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HARRY POTTER AND THE BROTHERS GRIMM'S RETURN - J.K. ROWLING'S "TALES OF BEEDLE THE BARD"

J.K. Rowling, "THE TALES OF BEEDLE THE BARD", London: Children's High Level Group / Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008, hardback, xvii + 109 pp., ISBN 978-0-7475-9987-6

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Readers of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, the final volume in J.K. Rowling's seven-tome wizarding epic, will recall the inset story 'The Tale of the Three Brothers', attributed to Beedle the Bard, which appeared at one of that book's most dramatic moments - in chapter 21, when Hermione reads out the tale to Harry and Ron, all three on the run from the Death Eaters, in the home of the perfidious Xenophilius Lovegood. At the time it struck me as a remarkably powerful fairy-tale in the best Brothers Grimm mode, and it is now an enormous pleasure to find it once again, alongside with four new stories from the Bard's storehouse, in this welcome companion volume to the Potter series. The new stories are: 'The Wizard and the Hopping Pot', 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune', 'The Warlock's Hairy Heart' and 'Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump'; 'The Tale of the Three Brothers' comes at the end.

J.K. Rowling has vowed there will be no more Harry Potter books as such, but ancillary volumes such as this - joining Quidditch Through the Ages, Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, and to be joined at some point by Rowling's projected Potter encyclopaedia - do not amount to a breach of that promise, and represent an interesting extension of and commentary on the Potter phenomenon. The present offering appears as 'a collection of stories written for young wizards and witches' (Introduction, xi), written by Beedle the Bard in the fifteenth century and translated from the original runes by Hermione Granger. Each story is accompanied by notes attributed to Albus Dumbledore and further annotated in person by J.K. Rowling, who also signs the introduction. This amalgam of story, alleged translation, criticism and annotation in fact constitutes a highly sophisticated textual mix, and it may, I believe, be reasonably argued that with this little book Rowling is, once again, doing the world an educational service - this time by gently urging her younger readers along the much-needed path of textual awareness and intelligent criticism. Cervantes offered Don Quixote as an alleged translation from the Arabic; Edgar Allan Poe presented The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym as his imaginary hero's adventures relayed to the world by himself; J.K. Rowling now serves up a set of narratives claimed to be written by one of her characters, translated by a second and commented on by a third.

Intertextuality, then, rules from the beginning: in her introduction, Rowling refers to 'those familiar with the history of the most recent wizarding war (everyone who has read all seven volumes of the life of Harry Potter ...)' (xv-xvi), and indeed most readers of these tales will be in that position. It is assumed that readers know what a Horcrux is, and if a term like 'Animagus' is glossed it is to refresh memories, not to introduce something brand-new; while Dumbledore's commentaries refer at will to characters and themes from the Potter books a shade problematically if we think of sixth and the seventh, since he is said to have written the commentary on 'The Tale of the Three Brothers' eighteen months before the 'tragic events' of the sixth: as Rowling herself says, 'Dumbledore reveals a little less than he knows - or suspects - about the final story in this book' - Introduction, xv). The reader, meanwhile, knows that that story has played a major part in the plot of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' and has already been multiply interpreted within that book by

different characters. All this intertextual and interpretative dimension serves to make the young reader aware that books and stories do not exist in isolation, for we live in a world where all is related to all.

Dumbledore's commentaries also have the function of instilling important notions relating to text and meaning. Of the first story, 'The Wizard and The Hopping-Pot', he immediately states that it is not as innocent as it seems: a apparently 'simple and heart-warming fable' or paean to generosity, it was greeted in its day with hostility by many in the wizarding community because of its 'message of brotherly love for Muggles' (13). Albus Dumbledore thus alerts readers to the need to be aware of historical context when interpreting a text. Any idea of textual innocence is further undermined in the commentary on the second tale, 'The Fountain of Fair Fortune', when Dumbledore informs us that 'more than one parent has demanded the removal of this particular tale from the Hogwarts library' (39), even quoting a letter on the matter from none other than Lucius Malfoy, the father of Harry's arch-enemy Draco. The young audience is thus confronted with complex issues of censorship and book-banning, and therefore, of interpretation. Finally, Dumbledore's reading of 'The Tale of the Three Brothers' - necessarily partial, as Rowling had already signalled- should alert to the provisional nature of any textual interpretation and the need to take account of a given reader's position as interpreter.

The story-telling goes on: stories speak to stories and characters to readers. I will not summarise J.K. Rowling's new fairy-tales here, preferring to leave their discovery to the reader. I hope, though, that these brief comments will have suggested something of the deft and intelligent fashion in which her tale-telling not only - as we all know - encourages otherwise reluctant young people to read books as such but is also able to instil habits of reading books well and wisely.