Littler Red Riding Hoods

Bookreview of Sandra Beckett: Revisioning red riding hood around the world: an anthology of international retellings.

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Sandra Beckett: Revisioning red riding hood around the world: an anthology of international retellings, Wayne State University Press, 2014.

In Revisioning Red Riding Hood around the World, Sandra Beckett presents 52 versions of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood in English translations from 15 other languages, representing authors, illustrators, and publishers from a globetrotter’s list of countries: Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Russia, Spain, and Switzerland. While some of the original texts first appeared in the early 20th century, most were published after 1970, and about half of them in the last two decades. While the book has been published by a university press, comments on the back cover of the paperback edition I read suggest it might be appropriate for an audience of students and other less specialized readers as well as for researchers in the field of fairy tales: in these comments, Cristina Bacchilega speaks of the book’s potential appeal to “a wide English-speaking readership” and Vanessa Joosen says, “What a treasure trove for researchers, what an eye-opener for students, and what a joy to read for all those interested in fairy tales, children’s literature, and world literature.”

Unlike Bacchilega and Joosen, I am disappointed by this anthology—mostly because, based on their comments and the book’s title, I had such high expectations for it. I was looking forward to what the title identifies as “an anthology of international retellings” of the tale of Red Riding Hood from “around the world.” I wanted to learn how, as Sandra Beckett promises in her introduction, “the number and diversity of these retellings from the four corners of the globe demonstrate the tale’s remarkable versatility and its unique status in the collective unconscious and in literary culture, even beyond the confines of the Western world” (11). Unfortunately, though, both the world this anthology represents and the tales it retells are worrisomely incomplete. There is less here than there ideally ought to be.

First, there is less of the world. The globe as depicted here is missing one of its four corners—the one where English is spoken. While Revisioning Red Riding Hood does make a lot of previously unavailable and often interesting material available to the English-speaking parts of the world, it also bypasses the existing English-language context in a way that significantly limits the audience.

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and usefulness of the collection. Appreciating the extent to which these versions and variations differ from or are more or less experimental than the ones that have already appeared in English depends on knowledge that only the most committed and already expert readers are likely to possess. The anthology purports to fill a gap; but in doing "only" that it leaves the much larger gap of everything else that it assumes its readers will already know. Beckett complains that "a number of retellings for children see the light in English only in the anthologies of scholars and are therefore unlikely to reach their intended audience" (3). But Revisioning Red Riding Hood is itself just such a scholarly anthology, and its exclusive focus on previously unavailable texts makes it much less useful than it might have been, not only for child readers and adults with an un scholarly interest in fairy tales but also for university students who might use a more comprehensive collection as a textbook in university fairy tale classes. The "wide readership" Bacci hlega speaks of turns out to be disappointingly narrow.

It might seem unfair to criticize a scholarly book from a scholarly press for not being unspecific enough to appeal to the wider readership its back cover makes claims to. Perhaps it is. Perhaps I should be upset with the press for featuring these misleading claims, and perhaps scholars in the field of fairy tales do need a specialized text that relates to and amplifies a context they already know. Even so, providing such a text seems to represent a missed opportunity to inform and give pleasure to a wider audience.

Nor is that the only consequence of this choice. Divorced from the context of the many other, and to my knowledge, equally unusual versions and variations of the tale already available in English, the texts included here come to represent an exotic otherness, and "the world," here defined as wherever English speakers are not, turns into an exotic bazaar of exclusively alien cultures. Beckett expresses the hope "that this anthology will contribute to cross-cultural exchange and facilitate comparative study of the tale from a global perspective" (12); but it can do so only for one group of scholars—those who read and write primarily in English. Perhaps that is inevitable in a book published in English in a self-involved and self-isolating country like the United States; but I would have hoped at least for some awareness of and comment on matters of this sort. Without such comments, the neocolonial form of globalism evoked and taken for granted here diminishes the non-English-speaking parts of the globe into a spectacle performed for the powerful gaze of an English-speaking audience.

I am fairly certain that Beckett did not intend to convey such a view. Indeed, my knowledge of the current state of scholarly publishing leads me to suspect that her editorial choices were not all made on the basis of adherence to anything so idealistic as a guiding principle—even a misguided one. There are other more pragmatic reasons why English-language versions of "Little Red" might have to be eschewed—most significantly, the matter of obtaining the rights to reprint them. In late capitalism generally, and in very bad times for the publishing industry in this economically depressed decade, the increasingly greedy and increasingly desperate English-language publishers of recent picture books—picture books such as, say, Joan Holub's Little Red Writing or Roberto Innocenti and Aaron Frisch's The Girl in Red—who did agree to the use of their property in an anthology such as this one would most likely demand impossibly exorbitant fees for permissions to reprint them. In that context, I have to wonder about the wisdom of attempting a project of this sort.

