



UDC 821.113.4

Jana Segi Lukavská

Charles University, Czech Republic

### ANDERSEN'S BEAUTIFULLY CLUELESS FAIRY TALES

**For citation:** Lukavská J. S. Andersen's beautifully clueless fairy tales. *Scandinavian Philology*, 2020, vol. 18, issue 2, pp. 338–343.

<https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu21.2020.208>

The article reviews the recently reprinted Czech monograph *Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby: Pohádky H. Ch. Andersena: mezi romantismem a modernitou* (Nightingales, Mermaids and Toothaches: Andersen's Fairy Tales between Romanticism and Modernity) by Helena Březinová. By outlining the Czech context of research in the field of children's literature and analyzing Březinová's book, the review shows the substantial contribution of the publication for the Czech speaking audience. Březinová carefully analyzes several examples of Andersen's work to convincingly show its ambiguous, disturbing potential, which was lost in the vast majority of Czech retellings and adaptations. Consequently, Andersen's work is commonly perceived as purely children's literature in the Czech context. Březinová questions this notion by thoroughly uncovering Andersen's subtle play with genre norms and readers' expectations on multiple text layers. Březinová's book is intended not only for literary experts, but also for a wide audience of readers with her eloquent and witty writing. Her primary focus is a narratological analysis, however, she makes good use of translation studies, literary history, linguistics, and philosophy as well. In her close readings, she shows Andersen's simple, yet highly sophisticated stories as rooted in romanticism but also anticipatory of modernist themes such as the crisis of language and subject.

**Keywords:** Helena Březinová, Hans Christian Andersen, Danish literature, fairy tales.

In 2018, Helena Březinová published a monograph focused on Hans Christian Andersen's work titled *Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby: Pohádky H. Ch. Andersena: mezi romantismem a modernitou* (Nightingales, Mermaids and Toothaches: Andersen's Fairy Tales between Romanticism and Modernity). The book received a warm critical response in Czechia, from scholars as well as journalists writing for non-expert audiences. Moreover, it was awarded the Golden Ribbon, the most prestigious Czech

prize for children's literature authors, illustrators, translators, and scholars. In 2020, the publishing house Host produced a slightly revised reprint of the monograph. In the Czech context, it is rather unusual for a book of literary scholarship to attract this much attention and praise even among non-professional readers. However, Březinová's work has persuaded a wide audience that her analysis and interpretations of Andersen's stories are worth reading. One may identify several causes of the book's success.

First of all, prior to *Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby*, there had been no comprehensive work dealing with Andersen's writing available in Czech, even though Andersen's fairy tales have been popular since their first publication in 1863 [Vimr, 2014, s. 32]. Therefore, Březinová remembers to include key facts on Andersen's life and work. As a result, she provides a good point of departure for further Andersen research. But still, she never loses sight of her goal: "to introduce Andersen's fairy tales as sophisticated literature for grown-ups" [Březinová, 2018, s. 283]. Pursuing this goal, she presents clear and easy to follow arguments. Accordingly, her book is suitable for everybody, not just literary experts. She draws on her teaching experience at Charles University, where she "could note the pleasure and surprise in [her] students when they discover the sophisticated layers of the tales upon close reading in the original Danish" [Březinová, 2018, s. 283]. The informative and entertaining (occasionally even provocative) tone of her writing makes her monograph exceptional in the Czech academic environment.

Even though Březinová maintains that Andersen's texts are no children's stories (or not exclusively children's stories at least), the book provides a significant incentive for the field of Czech children's literature criticism — and the awarded Golden Ribbon proves it. By comparing the various translations of Andersen's fairy tales, Březinová cannot avoid the history of Czech discourse on children and children's literature. Moreover, by saying that some of Andersen's texts (or parts of those texts) are hardly suitable for children (because they are morbid, nihilistic, frivolous, non-linear etc.), she implicitly defines what children's literature is — texts full of harmony, optimism, predictable structure etc.

Last but not least, the Czech children's book market has grown significantly in the last years<sup>1</sup>. The almost intimidating amount of recently

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2000, children's books held 4% share on the book market, in 2018, the share grew to 14%. See <https://www.sckn.cz/zpravy-o-ceskem-kniznim-trhu/>.

published books makes buyers' choices rather difficult, which in conclusion helps the well-established "classics" of children's literature. If you do not know what to choose, you may reach out for something you already know is good. Going through book covers in the bookstores, the name "Andersen" is supposed to mean a seal of quality. However, as Březinová reminds us, one can truly not judge a book by its cover.

