

Helena Březinová, *Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby,*
Pohádky H.Ch. Andersena: mezi romantismem a modernitou,
Brno: Host, 2018, 382 pp.

Helena Březinová's book is remarkable in many respects. It is the first study on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy-tales written in Czech, and it is also a text that you do not want to stop reading once you have begun. Before discussing Březinová's work, I want to emphasize that my approach is that of a comparative literary scholar with expertise in Finnish literature in a transnational context; I am familiar with Nordic literature, but I am not a specialist on Danish literature, let alone on Andersen. At the same time, I count myself among readers who have been fascinated by the Danish writer since early childhood. These are readers (or child listeners) who are enchanted by Andersen's unique mixture of poetry, bleakness, melancholy and cruelty that is appreciated by adults, but also captivates children, who sense and appreciate the truthfulness of the author's ambivalent take on the world. And it is precisely this ambivalence that Březinová writes so convincingly about as well as about many other aspects of Andersen's writing.

Březinová's study is, indeed, written in Czech, which also makes it an important statement since it defies the present pressure to publish only in English. It is, of course, a pity that readers without knowledge of Czech cannot appreciate the work. On the other hand, this decision contributes to the development of scholarly writing in a lesser-spoken language and, in this case, it provides Březinová with a great opportunity to engage with translations and the reception of Andersen's fairy-tales. She dedicates a chapter to Andersen's translations into Czech and, at the end of the book, she contributes to it with her own translations of two of Andersen's fairy tales.

The first chapter, *Andersen's fairy-tales in Czech translations or the literary fairy tale which became a popular folk tale* is dedicated precisely to translations. As the author aptly states, various allusions, puns, and double entendres in Andersen's fairy tales, masked by childish ingeniousness, have, in fact, caustic, critical, ironic, or even nihilistic meanings. Hence, we need accurate translations to convey this meaning (p. 24). Březinová provides the reader with a brilliant analysis of translations and adaptations of Andersen's fairy-tales into Czech, denouncing various ideological manipulations as well as the Disneyfication of the Danish writer in contrast to some excellent and accurate translations by the distinguished Czech translator František Fröhlich (1934–2014). Březinová is not afraid to use the phrase "faithful translation," showing, with the help of specific examples, that the strategy to provide faithful, but accurate, translation does not necessarily

happen at the expense of creativity or artistic quality. In other words, the translator's creative ability does not have to be set against service to the author; on the contrary, for example, irony is something that requires a creative interpretation of the text as well as striving for fidelity. An important remark concerns indirect translations, which have been recently researched, but, at times, also exaggeratedly vindicated and evaluated. An indirect translation is always better than none, but the price is often the loss of the authorial voice, including irony, other rhetorical strategies, and stylistic nuances.

And it is precisely Andersen's language, style, and rhetorical strategies that are highlighted in other chapters; at times, a thorough linguistic, stylistic, and narratological analysis (commendable is especially the analysis of Andersen's narrator) is combined with analyses of the thematization of language in many fairy tales. Březinová shows how metanarrative comments and other narrative strategies add to the ambivalence and subversive potential of the narrative voice; her astute analyses also confirm the interpretation according to which some of Andersen's most famous fairy-tales deal with the theme of failing communication and alienation. Generic analysis is not lacking either; in the second chapter, we find an introduction to the genre of fairy tale in general as well as in the specific context in question, which serves the "major goal" of the book, i.e., "to introduce Andersen's fairy-tales as sophisticated literature for adults" (p. 283). The genre of short story is also discussed. Considerations concerning this subject culminate in the last chapter of the book where they are intertwined with major conclusions about Andersen's *oeuvre*. Most relevant are Březinová's observations on the relation between Andersen's texts and folklore. Throughout the book, close reading in the broad sense of the word is skillfully combined with insightful interpretations; however, this does not happen at the expense of the historical and literary context. On the contrary, the reader is offered a rich background of Danish history and of Andersen's life without falling into the trap of biographical writing. Březinová makes this very clear, pointing out that in the fairy-tales, she is not looking "for the key to the private life of the famous Danish author" (p. 65). Andersen's life and his personality function as context and intertext, especially in case of the careful readings of his letters and diaries.

