Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag

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fairy-tale aspect of his films has been ignored as much as the importance of the queerness of his work, in this text she asks ‘what Demy’s cinema can tell us about the fairy tale and what the fairy tale can tell us about Demy’s cinema’ (1).

Duggan believes that Demy’s films are particularly suited to showcase the subversive potential of the fairy tale and that he ‘unsettles conceptions of gender, sexuality, and class’ as a way of both exploring those issues and ‘broaden[ing] the possibilities of the genre’ (1). It is this ‘unsettling’ that Duggan identifies as the queerness of Demy’s films and thus the subject of her study, examining the ways in which these “‘queer enchantments” destabilize binary oppositions … that uphold a heterosexist, bourgeois order’ (7).

The book consists of four chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. There are also notes and a useful filmography at the end. After a concise and clear introduction, Duggan’s first chapter examines the films Lola and The Umbrellas of Cherbourg with the fairy tales ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty’, arguing for a dialectic between the ‘heteronormative fairy-tale genre’ and ‘queer melodrama’ (37). Chapter Two looks at Donkey Skin and gay aesthetics, particularly camp, alongside the film’s depiction of incest as a code for queerness. Chapter Three examines The Pied Piper in relation to the specifically French tradition of that story, bohemians and artistic freedom, and grotesque satire. While this section deals with somewhat different topics from the rest of the book, Duggan defends its inclusion based on the fact that ‘it does deal with a film by a queer director who is interested in Otherness generally, whether it is in relation to sexual, social, ethnic, or political Others’ (73). This, along with a few additional observations about the film itself that advocate for its queerness in the broad sense of the term, convincingly allows for its inclusion. The last chapter argues for a ‘queering of the French revolution’ via the film Lady Oscar and the tradition of the maiden warrior, drawing from a rich history from ancient China to the contemporary Japanese manga on which Demy’s film is based. Duggan’s epilogue chiefly reiterates her points and makes her case for Demy’s films as ‘postmodern fairy tales’ that ‘imitate and undermine, revel in and subvert the classical tale’, a process that ‘reshap[es] them to speak to economic and social injustices and alternative sexualities’ (143–44). Despite the complex issues each chapter grapples with, Duggan’s writing is always easy to follow and thoughtfully presented.

Duggan’s text is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from fairy-tale studies, film studies, folklore studies, queer studies, and more. Far from being overwhelmed by having so many different areas in play, however, she beautifully weaves these disparate disciplines together to create a rich and compelling text. Even those unfamiliar with the majority of Demy’s work will find themselves captivated by Duggan’s descriptions and enthusiasm for her subject. Folklore scholars will appreciate Duggan’s complex and well-informed approach to the fairy tale and folklore more broadly—a quality that unfortunately not all studies of this kind share. Her text further makes the important point that studying items like Demy’s films ‘provide[s] important insights into the genre of the fairy tale by shedding light on the ways in which gender, sexuality, and class can play out in the classical tale and by suggesting new ways the genre can represent different types of relations and worlds that go beyond heteronormativity and middle-class ideals’ (146). This text is highly recommended for its accomplished blending of both the fairy tale and film and the fairy tale and queer studies.

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Aiming to ‘unsettle assumptions about culture and its study’ (1), this engaging collection of essays will stimulate lively and productive conversation, both in college classes and among scholars and
The first assumption this book unsettles is the expectation that essays on a variety of subjects will appear in sections according to their themes. Because of readers’ suggestions, Greenhill and Tye present the thirteen essays alphabetically. This sequence results in an appealing free flow of interrelated subjects. Scholars who want to know which themes appear in which essays can consult the editors’ list of thematic clusters, which includes ethnography, custom and belief, ethnic drag, film studies, material culture, men and masculinities, women and femininities, narrative, postcolonial studies, transbiology, transgender, and transex. As this list shows, there is an emphasis upon gender and sexuality among women and men in folk tradition and popular culture, but there is also much more: an unusually rich array of intriguing, thought-provoking material.

