

New Tales for Old

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*She wraps the cloth around
Her eyes to see.
The finer the weave
The more powerful is she.*

Marjorie M. Evasco, “Mandarawak”

Nick Joaquin’s first book, *Prose and Poems* was published in 1952 and Gilda Cordero-Fernando’s *Butcher, Baker, Candlestick Maker* was published in 1962. Both collections contain stories which today seem readily recognizable as modern tales. But for the longest time, “May Day Eve” and “Summer Solstice” were taught in classrooms as realist stories, and “The Legend of the Dying Wanton” was usually ignored. Similarly, Cordero-Fernando’s “The Level of Each Day’s Need” was passed over by anthologists, who clearly felt she was better represented by “Hunger” and “People in the War.”¹

For some time no other mainstream writer seemed interested in writing tales. But today, among younger writers there is a growing interest in what is referred to as “speculative fiction.” The term covers a wide range of genres which speculate about worlds different from the one we regard as “real”: science fiction, fantasy, horror fiction, gothic fiction, supernatural fiction, futurist fiction, alternate history, magical/marvelous realism.²

My own interest is not in the entire field of speculative fiction but only in the modern tale, which is descended from the literary fairy tale and the philosophical tale; and, in particular, in modern tales by Filipino women who write in English. This essay is part of a longer study, the first part of which is on Gilda Cordero-Fernando's tales, and has already been published (See Hidalgo 2006, 45-76).

Without losing sight of Maria Nikolajeva's warning that "drawing clear-cut borders between different types of literature associated with fantasy is not only impossible but also not always necessary" (2003,138), I find it useful to refer to her categories—myth, the traditional fairy tale, modern fantasy and postmodern fantasy—because using the terms interchangeably sometimes leads to confusion.

So, first, there is myth,³ which predates the *traditional fairy tale*, which, in turn, predates *fantasy*. Nikolajeva reminds us that the fairy tale and modern fantasy differ, first of all, in their origins. "Fairy tales have their roots in archaic society and archaic thought, thus immediately succeeding myths." But "literary fairy tales and fantasy are definitely products of modern times." They owe their origins mostly to the Romantic Movement in Europe, with its interest in folk tradition and its rejection of the rationalism of the previous century (138-139).⁴

For a long time, the fairy tale was associated with the nursery. According to Ursula Le Guinn, books written specifically for children began to emerge in the mid-19th century. Before that, fiction was dominated by the realistic novel.

Romance and satire were acceptable to it, but overt fantasy was not. So, for a while, fantasy found a refuge in children's books. There it flourished so brilliantly that people began to perceive imaginative fiction as being "for children" (Le Guinn 2006).