A similarly elegant approach is manifested in the treatment of Freudian psychoanalysis, which Březinová does not use to "explain" Andersen's texts, let alone his sexuality. Freud provides concepts and notions that enrich the interpretations, without indulging in the endless speculations about the Dane's sexual identity, known from some Andersen studies dating from recent decades. Nor does Březinová avoid the subject; one can only agree with the statement, that "for example, the question of Andersen's homosexuality, heterosexuality or androgyny will not be, most probably, ever solved" (p. 64). All this has important ethical implications. Březinová treats "her" author critically, but with respect. Her approach is dialogical in many different ways. In the subchapter "Transformation of Andersen

research: from positivism to iconology,” she provides a highly informed overview of the subject, and dialogue with Danish and other studies on Andersen is found throughout the book.

The aforementioned generic analysis is skillfully developed especially in the chapter in which Březinová analyzes and describes Andersen’s fairy tales as “modern parables”. In the subsequent chapter, she compares Andersen’s *Shadow* to Franz Kafka’s *Hunger Artist*. At times, one feels like arguing with the author, for example, about the parallels between Andersen’s and Kafka’s ways of using or creating absurdity or about irony on various narrative levels. All this is only positive, since Březinová involves the reader in the process of interpretation so skillfully that the reader feels the need to enter the debate. This engaging style of writing is worth mentioning. The author addresses the reader, plays with various registers, and uses colloquial expressions together with scholarly concepts. I have to admit that at the beginning, I found it a bit intriguing, until I understood that Březinová was inspired by Andersen’s style and writes about it in a way similar to Andersen’s rhetorical strategies; however, she does this without copying or mimicking them. It is a risky way to write a scholarly book, but here it works and pays off! It adds another layer of dialogism, which makes *Nightingales* a very good example of scholarly essay writing, combining immersive and compelling style with solid scholarly erudition. There are not many books like this, and there are not many scholars able to produce them.

Several comments on what is lacking in the book follow. The terms “modern,” “modernist,” “modernity,” and “modernism” used throughout the book, could have been explained more in depth, given the multiple meanings they have in various contexts and languages. On the other hand, I appreciate that Březinová does not employ the cliché of Modern Breakthrough, known all too well from histories of Scandinavian literature. Also lacking is a more thorough gender perspective as well as a deeper take on Andersen’s relationship to faith and spirituality in general. The latter is, indeed, mentioned various times, for example, with regard to the “evangelical” reading of *The Nightingale* in the parable chapter (esp. p. 137) as well as in the sensitive problematization of the metaphysical background of Andersen’s parables (esp. p. 168) and, most of all, in conjunction with Kierkegaard’s criticism of “the lack of a worldview” in Andersen’s writing. Albeit, given the key role this subject played in Andersen’s – both real and fictional – world, it would have been most instructive to elaborate on the issue more extensively. And it would be also interesting to read more about Andersen’s relationship to (“real”) children. However, the list of items that are lacking, which is, of course, purely subjective, could go on forever, and, as always, it is rather unfair. This study comprises a wide enough variety of themes and approaches, from the narratological focus to broad contextualization. Moreover, although some of these might be lacking in this book, Březinová has addressed them in her scholarly articles, which are also available to readers who do not read Czech.

The above remarks should not, by any means, diminish the book's merits. The virtuoso way in which Březinová convinces her reader about the "fragmentary truth of Andersen's fairy-tales" (p. 243) as well as about the ambivalently modern qualities of his texts makes it easy to understand why her work was awarded the Golden Ribbon, the Czech prize for the best theoretical-critical book of the year, and the award for the highest quality academic monograph at Charles University, Prague. One can only hope to read more books like *Nightingales* both in lesser and more spoken languages.

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