

Introduction: The European Fairy-Tale Tradition between Orality and Literacy

IN *FAIRY GODFATHER: STRAPAROLA, VENICE, AND THE FAIRY TALE TRADITION*, Ruth Bottigheimer proposes to correct the historical narrative of the emergence of the fairy tale in Europe and to recognize “Straparola’s role as an originator in the history of modern fairy tale” (Bottigheimer 2002:3). Giovanni Francesco Straparola (c. 1480–c. 1557) is not exactly an unknown figure in folktale history.¹ His book, *Le piacevoli notti* (Pleasant nights), which appeared in English as *The Nights of Straparola* (Straparola [1551–1553] 1894), was long recognized as a predecessor of Giambattista Basile’s *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The tale of tales; published 1634–1636; also known in its 1674 edition as *Il Pentamerone*) and Charles Perrault’s *Contes de ma mere l’Oye* (Tales of Mother Goose; Perrault [1695–1697] 1956). As Bottigheimer (2002:2) points out, the Grimm brothers considered Straparola as their precursor, admiring him as an author who conscientiously drew upon oral tradition. Selections from Straparola’s tales appeared in volumes published in Vienna in 1791, which included twenty-four tales, and in Berlin in 1817, which included eighteen tales and was accompanied by the copious notes of the editor and translator Friedrich Wilhelm Valentine Schmidt. In the mid-nineteenth century, Theodor Benfey found in the case of Straparola implicit support for his theory of the Indian origin of folktales. For him, the availability of Straparola’s tales was felicitous evidence for the possible historical interdependence of oral and literate tales. Since the idea that oral tradition alone could sustain a global diffusion of tales was unfathomable in his days, he relied on the migration and translation of the *Panchatantra*, a classic Indian tale collection, as a support for his Indian origin hypothesis (Benfey 1859). The availability of a European tale collection that demonstrated the possibility of such historical interdependence provided him with further support for his theory.

In her book, Bottigheimer rekindles Benfey’s conception of literature as inspiration for oral storytelling, and she proceeds to attribute to Straparola a far greater role in the history of the folktale. She argues that he was not merely a link in the back-and-forth transitions between oral storytelling and literature but was an original literary innovator who created a new, previously unknown folktale form—the “rise tale.” Associated with this form, and thematically central to it, is the narrative role of a magical benefactor in human or animal guise; Bottigheimer considers this narrative figure to be Straparola’s literary invention as well. In her view, Straparola acted as an

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agent of a newly rising urban middle class and expressed in his “rise tales” its socio-economic aspirations. While the consideration of folktales as a reflection of social and cultural values has been a staple of folklore research, the proposition that a literary writer originated a folklore form, and created a new narrative role to go along with this form, is revolutionary for the field.

Such a clear, precise, and well-defined proposition, which is limited to a specific literary-historical case, could be tested like a scientific hypothesis. Karl Popper proposed that a scientific system “require[s] that its logical form shall be such that it can be singled out, by means of empirical tests, in a negative sense: *it must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience*” (1959:41). Although Bottigheimer formulates her hypothesis in descriptive rather than logical terms, in her challenging study she offers a rare opportunity for testing a proposition that concerns a critical period in the history of the folktale: the era of the print revolution (see Baron, Lindquist, and Shevlin 2007; Eisenstein 1979, 1983). This was a period in which chapbooks, pamphlets, broadsides, and other forms of popular printing entered the domains of the marketplace, the family room, and the coffeehouse, as well as the community hall and bar, where oral entertainment previously ruled.

Regarding the European folktale tradition, print also changed the rules of historical evidence and entrapped folktales in a historical paradox. Chronologically, many literary tales pre-date the recordings of their oral counterparts. In fact, it is quite likely that the publication of the literary fairy tales encouraged the recording of oral tales (Fink 1966; Grätz 1988; Warner 1995; Zipes 1989). If positive empirical evidence dictates literary-historical conclusions, then the literary fairy tale could claim the first-born right, as Bottigheimer argues. But is literary visibility the only testimony of existence in historical reality?

The purpose of the articles in this special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* is to reconcile the historical paradox of the folktale, to search for and hopefully discover European evidence: either textual allusions to, or even better, full recordings of, tales that correspond in their form and theme to the “rise tale” but that appeared in the years preceding Straparola. The need for such a discussion became apparent following Bottigheimer’s lecture titled “Fairy Tale Origins, Fairy Tale Dissemination, and Folk Narrative Theory” on July 30, 2005, at the Fourteenth Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) in Tartu, Estonia (Bottigheimer 2006). The stormy discussion that ensued was not typical of the measured exchanges that followed other conference presentations. It became clear that Bottigheimer had touched an intellectual nerve and that a resolution of the issues she had introduced was necessary. The core of this controversy is not only about Straparola’s role in the history of the European folktale or fairy tale. In the sixteenth century, print emerged as a dominant force in society, replacing script and competing relentlessly with oral performance in the transmission of tales and songs. The issues raised by Bottigheimer, then, have profound ramifications for the folkloristic conception of society and culture. Has orality been replaced by print? Have narrative traditions become passively subservient to a literary elite and lost their creative, performative vitality? Has written literature overshadowed the artistry of oral narration? The implications of Bottigheimer’s thesis concern some of the fundamental tenets of folklore studies, so

much so that it has become incumbent upon us to re-examine our assumptions and re-explore the facts of the literary history of folk narratives. This we set out to do.

To further discuss Bottigheimer's thesis, we organized a roundtable titled "The European Fairy Tale Tradition: Between Orality and Literacy" for the 2006 meeting of the American Folklore Society in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The following articles, and Bottigheimer's response to them, are the revised and expanded versions of these roundtable presentations. On behalf of Francisco Vaz da Silva and Jan Ziolkowski, I would like to express our admiration of Ruth Bottigheimer. She knew ahead of time that we would challenge her theory seriously, yet she did not back down, and she continued to engage us and participate with us in a dialogue that we found most stimulating. In the years that passed between the inception and the completion of this project, Ruth, Francisco, and I each suffered personal losses, and we would like to dedicate this issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* to the memory of Ruth's brother, L. Edward Ballenger (1935–2008); to the memory of Francisco's brother, Salvador Gentil Vaz da Silva (1961–2009); and to the memory of my brother, Emmanuel Ben-Amos (1923–2007).

Note

1. There are several common variants of Straparola's name. "Giovanni Francesco Straparola" appears in the English translation of his work (Straparola [1551–1553] 1894:xi) and often in studies of literary history (e.g., Dunlop [1896] 1970:207–14). It was "Giovan Francesco" in the original publication of *Le piacevoli notti* in Venice in 1551, as well as in the recent Italian critical edition of that work (Straparola [1551–1553] 2000). Occasionally he is also mentioned as "Gianfrancesco" (e.g., in Merriam-Webster 1995:1973). Bottigheimer often refers to him as Zoan or Zuan, a dialectical rendering of Giovanni that was used in his first publication in 1508, *Opera nova* (Bottigheimer 2002:1, 45, 108).

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