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Decolonizing Fairy-Tale Studies

I take little comfort in the qualifying phrase “not quite” when Jonathan Gottschall says in a 2008 interview about the state of literary and cultural studies, “I’m not quite calling for total disciplinary annihilation and genocide” (Peterson B9; emphasis mine). Now, I’m not sure whether annihilation comes in degrees less than total, but if it does, even a little bit of annihilation and genocide goes a long way—metaphorically or not. Gottschall, who frequently trains his sights on folktale and fairy-tale studies, does not approve of what passes for literary and cultural scholarship. “It’s not such a good time to be a literary scholar,” he writes in an article published last May in the Ideas section of the Boston Globe (“Measure”). It’s not a good time for us, Gottschall asserts, because “over the last decade or so, more and more literary scholars have agreed that the field has become moribund, aimless, and increasingly irrelevant to the concerns not only of the ‘outside world,’ but also to the world inside the ivory tower” (“Measure”). Perhaps I have spent too many years in the company of the Brothers Grimm, but the fairy-tale allusion embedded in this description demands attention—literary scholarship as a Sleeping Beauty lying moribund and forgotten in her room in the castle’s old tower, waiting for the kiss of a prince to bring her back to life. As Gottschall asserts in concluding his Boston Globe manifesto, “If we literary scholars can summon the courage and humility” to walk through the imagined “wall dividing the two cultures of the sciences and the humanities,” “we can reawaken a long-dormant spirit of intellectual adventure” (“Measure”).

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1 The full context for these quoted lines—including the imagery of territorial discovery, heroic quest, and reawakening—is:
A prolific, polemic, and engaging advocate of Literary Darwinism who has been featured in articles in the *New York Times Magazine* (Max) and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Peterson), Gottschall advocates that

Literary studies should become more like the sciences. Literature professors should apply science’s research methods, its theories, its statistical tools, and its insistence on hypothesis and proof. Instead of philosophical despair about the possibility of knowledge, they should embrace science’s spirit of intellectual optimism. If they do, literary studies can be transformed into a discipline in which real understanding of literature and the human experience builds up along with all of the words (“Measure”).

The disciplinary transformation Gottschall has in mind is based on the premise that empirical science can bring intellectual enlightenment to the domain of literary studies—that it can break the magic spell cast by Postmodernism, Feminism, and Marxism to produce real knowledge. Like Sleeping Beauty, we need only keep our eyes closed and let science have its way.

Above all, these changes would require looking with fresh eyes on the landscape of academic disciplines, and noticing something surprising: The great wall dividing the two cultures of the sciences and humanities has no substance. We can walk right through it.

If we literary scholars can summon the courage and humility to do so, the potential benefits will reverberate far beyond our field. We can generate more reliable and durable knowledge about art and culture. We can reawaken a long-dormant spirit of intellectual adventure. We can help spur a process whereby not just literature, but the larger field of the humanities recover some the intellectual momentum and ‘market share’ they have lost to the sciences. And we can rejoin the oldest, and still the premier, quest of all the disciplines: to better understand human nature and its place in the universe. (“Measure”)

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2 For Gottschall and Joseph Carroll’s response to Peterson’s article, see “Letters to the Editor.”

3 “Literary Darwinism conceives of itself as the primary opposition to cultural theory in all its forms: Marxism, poststructuralism, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism, and so forth” (Peterson B8).
Before I pursue Gottschall’s expeditions into the territory of folktale and fairy-tale studies and their connection to the topic of my paper—decolonizing fairy-tale studies—I need to qualify my response to Gottschall’s work and his larger agenda concerning literary studies. I have in general no bone to pick with what is being called Literary Darwinism, a school of research that “emphasizes the discovery of the evolutionary patterns of behavior within literary texts” (Peterson B7). So Gottschall’s advocacy of Literary Darwinism per se is not what brings me to open this paper with a discussion of his work. I also do not wish to question the responsible use of empirical methods, such as statistics, in the arena of fairy-tale studies.

Instead, I want to begin by considering how Gottschall utilizes folktales and fairy tales to make his claims for the methods he is advocating—to “showcase,” as he says, “the promise of applying a scientific approach” (“Measure”). In his effort to plant the flag of science and empirical studies in the field of literary scholarship, he exploits fairy tales and identifies fairy-tale studies as a territory in which in-roads can be easily made. What makes Gottschall’s work on fairy tales so interesting is its unwitting reliance on a problematic discourse that remains embedded in the study of folklore, folktales, and fairy tales. Gottschall makes assumptions and employs a discourse that undercuts his work and exposes the importance of decolonizing fairy-tale studies—of finding useful critical and self-reflective ways of talking about fairy tales in a global context. What is it that brings a scholar to advocate disciplinary change in terms—even

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4 In his book of 2006 entitled Why Fairy Tales Stick, Jack Zipes has employed ideas from sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, in tandem with other theoretical perspectives and tools, to offer an explanation for the persistence and adaptability of folktales and fairy tales.

metaphorical terms—of annihilation and genocide? And how is this metaphorical conquest of a genre and a discipline carried out?

