

Annotated Bibliography for Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver*

Schanoes, Veronica. "Thorns into Gold: Contemporary Jewish American Responses to Antisemitism in Traditional Fairy Tales." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 132, no. 525, 2019, pp. 291–309.

Schanoes begins by establishing the ethnocentric tendencies of fairy tales, specifically "Rumpelstiltskin," which she cites as the inspiration for several recent novels, including *Spinning Silver*. Many Jewish authors have responded to the antisemitism at the core of "Rumpelstiltskin." In doing so, they "reevaluate Jewishness and unite it with the genre of the fairy tale" (294), exploring Jewish storytelling itself and placing Jewish women at the center of their retellings. Endeavoring to rectify the isolation and dehumanization of Jewish people, they create complex familial relationships for them and confront the stark absence of Jewish women in many antisemitic fairy tales. As Schoneos writes, "rather than a gentile story about the Jew as domestic Other, these have become Jewish stories with women as authors" (296).

In her reading, the novel explores what it means to be Jewish, "whether it is a matter of external persecution, religious belief, conscious choice and practice, or racialized physical characteristics" (301). In particular, it addresses the diasporic consciousness of Jewish culture. Historically, diaspora has, in part, destroyed any kind of unified local culture for Jews, resulting in a strong connection to the text of the Torah and the Yiddish language to reconstruct communal bonds.

Schanoes also examines the potential for folklore to be both healing and damaging. She acknowledges how this kind of two-fold effect of storytelling emerges in *Spinning Silver* as Miryem develops perseverance in spite of the stories told about her father, but also seems to harden her heart to achieve this determination. Ultimately, Schanoes concludes by addressing why retellings of fairy tales can be a mechanism for healing for the Jewish community and promote self-awareness for non-Jewish readers. She stresses the importance of engaging with and destabilizing stereotypes in fairy tales to "(reframe) it in a way that captures the big questions about Jewishness, creating a whole new genre in and of itself" (306). It is eye-opening to realize that the traditional Anglo-European storytelling mechanisms that are so popular today are perhaps not so inclusive or universal as they seem.

Strazzanti, Nicola Maurizio. "Jewish English: Re-Territorializing Yiddishland in the United States." *American English(Es): Linguistic and Socio-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Roberto Cagliero and Anna Belladelli, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, pp. 24–39.

Strazzanti defines Jewish English as "a variety of American English" (24) made more complicated by the non-existence, historically, of a singular Jewish homeland. The home Jewish people made in America, he argues, resulted in two, sometimes opposing desires: to find comfort

and belonging in Jewish heritage, and to be accepted into mainstream Anglo-American culture. Given the “intimate awkwardness of displaced people,” however, it could be difficult for Jewish immigrants to blend into a cultural mainstream that was, at times, outright antagonistic towards their needs or desires.

Basically, Strazzanti explains how the variety of dialects in America combined with the elusive nature of meaning within language complicate immigrants’ experiences. He claims that the “complex quilt” (25) of different dialects in American English creates a power dynamic, placing American English over “other, less ‘powerful’ *hyphenated* English(es)” (26). Strazzanti also incorporates Derrida’s term *différance*, a play on words that involves the idea that words have *deferred* meaning because they always refer to other words, and the idea that language is self-referential and achieves meaning because words are *different* from one another. In Strazzanti’s words, *différance* “dislocates its substance, disseminates its component parts spatially, almost geographically” (27); this concept allows the reader to understand immigrants’ attempts to balance the connection to their own culture and the desire to assimilate to the dominant one as a means to avoid subordination.

Jewish cultural identity, therefore, involved a separation of language, territory, and nation; in other words, it underwent a “displacing process of *detritorialization*” (31). This separation requires a language that is “outside of any specific time and space, any concrete history and geography” (31). To clarify, Strazzanti introduces Homi Bhabba’s term “DissemiNation,” which is defined as “a nation made of words, and that continuously shifts its geographical and semantic borders to its periphery” (32). In practice, this results in English influenced by Yiddish, or “local Jewish *versions* of languages that are *close* to Standard language” (34).