The matter of permissions costs might also help to account for another limitation of Revisioning Red Riding Hood. As well as offering a diminished world, it offers diminished texts. Many of the tales it includes appeared in their original language in picture books, accompanied by a series of illustrations that, if the books are indeed worthy examples of picture-book art, are a necessary part of their complete meanings. While Beckett promises to have included at least one illustration from each of the picture books for which she has offered translations, one or two of a cohesive and integrated series is hardly enough; and even those one or two pictures per book are housed in a separate section of the anthology, often at a grew distance from the texts they are meant to accompany. Divorced from these sample pictures and the missing rest of their illustrations, the texts are, surely, quite different stories than their authors and illustrators originally intended. Introducing Fabian Negrin's "In bocca al lupo," Beckett calls it "a carefully constructed ensemble in which text, illustration, and design work together to create a highly original atmospheric retelling of the tale" (275); but on the evidence of the English translation and few isolated illustrations reproduced here, readers of Revisioning Red Riding Hood will have to take Beckett's word for it. While trying to
encourage English speakers’ knowledge of picture books published elsewhere is a worthy goal, the inevitable inaccuracy of their incomplete representation in an anthology like this one seems like an inadequate and counter-productive way to go about doing it. My response to many of these stories as presented here was that they seemed to be much less distinctive, much less nuanced, in so many ways much less interesting than I had hoped they would be—little “Little Red Riding Hoods.”

Nor is the absence of pictures the only way in which this anthology diminishes these stories. In some cases, Beckett has included only small sections of larger texts—a peculiar choice if the assumption is that English readers are not themselves capable of going on to read the rest of these texts in their original languages. In one case, what gets left out creates a serious misrepresentation of the original: Beckett says of Zoran Pongrašić’s “Crvenkapica na drugi način,” “The reference in the original to a special school—that is, a school for children with special needs and learning disabilities—may also be considered not very politically correct, so we have substituted ‘a school for children with special needs’” (142). Misrepresenting a text in order to repress what one assumes might offend members of the target audience seems a peculiar thing to do in the context of a scholarly anthology designed to increase cross-cultural understanding—especially when one announces one is misrepresenting what one contradiactorily claims to be representing in a way that reveals what is being left out, and thus fairly clearly implies a judgment about the relative insensitivity of the original author and his entire culture.

I also have concerns about the quality of many of the translations, almost half of them translated from originals in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Valencian, and German by Beckett herself. While the translations generally seem to convey a basic idea of what happens in each of the tales, the prose often strikes me as being clumsy and unrhymetic. For instance:

Poor, invalid Grandma, who is going to protect her!

...Laughing, he ate her wholly and slowly and immediately put on her woman’s clothes.

(Translation by Beckett, 16)

Or: “Later on the grandma woke up and asked Layla to give her her eyeglasses so she could see better. She wondered why the policemen were at her home, and Layla told her what had happened while she was asleep. Layla and the grandma thanked the policeman and invited them to have some baked goods as well” (translation by Amina Ashi, 161). Or, “There were a tremendous number of dresses in that shop, but Red Hat got the assistance of a nice saleswoman, who even wanted to escort him to point out the road to the grandmother’s house” (translation by Rolf Romør and Beckett, 66). If this sort of unidiomatic English does accurately represent the quality of the language of the originals, I have to wonder if they are indeed worth translating and drawing attention to.

These stories are yet further diminished not by what is absent in Revisioning Red Riding Hood, but by what is present. In order to make up for the many missing illustrations, Beckett offers lengthy verbal descriptions of them—descriptions of pictures which, made up merely of words, are doomed to fail to convey what they are trying to convey, and doomed, thus, to place yet another screen of inadequately communicative language between readers and the original texts. These descriptions of absent pictures occur in lengthy interpretive introductions to each tale that are sometimes longer than the texts they describe, and as Beckett says, there are yet longer descriptions, offering “much more complex analyses of many of the works” (5) in the two critical studies of versions and variations of this tale she published earlier: Recycling Red Riding Hood, dealing with versions for children, and Red Riding Hood for All Ages, about adult variations. In the light of all these many, many words, I found myself unable to arrive at a sense of the texts they so thoroughly attempt to describe that was not inextricably intertwined with Beckett’s understanding of them. This is very much the world as Sandra Beckett sees it, and the tales as Sandra Beckett understands them—even when the requisite context of those two other volumes is another lack readers are apparently required to fill on their own.