Individually or in collaboration with others, Gottschall has made several forays into the field of fairy-tale studies in at least seven separate articles and essays (see the list of works cited). Here, however, I want to focus on the article entitled “The ‘Beauty Myth’ Is No Myth: Emphasis on Male-Female Attractiveness in World Folktales,” published in 2008 in the journal Human Nature. It is this co-authored article that Gottschall summarizes and showcases for the general public in his Boston Globe piece. The objective of Gottschall and his coauthors in this study is to employ a scientifically based methodology to test whether an emphasis on female physical attractiveness is a universally human phenomenon that is due to evolution or whether it is a predominantly Western phenomenon reflecting a social construction deriving from patriarchal power structures, a position which they attribute to feminist scholars. To test these two hypotheses they “tallied references to male versus female attractiveness in 90 collections of traditional folktales from 13 diverse cultural areas.” As a result of the study, they found that “across culture areas information on physical attractiveness was much more likely to be conveyed for female characters” (174), leading to the conclusion that there is a universal emphasis on female beauty due to evolutionary factors and that the idea of a predominantly Western construction of female beauty is a myth.

My intent is not to debate the conclusions of this research or to question the appropriateness of the scientific method per se. Instead, I want to examine the assumptions

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Gottschall makes when he chooses folktales and fairy tales to demonstrate his theory and method and when he studies those “90 collections of traditional folktales from 13 diverse cultural areas.”

Gottschall and his collaborators specify four reasons for selecting “folktales as [their] cross-cultural sample”:

First, folktales are a universal and indigenous narrative form and therefore allow the compilation of samples possessing maximal cultural diversity. Second, they are a “cheap” form of cross-cultural data, available to any researcher with library privileges. Third, although folktales are not pristine, having suffered potential distortion through poor translation and the whims of collectors and editors, it can be argued that they provide a more direct perspective on life in traditional societies than the heavily mediated accounts of anthropologists and ethnographers. As the folklorist Alan Dundes writes, folktales can be approached as a form of ‘autobiographical ethnography’ (1968). [Fourth], most of the 90 collections in our sample date to within a few decades of the year 1900, before many of the represented cultures were saturated by Western influence and—more specifically—by images of attractiveness conveyed by Western mass media. (177)

This statement offers a clear rationale for selecting the folktale genre to test whether an attraction to beauty is a universal phenomenon generated by evolutionary forces or a predominantly Western phenomenon constructed by patriarchal attitudes in Western culture. From the perspective of fairy-tale studies, however, some of these claims require significant qualification, especially in light of research that has been conducted over the last forty years. The assumptions made about the nature of folktales and what they express or represent are particularly problematic. In fact, with the possible exception of the statement that folktales constitute “a
‘cheap’ form of cross-cultural data,” each of the reasons given for selecting folktales as an object of study shares fundamentally the same premise—that is, the idea that folktale collections contain simple narratives serving as essentially direct expressions of “traditional” societies. And in each case the assumption that traditional narratives are simple, direct expressions relies on the assumption that all the published texts have oral origins, that orality is pure and natural, and that this natural origin essentially survives intact and defines each text’s unequivocal and primary level of significance, whatever the language of that text and despite whatever mediation, alteration, or appropriation might occur at the hands of collectors, editors, and translators.

These inextricably linked assumptions and oversimplifications, which have dogged folktale and fairy-tale studies for two centuries, permeate Gottschall’s methodological description. “All collections [used in the study]” we are told, “were of traditional tales, originally transmitted orally” (177). While Gottschall is generally aware of the issues pertaining to collecting, editing, and translating, and while he acknowledges them explicitly as “potential limitations” (179), he does not pursue these particular problems, makes no effort to examine the collections and editions critically or historically, ignores the important work that has shown us how to understand the complexity of folklore collections and translations, and ultimately returns to his initial premises about the nature of folktales.7

Take his discussion of the ninety collections that comprise his data sample. In specifically addressing his study’s “potential limitations,” Gottschall points out first and foremost that “there are possible sources of bias in the folktale collections.” He correctly considers “the most salient”

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7 I am not suggesting that the “potential limitations” identified by Gottschall are not addressed in the article, which in fact devotes four pages to a discussion of limitations (179-82). The problems related to the collections and translations in his sample, however, are not adequately considered, as I explain here.
of these the fact that “about 60% of the collections in [the] sample were collected, edited, translated, and in some cases retold by Westerners, usually males, between 1860 and 1930. It is therefore possible that the sample has been distorted by the biases—male and Western—of ethnographers, collectors, and editors of an imperial era” (179). This is a crucial observation, and acknowledgment of this important limitation attests to the scientific objectivity to which Gottschall and his team aspire. Still, Gottschall identifies this only as a “potential limitation” and does not evaluate any of the collections individually. And while he offers reasons why concerns about gender bias can be “meliorated” (179), he does not adequately address the significant issue of Western bias on the part of colonial folklorists. So despite the admission that using predominately texts produced by colonialist-era folklorists is problematic and constitutes a possible limitation that “cannot be dismissed” (179), Gottschall does effectively dismiss the problem by relying on the assumed purity and authenticity of his texts. As he writes, “Although the folktales in our sample were mostly compiled, edited, and translated by Westerners (and thus may reflect Western biases), the tales were originally composed in traditional societies and can cautiously be assumed to reflect the traditional attitudes and social patterns of the populations that produced them” (178). While it is indeed possible to use sources collected in colonial times to learn about the societies and cultures that these attempt to document, critical awareness that the texts produced by collectors and translators are forms of intercultural communication dictates more caution in dealing with these texts than I think we find in this study. At minimum, our awareness of the collections’ origins requires that we engage the texts individually and not