In the first part of the book, Březinová briefly compares several Czech translations of selected fairy tales and explains how they relate to the Danish original. She argues that a considerable part of available Czech translations is inadequate<sup>2</sup>. According to Březinová, most of the publications attempt to "simplify" the original fairy tales and make them more fitting for children. Paradoxically, such translations tend towards redundancy and also use a more complex, less child-like style. Supplemented by pleasing illustrations and labels such as "The Most Beautiful Fairy Tales", the stories are devoid of their original irony, poignance, and nihilistic tone. The texts might be either abridged (of religious and erotic allusions as well as narrator's bitter exegetical comments) or expanded — by homiletic, explaining remarks. The disturbing messages of the stories are then lost in translation along with the original laconic, lucid style, Březinová remarks.

In the next chapter, the fundamental context of the fairy tale genre and its transformations are outlined before Andersen's play with the genre's conventions and readers' expectations is exposed in detail. Březinová concludes that Andersen's work was utterly subversive from the beginnings of his writing. It is made clear the subversion applies not just to the form of the stories but to their subject matter as well. Březinová notices that the texts keep criticizing social order and demonstrates the author's subtle hints at these issues. In this regard, her conclusion intriguingly contrasts the interpretation of the literary scholar Jack Zipes who describes Andersen's work as "servile" [Zipes, 2006].

Furthermore, the book examines Andersen's use of a folklore-like, traditional narrator (Březinová chooses to use Walter Benjamins's term "storyteller") and deals with the way Andersen's stories originate in romantic prose but anticipate modernist fiction. In this regard, she operates with Michael Halliday's theory of register — the notions of the

---

<sup>2</sup> The only adequate contemporary translations of Andersen's fairy tales are provided by František Fröhlich.

“field”, “tenor” and “mode” in particular. She finds a “striking contradiction between the familiar voice of the storyteller and the topics that are considered” [Březinová, 2018, s. 285]. What might seem like a simple, traditional oral tale conveying a morale, is carefully uncovered as a sophisticated, cautiously structured piece dealing with the hopelessness of human existence. Březinová describes this tension as a “dangerous play with the addressee” [Březinová, 2018, s. 74] caused by the duality of the texts’ mode and tenor, to use Halliday’s terms. She assigns the disturbing thematic level of the texts to adult readers exclusively, arguing that “it is not advisable for a child to fully understand the fairy tale” [Březinová, 2018, s. 12], demonstrating that the “adult-oriented” text level prevails and concluding the fairy tales are not children’s stories. This conclusion seems problematic. Children’s scholars such as Barbara Wall, Hans-Heino Ewers and Zohar Shavit have used terms such as a “double” and “dual address”, “Mehrfachadressierung”, and “ambivalent text” (respectively), showing that forming an alliance of the implied author and the adult implied reader (while ignoring the child implied reader) is one of the commonly used strategies of children’s texts. Secondly, Březinová mentions the romantics’ debate on the nature of childhood. Surely, the notion of “childhood” is a heterogenic, dynamic one. “Children” as a social group are culturally and socially constructed, even today. Unfortunately, it is not always clear which notion of “children” Březinová talks about when she distinguishes what is and what is not child appropriate.

That said, Březinová’s close readings are very thorough and insightful. They elaborate on the “storyteller’s” characteristics and show how Andersen deals with the crisis of communication, the crisis of modern society as well as the crisis of the individual. In this respect, Březinová provocatively proposes to promote Andersen’s work not as “The Most Beautiful Fairy Tales” but rather “The Clueless Fairy Tales” or “The Fairy Tales of a Clueless Storyteller” [Březinová, 2018, s. 256]. She keeps emphasizing the ambivalent, subversive, ironic nature of Andersen’s texts.

Březinová focuses exclusively on a few selected tales including *The Little Mermaid*, *The Shadow*, *Aunty Toothache*, *The Will-o’-The-Wisps Are in Town, said the Woman of the Marsh* and *The Little Green Ones*. She also translated the last three of these and included them in the monograph as they lacked an adequate contemporary Czech translation before. In this part of the book, Březinová shows her excellent translation skills.