So what then does Beckett see and understand? Once more, I am afraid, I find myself worrying about ways in which the tales are being diminished. Rather than presenting them randomly or in chronological order, Beckett organizes the tales into thematically organized groups, each of which represents what she understands to be a common path adapters follow as they pursue variations of “Red Riding Hood:” stories of female initiation, for instance, or rehabilitations of the wolf. Readers then come to the tales prepared to understand them primarily in relation to their place in this thematic structure imposed upon them. Furthermore, Beckett’s introductions to the individual
tales tend to suggest that each of them expresses just one major idea—a theme that is itself a variation of the one subject of the section it appears in. For instance: in Francisco Villaspeca’s “Caperucita,” Little Red’s story “is interpreted as one of male violence against an innocent child” (18). In Kyoko Iwasaki’s “Akuzukin-chan” “The true wolf in this story is war” (26). In Manuel Antonio Pina’s “A História do Capuchinho Vermelho conta da crianças e nem por isso,” “the wolf’s behavior is that of a predator, a pedophile who preys on young girls” (55). In Ioulita Iliopoulou’s “Prassini Soufitsa,” “the moral is that in today’s world people are a far greater threat than wolves” (115). In Matilda Rosa Araújo and André Letria’s “O Capuchinho Cinzento,” “The classic story of childhood and fear has been transformed into a story about old age and fear conquered” (129). And so it goes. The implication that each of these tales can be summed up in one sentence represents a significant narrowing of the potential for a variety of meanings in the earlier tales by Perrault and Grimm that they are based on. Furthermore, the summations tend to transform the stories into all-too-expectable clichés of contemporary theoretical discourse, into straightforward Jungian archetypes or obvious Freudian family dramas, into all-too-expectable ecocritical or feminist tracts.

But again, that may not be Beckett’s fault. According to her introductions, many of the writers of these tales have made statements that proclaim their awareness of the diminishing nature of their work prior to its translation into English—their conscious efforts to undermine some of the possible meanings of earlier tales that they personally disapprove of, or to make the tales fit into their own narrow and presumably more current concerns. Beckett tells us of Bruno de la Salle that, “while he felt it was necessary to transpose these tales into the contemporary world, he also recognized the danger of destroying their fragile symbolic meanings” (72). On the evidence of their tales as presented here and their comments about those tales that Beckett reports, it seems that few of the writers represented here share that concern; the symbolic meanings other than the ones the writers like and have chosen to emphasize seem to have disappeared. Their tales are then less interesting—and less provocative of nuanced thought—than the earlier texts they are based on.

That might, though, simply be a characteristic of such variations. The Perrault and Grimm tales clearly had the potential to imply or engender a lot of different meanings—all the wide range of different meanings that the writers represented in Revisioning Red Riding Hood, and all the other writers of a myriad of versions and variations of them in English and other languages, have managed to find in them. But paradoxically, in the process of revealing that vast potential for so many differing responses and interpretations by engendering yet another, the authors of these tales have lost that potential. The one major thread that each of these newer tales selects to focus on out of the complex web of possibilities in Grimm and Perrault also then reveals its own relative lack of such potential—its singularity and specific diminishment of a richer source. Unlike Perrault’s “Riding Hood” or Grimm’s “Red Cap,” a tale specifically about contemporary urban blight or female empowerment is unlikely to engender a variation with a quite different theme. So perhaps I should not be complaining about diminishment here. Perhaps this business of remaking suggestive old tales is ever and always a matter of diminishment, and perhaps Beckett has done an excellent job of representing the truth about these tales exactly in having made them less than I had originally hoped for.

Truthful or not, Revisioning Red Riding Hood worked for me as something like the synopsis of the plot that you might find in an opera program. It gives you an idea of what is happening in the story you have not seen yet, and maybe it encourages you to want to learn more. But it is nothing like the actual experience of the singers onstage expressing the richness of the original words, often in another language, in music, accompanied by lights and sets. Like those opera synopses, this collection is so, so tantalizing—and so much less than what it attempts to describe.

WORKS CITED