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8 The “traditional societies” that Gottschall has in mind are evident in the categories he uses to classify the tales in his sample: “The sample was also divided into two broad levels of cultural complexity. The first level consists of tales that circulated primarily in unassimilated band and tribal societies, though the tales may have only been written down after assimilation. The second level consists of tales that circulated mainly in preindustrial state societies” (182; emphasis mine).
simply in bulk. This is evident from recent research on colonial collectors, particularly in the work of Sadhana Naithani.9

In her book *In Quest of Indian Folklore*, Naithani convincingly demonstrates the complex and sometimes hidden intercultural process by which colonial collections of Indian folklore and folktales were gathered, edited, and translated. As she explains, the production of English-language texts in colonial India must be considered “in the entirety of colonial hermeneutics,” which involved the negotiation of “many stages and layers of communication and relationships” (24). One of these stages, of course, involved the double-barreled process of translation. As Naithani states: “One of the main features of the colonial British collection and publication of Indian folk narratives in the second half of the nineteenth century was the transformation of orality not just into written words, but into the written words of another language. As Indian folklore has been textualized, it has moved from dialects to foreign language(s). The reason for and the implication of this were the same: the published collections were not meant for those who had told the stories, but for British and other European readers” (19). Especially crucial, and especially obscured, in this process has been the essential role of the Indian informants as collaborators in the production of colonial-era collections. The work and identity of these so-called “native assistants” (52), typically went unacknowledged. As Naithani writes in the case of Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube, whose relationship with William Crooke is the focus of her book, “Colonial processes of the production of knowledge had gulped his labor without much trace” (50). These individuals remain mostly invisible, and their work as intercultural mediators and their impact on the texts that were collected from the equally invisible narrators remains

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9 See, for example, Naithani, “Colonizer”; Naithani, *In Quest*; and Naithani, “Prefaced Space.”
obscured and unexplored. And it is precisely the invisibility of this web of relationships involving narrators, collectors, editors, and translators (not to mention publishers) that enables the assumption that colonial-era texts—not only from India but from other colonized countries, continents, and cultures—give expression to an unequivocal folk voice, that they “reflect the traditional attitudes and social patterns of the populations that produced them.”

Dismissing or minimizing the problems—or let’s just say: the unique features—of colonial-era folktale collections, as Gottschall’s study ultimately does, is really a function of a colonialist point of view embedded in his study. The same unconscious sleight of hand that transformed oral tales from India or other colonized cultures into written English-language tales without recognizing the work of local collaborators is duplicated in a study that, at best, does not more seriously engage this issue or, at worst, does not genuinely understand what the colonial process of collecting implies for the texts it produces. Ignoring the dynamics of the translation process, dismissing the importance of the “original” text and narrator in their own right, assuming the full transparency of collected, edited, and translated texts, and viewing them as means to an end, as a “cheap” resource—to be exploited in the economy and service of the scientific method—all the while asserting a fundamental interest in the authentic voice of the indigenous population—perpetuates a colonialist point of view and throws into question the degree to which the sample actually reflects cultural diversity.

While Gottschall documents efforts “to maximize geographical and cultural variability” (177), the study nonetheless treats collections and editions without regard to their specific identities and qualities, which results in a certain indifference to the nature and complexity of the texts selected. Indifference, of course, is not the same as scientific objectivity. In this study, the
requirements of method trump the importance of knowledgeably assessing and understanding the
origin, identity, and nature of the texts being studied. “Because our method required digitized
texts,” the study tells us, “the bulk of our samples (60 collections) consists of copyright-expired
collections that were freely available through an assortment of reputable Internet libraries”—
including Project Gutenberg and the Internet Sacred Texts Archive (177). This pragmatic
methodological requirement explains the abundance of colonial-era collections in the sample.
And operating on the assumption that such texts are ultimately transparent, one-dimensional
reflections of indigenous cultures, no analysis was conducted to assess whether the many
English-language, colonial-era collections they had assembled truly assured cultural variability.

A review of the ninety collections and editions making up the sample used in Gottschall’s
study demonstrates a nominal diversity in the selection. On the one hand, the selected collections
are displayed as representing a range of cultural areas, including these categories: Aboriginal
Australia, Africa, Arctic Coast, Europe, India, Japan, Mayan, Middle East, Northwest Coastal
Indians, Oceania (minus Australia), Southwestern North American Indians, South American
Indigenous, American Indians (Miscellaneous), and Miscellaneous Collections (183-84). A
closer look, however, seriously undercuts the assumption that these editions are only slightly
removed from oral culture and that even in translation they “reflect the traditional attitudes and
social patterns of the populations that produced them.” Consider these examples:

