Suzanne Magnanini. *Fairy-Tale Science: Monstrous Generation in the Tales of Straparola and Basile*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Pp. 221 ISBN 978 0 8020 9754 5 n.p.

Curiosity is a sin. From antiquity to the late middle ages, philosophers and theologians struggled with the relationships between legitimate wonder—the parent of philosophy, devoted to the variegated works of God—and idle, unsanctioned, and undisciplined curiosity, a sensibility intimate with lust and pride. The wonder that avoids astonishment funds inquiry, while curiosity is wayward, incontinent prying into marvels and *lusus naturae*. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the valences of wonder and curiosity had shifted in concert with the sensibilities of natural philosophers conversant in the ‘new science’. Authoritative, ‘scientific’ discourse in the period seemed to endorse both wonder and curiosity, the latter — aligned with wonder, figured as the passion of accumulation, inexhaustible inquiry, even intellectual greed—embodied in cabinets of curiosities or *wunderkammern*. The now significant scholarship concerning this transformation of sensibility (Park and Daston’s *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, for example) largely ignores literary excursions into the province of wonder, and few scholars have explored the ways in which literary treatments develop and refine admiration, wonder, and curiosity in early modern Europe. For the renaissance of wonder in early modern Italy—especially for the relationships between literature and science, fiction and museology—Suzanne Magnanini is a very fine docent.

Fairy-Tale Science is marvelous: replete with monsters and spontaneous sex changes, ogres and basilisks, fools and flatulence, it illuminates a world obscured by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship, a world in which fairy tales, *favola*, and science were close, if not precisely consanguine. In seven concise chapters, Magnanini explores the “dense network of intertextual references” (7) that binds the fictive and the factual in the fairy tales of Giovan Francesco Straparola (d. 1557) and Giambattista Basile (d. 1632) and in contemporary medical, philosophical, and ‘scientific’ discourse (she uses the term ‘science’ to mark an ensemble of discourses and practices aimed at understanding, explaining, and controlling the natural world [8]). Characterising the tales as *wunderkabinette*, Magnanini argues that the monstrous human body functions as a “nexus where the literary fairy tale and the emerging New Science” meet in “mutually defining contiguity” (6). Learned theories of monstrous generation inform the *favole*, while physicians and natural philosophers ‘explain’ anomalous bodies with recourse to myth. *Favole* and natural philosophy participated in a “single cultural debate on the monstrous” (15). While the overall story is familiar, and at times her analogies are rather attenuated, Magnanini’s subplots and excursions, inflections and revisions, are spurring. Few areas of inquiry in the ‘age of the marvelous’ escape Magnanini’s sharp eye; her range is admirable, ballasted by shrewd and engaging readings of the fairy tales themselves.

Chapters one and two situate Straparola’s and Basile’s tales in the milieu of early modern natural philosophy. She claims that *Le piacevoli notti* and *Lo cunto de li cunti* are “like” early modern cabinets of curiosities, “for they are constructed

from a variety of literary materials, both aulic and exotic, and enclose an array of marvels" (23); they also depend on *variatio* and multiplicity (25, 28). While she is attentive to the literary etiology and the politics of gender and voice, Magnanini's analogy seems rather weak: the age of the marvelous is, after all, the age of the *cento* or patchwork, the literary anatomy, the Menippean satire. The *favole* and other tales that incorporate, denigrate, or cathect learned matter seem more about revitalising a genre than 'theatres of the world.' At times, Magnanini engages in what might be called an aesthetics of juxtaposition.

Magnanini addresses these problems in chapters three and four, which demonstrate Straparola's and Basile's modulation of voice and genre in order to free fairy tales from "stigma" (47). Straparola, for example, accommodates medical case histories in his tales (52ff.), while Basile's focus on the female body as the locus of the marvelous allows him to laud *favole* as a legitimate genre for male writers, as an expression of masculine authority (73-92).

The next three chapters explore divisions between the human and the animal in early modern Italian thought, with most of Magnanini's focus trained on the ways in which the monstrous limits the human (for example, 104). We learn about abnormal bodies and bestial acts that were "destabilizing radicals within the carefully constructed system" of early modern classification (107). A marriage with a pig demonstrates the importance, not of status, but of "generation and lineage" (112), while 'fake monsters,' like dragons and basilisks, are explored by the authors of the fairy tales in order to replace the "sword by science," the dragon-slayer with the naturalist (127). The final chapter examines "fart-babies" and 'demonic anuses' (147-148), and their exigencies in natural history and in fairy tales. Magnanini concludes her reading of Basile here with a suggestion that, by the early Seicento, *favole* comment on science (145), that they function as "meditation[s]" on natural philosophical inquiry (150, 152), and that they feature as an embodiment of superseded knowledge—characterised as antique nonsense—in the narratives of the new science (161). In the "hands of capable, male authors," Magnanini concludes, "the tales of old crones and simple young girls could become science fictions" (163). Her point is clear: natural philosophy and the *favola* "encountered and defined each other in the broader cultural discourse of the marvelous" (169). A rhetoric of redescription revitalises wonder and curiosity in the Cinquecento, and Magnanini conveys, clearly and acutely, the role of fairy tales in such change. Yet she largely neglects rhetoric, neither treating her writers' rhetoric very surely (see, for example, 123, 141) nor the rhetoric of description in the period. Further caveats: Magnanini rarely explores the scholarship on wit, admiration, and wonder in classical or early modern contexts (the work of James Biester, for example, is absent) nor does she fully contextualise her treatment of fairy tales in Italian literary criticism of the period. Finally, there is very little attention to readership (is there any direct evidence of natural philosophers reading *favole*?) or to other examples of the interaction between literary genres and scientific discourse (Robert Boyle comes to mind: he wrote a romance entitled *The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus* in 1687). These minor concerns—curiosities rather than sins, one might say—do not detract from Magnanini's ambitious, accomplished project. *Fairy-Tale*