

Corporealizing fairy tales: the body, the bawdy, and the carnivalesque in the comic book *Fables*.

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 **Corporealizing Fairy Tales: The Body, the Bawdy, and the Carnivalesque in the Comic Book *Fables***

Adam Zolkover

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Abstract

Through a series of inversions of the structure and content of canonical European literary fairy tales, Bill Willingham's comic book *Fables* functions, at once, as parody, commentary, and as an ongoing fairy tale in its own right. The classic fairy-tale characters of the Grimms and Charles Perrault are given corporeal form—given sexuality and sensuality in the comic's pages—and through this transformation are reshaped into a refracting lens for the moral precepts of those collections. The result is a postmodern literary endeavor that is neither condemnation nor celebration of the material from which it draws, but something in between.

Corporealizing Fairy Tales: The Body, the Bawdy, and the Carnavalesque in the Comic Book *Fables*

Historically, there has been little space in the discipline of folkloristics for the study of the American comic book. This was the case in 1980 when Alex Scobie wrote that folklorists “have not evinced the same degree of interest as has been shown by their colleagues in the social sciences” (70). And it is no less true today when, despite an expansion of folkloristics into the realm of popular culture, discussion of sequential art in print remains conspicuously sparse. Aside from Scobie’s “Comics and Folklore,” which appeared in *Fabula* in 1980, the only significant writing on the topic from a folkloristic perspective is Ronald Baker’s 1975 article in the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, “Folklore Motifs in the Comic Books of Superheroes”.¹ Here, Baker comments on the replacement of *märchen* in the popular imagination with an array of mass-mediated entertainments, and then goes on to point out a set of confluences between folktale motifs and tropes from Golden Age superhero books.² The waxing of the latter, he suggests, makes up in part for the waning of the former. His article, and Scobie’s as well, provides little more than a few introductory remarks intended to lead us toward a more well developed interest in the topic. Unfortunately, however, folklorists have been reluctant to follow.

There are a number of significant reasons, as Scobie points out, why this should be the case (70–72). Given the kinds of constraints in the past placed on folklorists engaging in the study of folklore in literature, as well as the broader

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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