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10 The description for choosing the collections to be used in the sample begs the question whether it might not have been possible to use collections in languages other than English—especially for a study that hypothesizes a universally human phenomenon. Certainly a very wide variety of texts exists on the Internet and otherwise in digital format. See Uther’s Deutsche Märchen und Sagen and Europäische Märchen und Sagen, CD-ROM collections which together offer about 25,000 folktales from roughly 50 European linguistic traditions.
Representing the Middle East are four collections, listed as having been published between 1850 and 1901. One of these four representatives of the indigenous oral folktale of the Middle East is Sir Richard Francis Burton’s translation of the *Arabian Nights*. Indifference to the text and what it represents begins with the basic fact that Burton’s multivolume translation was published from 1885 to 1888, and not in 1850, as Gottschall indicates, apparently having picked up the erroneous date from the digitized text at the Internet Sacred Text Archive, whose error has now spread to countless Web sites dealing with the *Arabian Nights*. When using “cheap” data, you often get what you pay for. Beyond that historical inaccuracy, however, there is no recognition that Burton’s complex, layered literary translation, which is both admired and considered problematic, bears the signs of Burton’s own visible efforts to heighten “exotic” aspects, elaborate his own view of Arab culture, and to shock and titillate his Victorian readers.

As Husain Haddawy points out in his own translation of the *Arabian Nights*, “Burton’s translation . . . is not so much a true translation of the *Nights* as it is a colorful and entertaining concoction” (xxiii). It does not, in any case, provide a “direct perspective on life in a traditional society” (Gottschall et al., “Beauty Myth”’ 177). This is confirmed by Cristina Bacchilega’s observation that “translations of the *Arabian Nights* into European languages reveal more about the translators’ mindset and the concerns of the time than about the Muslim or Eastern manners and customs that they purport to represent” (“Translation” 989).

Other examples of the study’s careless assumption about the collections in its sample come quickly to the fore. One of the six collections representing India is S. L. Sadhu’s *Folk Tales from Kashmir*. Published in 1962, this edition is not a translation of oral tales but “a collection of Kashmir folk-tales retold by the author—retold in English rather than translated or recorded, for they are mostly introduced by reflections and moralizations which are clearly no
part of a traditional folk-story,” as J. H. Hutton has pointed out. Another of the Indian
collections, P. W. Jacob’s *Hindoo Tales* of 1873, bears a subtitle (not given as part of the study’s
bibliographic citation) that declares the stories to be *Freely Translated from the Sanscrit*. The
realities of texts like these undermine the assumption that collections in English translation still
have a direct relationship to oral narratives and may not be influenced by Western cultural
attitudes. The study’s admission that they should be used with caution is meaningless if they are
employed without a critical understanding of the context and manner in which they were
produced and without an informed literary and cultural analysis of the texts themselves.

As exploited in the study, texts constitute nothing more than strings of words—“8.17
million words,” as we are told (177). The methods used by Gottschall and his co-authors do not
take into account the contexts in which the words of the texts might have been produced and
received. Having “compiled a list of 58 adjectives which, in English, are frequently used to
indicate male and/or female attractiveness or unattractiveness,” they used “Microsoft Word’s
‘find and replace’ function . . . [to tag and highlight] all of the keywords in the collections, and
all of their relevant variants (e.g., pretty, prettier, prettiest; ugly, uglier, ugliest” (178). Coders
then used “Microsoft Word’s ‘find’ function to locate the keyword tag . . . [and] then used as
much of the surrounding context as was required to judge” whether the adjective was part of a
reference to male or female physical attractiveness, or whether “it was a reference to neither
(e.g., ‘a beautiful sunset,’ ‘a handsome offer’). Coders also indicated if the adjective positively
(e.g., ‘handsome’) or negatively (e.g., ‘ugly’) described the character’s appearance.” That the
thirty coders were undergraduate university students who “were naive about specific theory-
derived expectations” (178) is perfectly consistent with the kind of statistical methodology
Gottschall utilizes. However, it also embodies the problematic assumption that the texts in these
collections require no understanding of the cultural contexts in which they were produced, that they directly convey cultural attitudes and values with singular clarity, and that the context of the entire tale is not necessary for an understanding of a motif’s importance and meaning.

This lack of concern with texts and contexts—the cultural context, the editorial context, and the linguistic, aesthetic, and narrative contexts—is linked to the belief that folktales, especially tales of oral origin, are uncomplicated (or, tellingly, unsophisticated) and that they express indigenous attitudes and values directly. “Folktale language,” Gottschall writes, “is generally simple” (179). So it would appear that careful lexical and contextual analysis is not considered important since (1) oral storytellers seem to be considered incapable of irony or any subtle, complex use of language and narrative; and (2) the voice of the “original” oral informant seems to be the only meaningful voice speaking through the tale.

But another level of indifference—more than indifference, an antipathy—to texts and contexts seems to be at work here. When explaining why he and his co-authors chose to compare the number of male and female characters in their sample by doing “a computerized count of all male and female personal pronouns,” rather than by actually identifying specific characters, Gottschall offers the stunning, albeit candid, admission that “accurately counting, or adequately sampling, all characters in the sample would have meant carefully reading many hundreds of folktales—a task as onerous as the entire study reported here” (181). The implications of this statement are breathtaking. Not only is the language of the folktale simple and transparent, the full verbal text—the narrative as a whole—is inconsequential to its meaning. Not only can questions about the collecting, editing, and translating of texts be dismissed, in the study of its cultural content, the text itself becomes burdensome and proves useful only if most of the words
require no attention and can be disposed of as superfluous once stories have been mined for specific adjectives and pronouns.