Conveniently, the publication also includes extensive English resumes of all the chapters. Even though the book is rooted in the Czech context of Andersen's reception, the process of "Disneyfication" of Andersen's fairy tales seems to be universally applicable and Březinová's interpretations are diligent, deep, witty, and occasionally disturbing at the same time — just like the object of her professional interest. The book offers not just academic rigor; Březinová's style that invokes Andersen's poignancy also reminds the readers of the immense pleasure of storytelling.

## REFERENCES

- Březinová H. *Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby: Pohádky H. Ch. Andersena: mezi romantismem a modernitou*. Brno: Host, 2018. 326 s.
- Ewers H.-H. Das doppelsinnige Kinderbuch: Erwachsene als Mitleser und Leser von Kinderliteratur. *Kinderliteratur: Literatur für Erwachsene?* München: Fink, 1990. S. 15–24.
- Shavit Z. *Poetics of children's literature*. Athens, London: The University of Georgia Press, 1984. 193 s.
- Tureckova M. (ed.) Zpráva o českém knižním trhu 2018/19. *SČKN*, 2019, 25 s. Available at: <https://www.sckn.cz/document/download/9d020d929c7ad187a267b2b-582dcdbe/> (accessed: 02.08.2020).
- Tureckova, M. (ed.) Zpráva o českém knižním trhu. *SČKN*, 2013. 35 s. Available at: <https://www.sckn.cz/document/download/6cf151e9a021501338e9f-1fe4117f6bd/> (accessed: 02.08.2020).
- Vimr O. *Historie překladařské česty skandinávských literatur do češtiny (1890–1950)*. Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2014. 208 s.
- Wall B. Problems of Audience. *Children's literature: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volume 1: Definitions and distinctions*. Peter Hunt (ed). London: Routledge, 2006. S. 375–389.
- Zipse J. Hans Christian Andersen and the Discourse of the Dominated. *Fairy Tales and The Art of Subversion*. New York: Routledge, 2006. S. 81–104.

**Яна Сеги Лукавска**

*Карлов университет, Чехия*

## ПРЕКРАСНАЯ РАСТЕРЯННОСТЬ СКАЗОК АНДЕРСЕНА

Для цитирования: *Lukavska J. S. Andersen's beautifully clueless fairy tales // Скандинавская филология. 2020. Т. 18. Вып. 2. С. 338–343.*  
<https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu21.2020.208>

В статье рассматривается недавно переизданная чешская монография «Slavíci, mořské víly a bolavé zuby: Pohádky H. Ch. Andersena: mezi romantismem

a modernitou» («Соловьи, русалки и зубная боль: сказки Г.Х. Андерсена между романтизмом и современностью»). Исходя из чешского контекста исследований в области детской литературы и анализа книги Бржезиновой, в статье акцентируется существенная польза публикации для чешскоязычной аудитории. Бржезинова тщательно анализирует несколько примеров работ Андерсена, с целью показать их неоднозначный, будоражащий потенциал, который был утерян в подавляющем большинстве чешских пересказов и адаптаций. Следовательно, произведения Андерсена в чешском контексте обычно воспринимаются в качестве детской литературы. Бржезинова опровергает это заблуждение, тщательно раскрывая тонкую игру Андерсена с жанровыми нормами и ожиданиями читателей при знакомстве с несколькими уровнями текста. Благодаря красноречивому и остроумному стилю книга Бржезиновой может быть предназначена не только для литературоведов, но и для широкого круга читателей. Основная цель автора — нарратологический анализ, однако она также хорошо владеет статьями по исследованию переводов, историей литературы, лингвистики и философии. Придерживаясь традиции внимательного чтения она показывает как простые, но одновременно утонченные истории Андерсена, основанные на романтизме, предвосхищают модернистские темы, такие как кризис языка и предмета.

**Ключевые слова:** Хелена Бржезинова, Ганс Христиан Андерсен, датская литература, сказки

**Jana Segi Lukavská**

Master,

Charles University,

1/2 nám. Jana Palacha, Prague, 11638, Czech Republic

E-mail: jana.lukavska@ff.cuni.cz

Received: September 9, 2020

Accepted: September 19, 2020