

The Importance of Being Different: Disability in Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales by Chris Foss. Charlottesville: U of Virginia Press, 2025. xi, 182 pp. ISBN: 9780813953014 (cloth); 9780813953014 (paper). \$100.00 (cloth); \$32.50 (paper).

One of the first book-length studies of Oscar Wilde's writings informed by a disability-centred reading practice and analytical framework, *The Importance of Being Different* turns to Wilde's fairy tales as an understudied archive of fictions preoccupied with non-normative embodiment. For Foss, the centrality of figures like the performing dwarf, the once-beautiful then deformed "star-child," and the "selfish giant" to their respective stories underscores the great extent of "Wilde's imaginative interest in peculiar bodies" and "how their unusual physical appearance or attributes spur conditioned pejorative responses from others, who pose or posit them as 'less than,' as dismissible or dangerous, as different." Yet, as Foss reminds us, Wilde's representations of physical difference do not merely reproduce late-nineteenth-century ableist stereotyping but also attempt to create unexpected forms of solidarity among readers who are invited "to identify with his freakish characters (in direct opposition to the fear and repulsion many such representations consistently trade off of for their effect)." Hardly minor, these characters often bear complex interiorities and subjectivities that resist easy interpretation, especially by contemporary readers anticipating only flatness or caricature.

As opposed to attempting to read a consistently "progressive" or "regressive" stance across Wilde's two collections of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Foss recovers in these texts a fittingly Wildean sense of ambivalence and contradiction about disability's meaning. Foss inhabits the messiness of these fairy tales' "polyphonic multiplicities of potential meanings" to parse how Wilde "deconstructs" the more heavy-handed didacticism of canonical fairy-tale writers like Hans Christian Andersen. Instead of presenting clean, teleological narratives with little grey area, Wilde explores in his fairy tales a vast spectrum of affective responses within and to his characters ranging from disgust to pity to sympathy to even kinship that evade convenient moralizing. Framed differently, Wilde's narrative innovation of the fairy tale, Foss suggests, lies in his capacity to challenge his readers to think dialectically about his characters' embody-minded experiences, however strange or fantastical.

Foss smartly preempts the reductive dismissal of disability approaches to literary history as anachronistic by framing his study as one of reading what he terms "disability-aligned" characters in Wilde's children's literature. Rather than retrospectively diagnosing characters simply as "disabled – and