Given the article’s erasure of contemporary fairy-tale scholarship\(^{11}\) on questions such as orality, authenticity, and the history of collecting and editing, and given the skeletal appearance of the fairy-tale corpus in this research—indeed, the virtual invisibility of the fairy-tale text—we finally see how disciplinary annihilation clears the way for conquest of the field by a new methodology. The identity, import, and relationships of fairy-tale texts, tellers, recipients, collectors, editors, translators, and scholars are ignored—brought to nearly nothing.\(^{12}\) With these effectively removed from the field and rendered essentially invisible, the field itself is cleared for the scientific method and the search for a homogenizing universality.\(^{13}\)

In his new book of 2008, *Why the Humanities Matter*, Frederick Luis Almada asks, when we turn to a field like “evolutionary biology . . . in our study of literature, do we enlarge too

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\(^{11}\) Of the forty-five bibliographic items in the article’s list of references (which does not include the collections in his sample), only four are works (other than Gottschall’s own) that are affiliated with the discipline of fairy-tale studies or folklore (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz; Dundes; Haase, “Feminist”; Ragan, “What Happened?”). In the coda added to the book version of this article (“Coda: World Folktales’ Missing Women”), three additional works of folktale and fairy-tale scholarship are cited: Holbek; Mills; and Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth.*

\(^{12}\) Gottschall does acknowledge near the end of the article that “idiosyncratic biases in the tellers, collectors, editors, and translators of the tales” may affect his findings (185). However, he raises this point only as a qualification regarding possible cross-cultural variations in attitudes—that is, to qualify results suggesting that there is evidence of cross-cultural variation. Here, then, the problematic nature of folktale collections and translations is invoked in order to discount evidence that tends to contradict the study’s conclusion.

\(^{13}\) In an article on Literary Darwinism published in the June 2009 issue of *The Nation,* William Deresiewicz has described the movement to employ evolutionary thought in the social sciences and humanities as a colonialist venture and resistance to it as a struggle against colonialism: “Evolutionary thinking is, at present, an aggressively expansive species within the academic world, a kind of emergent *Homo sapiens* outcompeting the old-school Neanderthals across a wide swath of intellectual territory. Having colonized the social sciences—where it has begun to displace the view, predominant throughout the twentieth century, that the mind is a highly malleable product of culture—it has now set its sights on the humanities, the last area of resistance” (1).
much our domain of inquiry” (237).\textsuperscript{14} Scholars of literature and culture who turn to a field such as evolutionary biology for information, insights, perspectives, and a conceptual framework can certainly help to illuminate the field in which we work. In the case of Gottschall’s research, however, it seems to me that it is not a question of whether he is enlarging to much the domain of literary and cultural inquiry. Rather it is a question of his “hijacking methods”—his phrase—from science in an attempt to cleanse literary and cultural studies of their current theories and practices by use of a uniform scientific paradigm. As we have seen, many of his initial incursions have been into fairy-tale studies, which are often the site where literary and cultural theories are demonstrated—as Stephen Benson has shown in \textit{Cycles of Influence}\textsuperscript{16}—and where sociocultural and political battles are fought. Fairy tales and fairy-tale studies are, in short, a highly prized, exploited, and contested territory, as the last forty years of scholarship have made clear.\textsuperscript{17} Gottschall’s research is the latest contribution to this territorial struggle.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} In its original context, Aldama’s question is not limited to asking about evolutionary biology: “When turning to other fields like cognitive linguistics, evolutionary biology, ethics, and so on in our study of literature, do we enlarge too much our domain of inquiry” (237).

\textsuperscript{15} This is Gottschall’s own phrase (quoted from “Measure”) in reference to another of his articles: “Hijacking methods from psychology, Joseph Carroll, John Johnson, Dan Kruger, and I surveyed the emotional and analytic responses of 500 literary scholars and avid readers to characters from scores of 19\textsuperscript{th}-century British novels.”

\textsuperscript{16} See also Joosen.

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, Haase, “German Fairy Tales”; Zipes, \textit{Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion}; and Zipes, “Struggle.”

\textsuperscript{18} The \textit{Chronicle} interview with Gottschall seems to confirm that the struggle over the field is also an academic political struggle over disciplinary position, privilege, power, and space: “Gottschall is still an adjunct, and he says he believes that no one of a ‘principally Darwinian bent’ has tenure, except for those who originally started down a more-traditional path. ‘It is true that we are promoting views that seem disturbingly alien or threatening to most of the professors who serve on hiring committees, editorial boards, and who comprise the main pool of peer reviewers,’ he says” (Peterson B8).
I have dwelled on Gottschall’s comments in the press and on the “‘Beauty Myth’” paper at some length now to illustrate this point and to critique certain aspects of his work—especially what I take to be its utilitarian appropriation of collections, its misunderstanding of fairy-tale textuality, and its problematic assumptions and oversimplifications about the relationship of folktale collections and translations to oral tradition. I have emphasized these problematic dimensions of the “‘Beauty Myth’” article because it exemplifies and magnifies how certain ideas persist in fairy-tale studies and consequently impede our ability to decolonize the field, to develop an effective intercultural or transcultural model for understanding the fairy tale, and to create a disciplinary or interdisciplinary space that can accommodate the genre in its many manifestations. The fact is that despite some four decades of dramatic progress in clarifying the complex generic and sociocultural history of the folktale and fairy tale, problematic notions and tendencies are embedded in the history of our discipline, and these are perpetuated in our discourse, which enables the continuing colonization of the genre and the discipline itself.