Ultimately, Strazzanti’s article provides a background for understanding Miryem’s family and their position in their village and Vysnia. Miryem’s father’s timidity as a moneylender may be an attempt to avoid antagonizing the other members of their community and to adopt the mainstream culture. However, since their neighbors do not entirely accept them as full members of the community and refuse to pay their debts, Miryem’s family lives in quasi-poverty. Miryem’s insistence on collecting what her family is owed, on the other hand, prioritizes her family over the village. Her loyalty seems to reinforce the importance of maintaining a balance between Jewish culture and assimilating into the mainstream.

Zipes, Jack. “The Cultural Evolution of Storytelling and Fairy Tales: Human Communication and Memetics.” *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 15–31.

The first chapter of Zipes’ book explores how theories of cultural evolution, storytelling, and memetics explain why we enjoy fairy tales and how they remain relevant today. He begins by defining storytelling as a way “to communicate knowledge and experience in social contexts” (15), using Arthur Frank’s theory that stories are interwoven with other stories, people’s cultures

and societies. The intricacies of stories mean that they are alive; they “breathe” (15) as they evolve, changing the cultures that surround them.

Zipes also uses the ideas of Marshall Poe to explain that humans communicate to be heard and to remain relevant. Telling stories was (and is) essential to gain influence in a community, and thus “language can ... be seen more as a means than as an end” (19). Stories that have been repeated and retold become tradition, with shared experience playing a vital role in gaining influence with an audience. Still, as people retell stories, they also alter the plots or the characters to suit their values and beliefs. As Zipes explains, “(The story) defines itself differently while adhering to a tradition of tales that may be indecipherable but is inherent in the telling ... of the story” (21).

Zipes then provides an overview of how several simple genres combine to form the “building blocks of more complex literary narratives,” including the fairy tale. Aesop’s fables, for example, were retold and modified, spreading through the world as an intricate web of interrelated stories. Zipes traces the fable’s evolution to the fairytale, saying that “the fairytale has always been created as a *counterworld* to the reality of the storyteller,” (26) which allows it to both address the real world and point out what it is lacking. By creating this counterworld, fairytales and fables both grapple with social formations and imagine something better. While fairytales and fables evolve and change gradually, they stay true to this simple pattern.

Finally, Zipes compares the history of the fairy tale to the cultural significance of memetics. A meme, according to Richard Dawkins, is a “unit of cultural transmission ... tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (29). Memes, similar to fairy tales, are living things because they evolve through repetition and memory, which have a “creative function, serving as grist for the mill of cultural change” (30). Ultimately, Zipes notes how both memes and fairytales emerge from and instigate change within their cultures.

Spinning Silver is itself a retelling of and a response to “Rumpelstiltskin.” The novel displays the power of storytelling in determining whose stories get told. By focusing the story on marginalized groups, Novik employs the evolutionary elements of fairytale retellings to address issues within the real world. She also addresses how iteration can alter how we interpret reality, specifically when Oleg attacks Miryem in chapter seven: “[I]t was the story again, only a little different; a story Oleg had found to persuade himself he wasn’t doing wrong, that he had a right to what he’d take or cheat, and I knew he wouldn’t listen to me” (93). Miryem understands the ability of stories to justify evil actions or silence marginalized peoples; the novel follows her efforts to overcome oppression by embracing her own storytelling power.

--. “The Tales of Innocent Persecuted Heroines and Their Neglected Female Storytellers and Collectors.” *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, by Jack Zipes, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 83–103.

In this chapter, Jack Zipes gives an overview of several late-nineteenth-century female collectors and folklorists, including Nannette Lévesque, Rachel Busk, Božena Němcová, and Laura Gonzenbach, whose works have been widely overlooked. He notes that female characters in fairytales are largely passive, submissive, and helpless because of “a general patriarchal view of women as...born to serve the interests of men” (83). These female folklorists’ stories, however, do not fit into this typical structure; instead, their stories depict women who overcome persecution with strength and perseverance.

