling validates the preservation of the genre in response to the ever evolving and ever-changing social and cultural reconfigurations of today.