Among these are certain positivist practices that were initially developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Still embedded in the contemporary practice of folktale scholarship, these tend to promote the universalizing and leveling of texts across cultures. I’m referring particularly to the practice of categorizing tales and their constituent elements according to classification systems for tale types and motifs. Identifying a tale as a variant of any international tale type, with its component motifs, automatically subsumes that tale in a general classification system, displacing and abstracting it from its context and positioning it within a scientifically inspired taxonomy. I am not arguing that a classification system cannot be

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19 See Aarne; Conrad; Uther, *Types*; Thompson.
useful, and I will not repeat here the criticisms that scholars have made about them. In fact, tale-type catalogues and Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* are essential resources for the cross-cultural study of folktales. However, in the history of folktale studies, the challenge for scholars who rely on this practice and terminology has been not to lose sight of the tale as a text within its context. As Hans-Jörg Uther has observed, “a description of tale type can show its various and changing structural elements but not its meaning or function. Nor can such a description show the variation in motifs contained in the individual texts, variation that is essential for understanding the narrative’s . . . importance in tradition” (“Tale Type” 941). The interest in “context” and “performance” that took hold in folklore studies during the 1960s and ‘70s reflected the effort to move beyond typology, which had dominated much of the field. Nonetheless, despite new models of understanding folktales and fairy tales, the concepts of “tale type” and “motif” remain firmly embedded in the discourse of folklore and fairy-tale studies. And although they promote cross-cultural research by drawing attention to obvious similarities and setting the stage for comparative analysis, they simultaneously make it simple to strip tales of their cultural specificity and reduce them to universal types referred to by alphanumeric codes and brief descriptive labels (for example, ATU 281, Miscellaneous Tales of Gnats; or ATU 363, The Corpse-Eater).

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20 See Uther, *Types* 1: 7-8; Uther, “Tale Type” 939-40. See also Lundell.

21 See Conrad 644.

22 The staying power of tale-type and motif classifications even in the light of new emphases on context and performance in the 1960s and ‘70s is reflected in the fact that Stith Thompson’s second revision of Aarne’s *Types of the Folktale* (originally published in 1910 and revised in 1928) appeared in 1961, and that Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, first published 1932-36, appeared in a revised and enlarged edition in 1955-58. Both underwent multiple reprintings, with the former undergoing a thorough overhaul in Uther’s three-volume *Types of International Folktales* in 2004 and the latter being available online and on CD-Rom. They are established tools in folktale research.
With the reduction of tales to types and constellations of motifs, the value of the story as a verbal text essentially disappears. The narrative text, ostensibly rich in texture and lexical detail, undergoes a process of translation whereby the original words are displaced by an alphanumeric code, descriptive label, and brief paraphrase (all typically in English, since that is the language of Uther’s tale-type index and Thompson’s motif index). This form of scholarly translation erases all vestiges of linguistic and cultural identity. As we have seen in Gottschall’s study, texts disappear almost entirely. There is not even the need for a consideration of them by tale-type description or paraphrase. Save for a limited number of adjectives and pronouns, the verbal text is superfluous and burdensome.

I do not mean to suggest that scholars whose research employs tale-type and motif classifications find folktale texts superfluous or burdensome in the same way as does Gottschall, who finds the prospect of reading hundreds of tales “onerous.” But the implicit reductionism of this influential branch of folklore studies does communicate that individual texts are secondary to the universal type, that the verbal narrative of the original and its linguistic texture are only variations of something more essential and centrally significant. And in this there is a certain paradox, for the discipline of folklore studies, initiated in part by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in nineteenth-century Germany, was precisely interested in language—especially orality—as an expression of culture.

Of course, for all their intense interest in documenting the authentic language and oral narratives of the folk in their collection of Kinder- und Hausmärchen, the Grimms gave us something much more complex, influential, and paradoxical. The story of their literate

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23 There are, of course, indexes in other languages, but Uther’s and Thompson’s works are the basic tools.
informants, literary sources, and editorial interventions is by now well known, so I won’t repeat it here. What I do want to highlight, however, is that in becoming convincing ventriloquists for the folk, they not only created the enduring idea that folktales give direct expression to national identity, they also created a fairy-tale language whose apparent artlessness, purity, and simplicity seemed completely transparent and facilitated the translation of their tales as universal stories. This idea of fairy-tale language as pure and transparent is implicit throughout Max Lüthi’s influential book on the form and nature of the European folktale. According to Lüthi, “folktale motifs are emptied of their usual substance . . . All elements become pure, light, and transparent and join in an effortless interplay that includes all the important themes of human existence” (73). Lüthi’s widely accepted characterization of the genre simultaneously points to the importance of language and style while underlining its transparent expression of universal human themes.

In his own effort to identify a universal phenomenon in folktales, Jonathan Gottschall adopts assumptions about the nature of the genre that are fueled by the problematic ideas and tendencies I have described here. The fact that his research seeks to provide a model for the global study of folktales and fairy tales is significant and laudable. That model falls short, however, due to the problematic assumptions he makes, which not only undercut his methodology but also perpetuate colonialist perspectives still entrenched in our field. So what can be done to decolonize fairy-tale studies and promote instead a responsible form of transcultural fairy-tale research?