Many of the female folklorists' stories include women who defy the malicious desires of a father figure or stepmother, representative of the patriarchy. These women use their intelligence to escape danger, sometimes with the help of a spiritual or supernatural being. One of Lévesque's more famous stories involves a woman who escapes her stepmother and father's murderous plots through spiritual intervention. Similarly, Busk transcribes one story where a woman "takes destiny into her hands, overcoming the lascivious desires of the devil and her father" (94). Others, such as Němcová, more directly promoted female independence, advocating for socialism and feminism, as well as women's involvement in politics in Czechoslovakia. Gonzenbach, an upper-class German woman who translated folktales from lower-class peasant women from Sicily, also promoted a feminist position in relation to women's "proper behavior" (98) and "expose(d) unjust practices" (98) that were common at the time. Zipes contrasts her work with the Brothers Grimm's collections. While the Grimm brothers "more or less 'bourgeoisified' their tales," (100) adding patriarchal perspectives, Gonzenbach's work "respected the 'authorial' and ideological perspective of the narrators" (100).

Ultimately, Lévesque, Busk, Němcová, and Gonzenbach offer a new perspective on methods of transcribing and collecting folk tales, one that significantly differs from the more popular male folklorists, "thereby altering our concept of what constituted an oral wonder tale and literary fairy tale in the nineteenth century" (100). Their existence and popularity offer the potential for renewed understanding the history of folktales, enabling us to consider the experiences of marginalized groups. At the same time, Zipes cautions that, while the lack of documentation makes distinguishing the collections of male and female folklorists difficult, "it is possible to approximate, transform, and appropriate their printed equivalents by paying respect to obfuscated voices and neglected words of the past" (103).

Naomi Novik, like these women folklorists, dismantles patriarchal stereotypes and portrays tough, capable women who seek control of their own lives. All three of the main characters experience conflict with a patriarchal system: Irena with her father and Mirnatius, Miryem with the Staryk King, and Wanda with her father. Novik adds her voice to the world of folklore and fairytale retellings, providing a modern, empowering perspective on the old, often patriarchal classics of the past.

Bernárdez, Sara González. "I Didn't Offer to Shake Hands; No One Would Shake Hands with a Jew': Escapism and the Ideological Stance in Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver*." *Bruma: Research Journal on the Fantastic*, vol. 7, no. 2, Sept. 2019, pp. 111–131.

Bernardez claims that, by spreading awareness of and speaking out against oppression, *Spinning Silver* is a mechanism for social activism. She explains that escapism is an essential feature of both fairytales and fantasy, "a way to avoid becoming overwhelmed or defeated by the harshness of reality, to obtain a glimmer of hope in order to face it again" (114). Fantasy and reality are therefore linked; fantasy simply reframes reality, enabling readers to better understand the world because it has been presented to them in a defamiliarized way.

Novik employs both fantasy and fairytales to subvert gender stereotypes through what Jack Zipes calls "transfiguration" (118), or a retelling that aims to "break, shift, debunk, or rearrange the traditional motifs to liberate the reader from the programmed mode of literary reception" (118). Novik utilizes transfiguration by writing female characters that defy the gender stereotypes usually found in fairy tales. Her characters deconstruct fairytale sexism as they "seize control of their own fate, defying patriarchal constructions surrounding them without putting any

special powers to use” (121). Wanda cares for her brothers and lives independently, Irina becomes a powerful leader, and Miryem acquires magical powers on her own terms. There is also significance in the fact that the abilities that the characters have are earned, rather than magically granted by an otherworldly being (a common convention in fairy tales). This important detail empowers Novik’s characters, deconstructing the “helpless maiden” of many mainstream fairytales.

Bernardez concludes by emphasizing that “it is very much possible to employ a fantastic story in a socially conscious and subversive manner” (128), as Novik does when she refuses to shy away from the realities of antisemitism. *Spinning Silver* invokes antisemitism to “retell, but also to respond” (122) to “Rumpelstilskin.” It depicts antisemitism realistically, almost “jarringly against the traditional, fantastic fairy-tale background of the story” (122). For example, Novik has Miryem recall the all-too-familiar stories that she’s heard about the oppression of Jews outside her village. Novik also addresses the stereotype that Jews are money-grabbers by making the members of Miryem’s family moneylenders. Yet, Novik strikes an important balance between Miryem’s cold, analytical nature and her parents’ kindness and generosity, exposing the more complex relationships that exist within Jewish families. To further complicate this dynamic, Miryem’s unmoving attitude towards her family’s debtors is motivated by a genuine desire to take care of her family and bring them out of poverty, a noble goal. By addressing antisemitism in a fantasy setting, “Novik disavows the universality of the fantasy hero in order to focus on the very specific circumstances which surround a marginalized protagonist” (128).