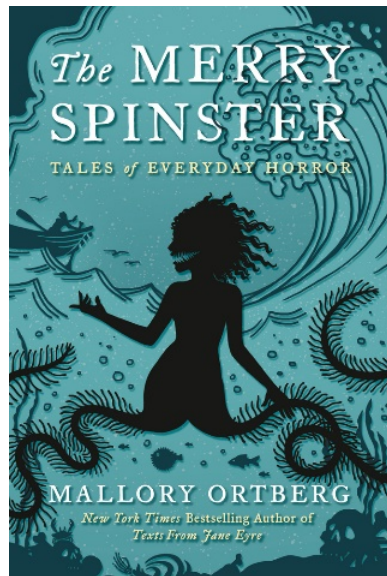




The Terror of the Uncanny: Deconstructing the Familiar in Daniel M. Lavery's *The Merry Spinster*

Review by David Semenov

Daniel Mallory Lavery. *The Merry Spinster*. Henry Holt and Company, 2018.



Many may be familiar with feminist retellings of classic fairy tales such as the “queered” collection of fairy tales titled *Kissing the Witch* by Emma Donoghue, the subversive hybrid fairy tales of Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber*, and Anne Sexton’s poetic rendering of Grimms’ fairy tales. Daniel M. Lavery (previously published under the name Daniel Mallory Ortberg) adds to these retellings in a unique way with his scintillating collection of short stories *The Merry Spinster: Tales of Everyday Horror* (2018), a number of which originally appeared on the feminist writing website co-founded by Lavery, *The Toast*.

Fairy tales are a distinctive subgenre of folklore as they have been modified throughout time to conform to cultural conventions, but simultaneously shape cultural myths pertaining to subjectivity, gender, and sexuality. Lavery’s renderings are starkly different from contemporary cinematic adaptations we have come to know (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Maleficent*, and

Cinderella to name a few), which are depoliticized, mostly de-eroticized, sugarcoated, and made compatible with heteronormative and more conservative views for children. Lavery takes fairy tale classics beloved by popular culture and compels readers to interrogate what we consider normal, familiar, and comforting by deconstructing and toying with the elements of the tales and their narratives.

Lavery skillfully uncovers the explicit messages about gender and the subsequent implicit messages about sexuality in children’s fairy tales. He toys with names and pronouns of characters, sometimes changing the gender of the fairy tales’ original protagonists entirely. Subject positions such as “wife” or “daughter” become roles that are detached from gender, instead becoming fixed to a certain performance or community role within the fairy tales. We see this in “The Thankless Child,” “The Frog’s Princess,” and “The Merry Spinster.” “The Thankless Child” borrows from its parent-story “Cinderella” in addition to a variety of Biblical references, and renames its protagonist to “Paul,” who negotiates taking the roles of “wife” or



“husband” with the priest’s son. With this, Lavery brings us to question the role of gender in fairy tales both in the original stories and in contemporary popular adaptations.

In interviews with *The Rumpus* (Alam 2018) and *The Cut* (Havrilesky 2018), Lavery clarifies that he began considering transitioning while writing *The Merry Spinster*, and while the short stories are very much so works of fiction, some of their themes are informed by his personal experiences. This is the case for the explicit gender fluidity in the stories, wherein Lavery explains to *The Rumpus*:

Gender feels like a job that you can sort of apply for, and you could just as easily not get that job. It didn’t interest me to write about a world where gender was better, so much as—what if it was not tethered to the same things that we tether it to, what would be ways in which it would still be a trap and a fiction and a prison? Which is not to say that that is the only thing that gender is, but in the terms of things you can explore in a short story, that’s some serious grist for the mill. (Alam 2018, n.p.)

So, while Lavery does not set out to subvert gender, if you are looking for a sophisticated queer recreation of gendered possibilities, this collection of short stories should be at the top of your reading list.

It should be noted, however, that Lavery’s stories are not merely genderqueer revisions. Rather, they tap into the ambiguities of life that we largely ignore in favour of more consoling structuralist understandings of life. “The Daughter Cells,” a poststructuralist rewriting of “The Little Mermaid,” specifically confronts the perceived familiarity and comfort of masculinist and individualist conceptions of personhood in Western society. The story reframes individualism as selfish, obtuse, and even violent. Lavery asks us to consider how identity and embodiment might be communal with his recreation of the little mermaid’s character, who remarks about humans: “They can’t make daughters as individuals or as a body politic, nor bud nor generate colonies, as sensible people do. They have to split off into two first, and commit sexuality against one another. I told you it wasn’t decent” (Lavery 2018, 7). The mermaid’s skeptical perspective on human embodiment and socialization taps into anxieties about the limits of the corporeal, both those that we consider natural and those we impose on ourselves discursively.

Lavery’s stories are best enjoyed by yielding to their incongruence with conventional logic and total knowability. His stories’ true horrors lie in their unpredictability and ability to deconstruct the internalized familiarity of classic fairy tales. Ultimately, *The Merry Spinster* rings true to its description as possessing “a keen sense of feminist mischief” (Alam, n.p.) with its clever, playful, and often unsettling deconstructions of notions of gender, selfhood, and human relationality.

Works Cited

- Alam, Rumaan. Mar 12 2018. “Just Doing It: A Conversation with Daniel Lavery.” *The Rumpus*. Accessed April 7 2019. <https://therumpus.net/2018/03/the-rumpus-interview-with-mallory-ortberg/>.
- Carter, Angela. 1979. *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Penguin Books.
- Donoghue, Emma. 1999. *Kissing The Witch: Old Tales New Skins*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.



Havrilesky, Heather. Mar 13 2018. "‘Mallory Is Not Gone:’ Daniel Mallory Ortberg on Coming Out as Trans." *The Cut*. Accessed April 7 2019.

<https://www.thecut.com/2018/03/daniel-mallory-ortberg-interview-heather-havrilesky.html>.

Sexton, Anne. 1971. *Transformations*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

DAVID SEMENOV is a first-year MA student in Women's Studies and Feminist Research at the University of Western Ontario (UWO). They completed a BA at UWO in 2019, with an Honors Specialization in Women's Studies and a minor in Sexuality Studies. Their research interests include transgender theory and embodiments, queer and trans phenomenology, and queer theory.