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24 See Haase, “Framing,” where I also show how the framing of the Grimms’ stories in English-language translations as a universal, as opposed to strictly Germanic, phenomenon can be considered a form of colonialism.
An initial step requires that we resist the twin urges to universalize traditional narratives at the expense of their specific historical and sociocultural contexts and to generalize the European fairy tale as an ahistorical global genre. This might seem obvious, but the progress made in historicizing and contextualizing the fairy tale continues to compete with the tendency to dehistoricize the genre and tout its universality in a simplistic and uncritical manner. A German volume of fairy-tale interpretations from 2005 entitled simply Märchen by Stefan Neuhaus begins with a quotation from contemporary German author Felicitas Hoppe, who writes: “the fairy tale is, first and foremost, completely ahistorical. Perhaps that is why, for such a long time, it has been number one on the list of all world literatures.” However, at the same time that this book asserts the global ubiquity of the fairy tale, it ignores most of the world and a wide variety of fairy-tale forms. It deals exclusively with the fairy tale as literary genre, devoting itself to the Arabian Nights and thirty-seven additional texts entirely from Western Europe and the United States. What does it say about fairy-tale studies that most of the world is invisible in a volume with the unqualified generic title Märchen—fairy tale?

On the one hand it tells us something about the relatively limited horizon of much contemporary fairy-tale research. On the other it may tell us also about the problematic terminology that defines the field. The unqualified identification of the fairy tale as a worldwide phenomenon works as a one-size-fits-all platitude or marketing blurb for dust jackets, but it

25 “... das Märchen ist, allem voran, durch und durch ahistorisch. Vielleicht belegt es deshalb langfristig den ersten Platz auf der Liste sämtlicher Weltliteraturen” (qtd. in Neuhaus vii).

26 Even in the early nineteenth century, when resources and access were much more limited, the Brothers Grimm, despite working in the service of German nationalism, documented and considered a wide range of cultural traditions in the scholarly apparatus to their collection.
hardly does justice to the specifics of distinct cultures or the evident differences that distinguish the European fairy tale from traditional narratives in many non-European cultures.

Of course, becoming adequately knowledgeable about the primary and secondary literature of cultural traditions outside one’s primary specialty is a tall order. This challenge, however, speaks to the continuing need for a greater emphasis on language training in folklore and literary studies, the need for useful translations of both primary and important secondary texts, and the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among scholars with diverse linguistic and cultural expertise. But this necessary and well-intentioned call for crossing borders, for producing knowledge about other cultural traditions, and for new translations begs the question of how to decolonize fairy-tale studies. Such an imperative runs the risk of making the same mistake Gottschall does—that is, it seems to suggest that collections, editions, and translations—even what we might call “good” ones—are not at all problematic, that they are merely archives or storage containers that are simple and transparent. They are not, of course. Consider what Jack Zipes has written in a note prefacing his English translation of Laura Gonzenbach’s German translation of Sicilian folktales that she had collected,

As much as a translation may seek to recuperate words, language, customs, and proverbs of a particular dialect used by an oppressed people to form bonds and understanding, it also destroys, omits, and obfuscates the historical conditions and context in which the oral tales were told and appreciated. Authentic or definitive renderings of oral folk tales in written languages are virtually impossible, even if the collector takes down the story in the vernacular with signs denoting tone and gesticulation. The contextual moment cannot
be recaptured. The relevance cannot be completely discerned. Sometimes, one must ask oneself, why collect? Why translate and transliterate? Why trespass? (Beautiful xxx)

The answer he gives is that the trespass is worth it if it helps to inscribe the oral narratives and the voice of the folk into history. And according to Zipes, this is precisely what the early folklorists did, “no matter how colonialist or condescending their attitude toward the common folk” (xxx) might have been.

However, the colonialist trespassing that occurs in collecting, editing, and translating is not only a matter of the tension or trade-off between what is lost and what is preserved. Equally important is the fact that these acts of trespass produce something new—a transcultural text that communicates more than the sum of its cultural parts. Sadhana Naithani has stated that “Colonialism created one of the first global networks of not only trade but also cultural communication” (In Quest 55). This illuminating idea does not completely rehabilitate colonialism and its practices any more than Zipes’s explanation of the historical contributions made by colonialist collectors. It does, however, give a useful perspective for thinking about the dilemma we consistently face when dealing with translations. In our encounter with the other by way of translations, we simply have to replace the expectation of authenticity and transparency with the understanding that translations of folktales are already literary adaptations, transcultural creations that must be experienced in their own right. The challenge, it seems to me, is to go about this work of inevitable appropriation—whether as producers or consumers of translations—self-consciously and self-critically—to understand fairy-tale production and reception precisely as acts of translation, transformation, and transcultural communication.
Nineteenth-century romantic models of national, cultural, and ethnic purity will have no place in a model where folktales and fairy tales are understood as transcultural texts.