One especially eloquent, evocative essay is LuAnne Roth’s ‘Sexing the Turkey: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality at Thanksgiving’. With well-chosen photographs and examples, Roth shows how the concealed ideology of the Thanksgiving holiday results in gender performativity. Women tend to cook and serve food, with emphasis on a well-cooked turkey, while men tend to watch football and wait for their dinner to be served. Noting the ‘symbolic slippage between women and meat in Western culture’ (163), Roth argues that the gendered, sexualized, and dominated turkey suggests ‘a profound cultural anxiety about masculinity, subjectivity, and nationhood, creating fissures in the ideology of Thanksgiving and suggesting that ultimately, the act of consumption may prove to be an act of aggression and sexual domination’ (169).

Other essays deconstruct masculinity from different cultural vantage points. ‘Three Dark-Brown Maidens and the Brommtopp: (De)Constructing Masculinities in Southern Manitoba Mennonite Mumming’, by Marcie Fehr and Pauline Greenhill, analyses ‘transgender, transethnic, and/or transracial identity exploration’ (20) by young and older men during mumming between Christmas and New Year’s Day. Some consultants deny the existence of cross-dressing and ethnic drag in the Brommtopp, but the authors show how both address anxieties, problematize ethnic and racial stereotypes, and potentially harm marginalized people.

Another very interesting essay, Diane Tye’s “‘What’s under the Kilt?’: Intersections of Ethnic and Gender Performativity’, explores the various kinds of performance and play that happen when people make fun of men wearing kilts. Tye explains how the kilt evolved in Scotland and other countries, including Canada, and became a means of performing hegemonic masculinity. Kilt-related humour and trickery takes many forms, including women trying to see or photograph what is under the kilt. Among men, jokes and pranks facilitate learning how to wear the kilt properly, and the first wearing of a kilt can serve as a rite of passage. Tye makes the point that kilt humour has ‘multifaceted, sometimes contradictory’ meanings (106).

Similarly, in ‘Listening to Stories, Negotiating Responsibility: Exploring the Ethics of International Adoption through Narrative Analysis’, Patricia Sawin sensitively considers a multiplicity of meanings. Acknowledging that international adoption involves joy, a sense of ethnic difference, and other feelings on the part of the adoptive family and a feeling of loss on the part of the birth family, she combines folklorists’ theories of narrative shaping with feminist ethicists’ use of stories for negotiation of reciprocal responsibilities. Parent-to-parent stories provide an important base for understanding the ethical complexities of adopting a child from another country. Sawin argues, ‘Whatever struggles we have faced in our own journey to parenthood, we cannot treat birth families like global storks dropping into our laps babies of whose source we remain blissfully ignorant’ (188). With courage and compassion, adoptive parents can try to contact their children’s birth parents and possibly, over time, influence adoption policies in their children’s countries of origin.

An earlier era and a different set of meanings emerge in Theresa A. Vaughan’s ““Composed for the Honor and Glory of the Ladies”: Folklore and Medieval Women’s Sexuality in The Distaff
These fifteenth-century French gospels include around 230 beliefs, remedies, and sayings embedded within a frame narrative. Some of the most intriguing forms of folklore are spells and remedies; for example, a woman should feed catnip to her lover or husband to increase his desire for her, and a woman who fears being mounted by an incubus can slow the creature down by placing an oak stool in front of the fire (219). Vaughan argues that although the Distaff Gospels came from men, they reveal women’s concerns about safety, sexuality, spirituality, and control of their daily lives through folkloric expression.

It is impossible to cover all thirteen excellent essays in this brief review; so I will simply say that all of them unsettle our assumptions in significant ways. Unsettling Assumptions will be a splendid text for college courses and an appealing source of well-theorized knowledge for readers with diverse interests. Let the conversations begin!

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