At the same time, a transcultural orientation signals neither a turn to universalism nor a betrayal of the sociohistorical and sociocultural approach to understanding the specificity of fairy tales. Texts exist, as Jerome J. McGann writes in *The Textual Condition*, “under determinate sociohistorical conditions” (9); and this is certainly true of folktale and fairy-tale texts, which exist in relation to their tellers, collectors, translators, editors, publishers, recipients, and a host of intertexts. Fairy-tale textuality is a complex state of affairs that defies simplification and demands nuanced exploration, attention to textual history, and—especially in the case of translations—a critical awareness of transcultural contexts.

This makes for difficult and messy work since the complexity of fairy-tale textuality, contextualization, and the transcultural turn disrupt the neat categories, assumptions, and dichotomies that we have used to talk about fairy tales for nearly two hundred years. But questioning and rethinking that powerful and seductive nineteenth-century model is precisely what the field of fairy-tale studies requires. The organic metaphors of European Romanticism and the stubborn dichotomies of oral-literary, primitive-civilized, and colonizer-colonized are inadequate to the task of explaining the full complexity of fairy-tale textuality. And given what we now know about the work of collectors and editors, even the distinction between scholar and storyteller must be questioned, at least according to the disciplinary tale as I tell it. The coalescing of the critical and the creative in folktale and fairy-tale collections by editors-translators-authors-scholars such as Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar, Neil

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27 In writing of the need to include colonial missionaries and their scientific work in the history of scientific knowledge, David N. Livingstone refers to the “messiness and richness of history” (61).
Philip, and Lee Haring\textsuperscript{28} is a striking phenomenon and underscores the need not only for a reexamination of earlier collections but also a study of the *literary history and poetics* of the folktale and fairy-tale edition. Moreover, thinking of fairy tales transculturally, as they exist across conventional geographic, linguistic, and cultural borders, provides both a compelling alternative to the nineteenth-century idea of the folktale as a unique expression of national or cultural identity and a new perspective from which to consider concerns about the relationship of translation to colonization. This is all the more reasonable in an era of fairy-tale production characterized, as scholars such as Cristina Bacchilega and Lee Haring have been showing us, by creolization, multivocality, and hypertextuality.\textsuperscript{29}

Jonathan Gottschall contends that empirical science and the methods he employs will “reawaken a long-dormant spirit of intellectual adventure.” But this romantic call to adventure is entirely out of touch with the fact that fairy-tale studies, which can benefit from critical self-reflection, need no reawakening. And it fails to understand what makes fairy-tale studies so significant in the first place. It is not adventure that we are looking for. What has excited scholars and students from diverse disciplines around the world and drawn them to fairy-tale studies over the last four decades—and motivated them to plan, for 2008 and 2009 alone, conferences in San Francisco, Honolulu, Louisville, Albuquerque, Norwich, Hanover, Athens, and Lausanne\textsuperscript{30}—are

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  \item[28] See, for example, Calvino’s *Italian Folktales*; Carter’s *Old Wives’ Fairy Tale Book and Strange Things Still Happen*; Zipes, *Beautiful Angiola and Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*; Tatar’s *Annotated Brothers Grimm* and *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*; Philip’s *Illustrated Book of Fairy Tales*; and Haring’s *Stars and Keys*.
  \item[30] The events in each city are: multiple panels on the fairy tale at the 2008 Joint Conference of the National Popular Culture and American Culture Associations (San Francisco, CA, March 19-22, 2008); the international symposium on Folktale and Fairy Tales: Translation, Colonialism, and Cinema at the University of Hawai’i, Mānoa (Honolulu, HI, September 23-26, 2008); panels on the folktale and fairy tale at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American
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fundamentally important questions, including the questions posed by the organizers of this conference, whose answers have meaning far beyond the so-called ivory tower.

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Folklore Society (Louisville, KY, October 22-26, 2008); multiple panels on the fairy tale at the 30th Annual Meeting of the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association (Albuquerque, NM, February 25-28, 2009); the international conference on The Fairy Tale after Angela Carter at the University of East Anglia (Norwich, UK, April 22-25, 2009); the colloquium on New Critical and Pedagogical Perspectives on the Fairy Tale at Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH, May 28-31, 2009); the 50th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (Athens, Greece, June 21-26, 2009); and the international colloquium From Fata to Fairies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Antiquity to the Present Day/Des Parques à la Fée Carabosse: Regards croisés de l’antiquité jusqu’à nos jours at the University of Lausanne (Lausanne, Switzerland, October 7-9, 2009).

According to a handout distributed by the organizers at the University of Hawai’i, “Collectively, the sessions will take up questions such as the following—What needs do folk and fairy tales serve today? How are they contributing to the development of a new form of the ‘supernatural’ in contemporary culture? What are the most basic working definitions of folktale and fairy tale in today’s popular culture? How can we historicize them and put them in productive conversation with one another? How has colonialism enabled and thwarted the translation of such narratives and their cultural meanings? How has colonialism shaped dominant discourses about orality and literature? How does narrative empower colonized or otherwise subordinate groups? How are these dynamics played out differently depending on the history of a place or people? How are these dynamics played out in Hawai’i and the Pacific? How are the folk and fairy tale being ‘de-colonized’ today? Is this de-colonization necessarily limited by cultural and generic codes? How can we distinguish a successful cultural translation of a traditional narrative from an unsuccessful one? How have new technologies, from photograph and film to the internet, affected translation practices and the construction of ‘tradition’? How does film speak effectively to culture-specific and global audiences?” (“UHM International Symposium”).


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