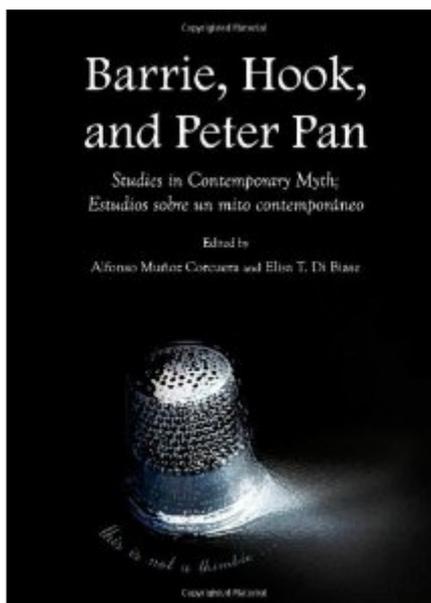




## Book Review

Muñoz Corcuera, A. & Di Biase E.T. (Eds.). (2012). *Barrie, Hook and Peter Pan: Studies in Contemporary Myth; Estudios sobre un mito contemporáneo*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 310 pages. ISBN 978-1443840026



The recent publication of the bilingual critical volume *Barrie, Hook and Peter Pan*, edited by Alfonso Muñoz and Elisa T. Di Biase should be applauded for several reasons, not the least of which, like the myth it seeks to explore and celebrate, its being full of magic and wonderful surprises. As many other collections of critical essays, it is a work resulting from a scholarly gathering, the international conference celebrated at Universidad Complutense de Madrid on the 14 and 15 of March 2011, “One Hundred Years of *Peter and Wendy*”. Yet, this is no ordinary volume of conference proceedings. Firstly, the fact that a group of Spanish young scholars were responsible for organizing in Madrid the only centennial academic celebration of James Matthew Barrie’s ground-breaking novel is a

first significant event that bespeaks the burgeoning influence of English Studies in our country. Secondly, that the British publishing house Cambridge Scholars should have edited a volume with nine essays written in English and eight in Spanish -the introductory essay being really the only bilingual text- is yet another promising and encouraging sign of the increasing acceptance of Spanish as a major influential academic language and a recognition of a distinctively international community of scholars. In this volume there are in fact contributions by academics coming from regions as diverse as Scotland, Mexico, France, United States, Ethiopia and Spain.

A deceptively simple cover image of a silver thimble upon a black background, dimly emerging from the dark with a caption below stating “This is not a thimble...”, designed by Michelle Erazo, already provides a forceful glimpse into the nature of Barrie’s work and of the volume itself. Indeed, the deliberate confusion between thimble and kiss that Wendy creates when she asks the boy, “Surely you know what a kiss is?” - and, upon intuiting he does not, gives him instead the silver cap “not to hurt his feelings”<sup>1</sup> - is among the most memorable scenes of *Peter and Wendy*. Then, the reference to René Magritte’s iconic painting ‘La trahison des images’ that the cover image further plays with, quoting its tricky inscription “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”, is not intended here so much as an ironic postmodern gesture but rather, one feels, as an homage. In fact, it seems to work perfectly to call attention from the very beginning to what both the art of twentieth century avant-garde and modernist writing sought to dismantle: the conventional correspondence between words, objects and images, exploring instead their more complex or hidden relationships. As different as the works of the Belgian painter and the Scottish writer are (and the volume here reviewed does not intend to establish a connection between them at all), they have both elicited a significant amount of psychoanalytic critical readings. The volume edited by Muñoz Corcuera and Di Biase shows that a hundred years after the publication of the novel the psychoanalytic critical apparatus is still the most widely chosen tool to unravel the mysteries of Barrie’s fictional world. It also shows, however, firstly, that this kind of criticism has transcended the old analyses centred too much on the author, or incapable of distinguishing between the authorial persona and the narrative voice of a fictional world; and, secondly, that there are many other alternative paths to approach the Peter Pan myth and “the immense depth and semiological richness of Barrie’s work” (xiii)<sup>2</sup>. Their multidisciplinary compilation of critical essays, covering a variety of disciplines ranging from literary theory, to postcolonial studies, comparative literature and pedagogy is a good proof of it.

The book is divided into six sections that rather than grouping the articles according to common theoretical frameworks, juxtaposes them instead “under the caption of an image emanating from *Peter Pan* that metaphorically points to the thread of the reflections”(xiv) it discloses, a quite obtuse description to justify what is nonetheless an interesting and evocative choice. Thus, the first part “London/Londres”, which deals with Barrie’s literary and personal

experiences and ghosts as anchored in the concrete world of London, ironically brings together against each other two essays with almost clashing approaches to the interpretation of Barrie's literary masterpiece. The first one, "Creating the Deathless Boy" by professor Ronald D. S. Jack, stands out as one of the best contributions in this volume. In it, the renowned specialist in Scottish Literature and Barrie's oeuvre explores a broad generative context for the Peter Pan myth that challenges fiercely the "Oedipal-escapist vision" (4) of the myth and its author that remains dominant in the media by looking in detail at the extremely limited textual and critical evidence on which that myth is based. Jack's essay follows the conclusions reached in his book *Myths and the Mythmaker* (Rodopi, 2010), a study of Matthew Barrie's major prose and theatrical productions composed during his Victorian apprenticeship and affecting deeply Pan's emergence and development. Here, he offers a necessarily shortened yet ample sketch of that literary training but one that covers Barrie's university period -and therefore the influence on him of David Masson's Rhetoric and Belles Lettres lectures, as well as Campbell Fraser's course in psychology and metaphysics-; the importance of his journalism and his contributions to *The Nottingham Journal*; his several authorial personas and detailed analysis of several dramatic texts and manuscripts. More important than offering an accurate survey of Barrie's prolific output is, however, the thesis that Prof. Jack gradually builds up to suggest that Barrie used his knowledge of what amused and frightened children as an intentionally light vehicle "for presenting a darker, adult view of Darwinian doubt as it effects the ultimate mysteries of human life" (11). What made his work differ from other writers of the times and from Darwin himself -Jack further argues providing ample textual evidence- was a true feminist vision developed throughout his works, granting to woman, "as child-bearer and possessor of many minds, both natural and artistic superiority in the battle of the sexes" (9).

Professor Jack's opening essay seems to fulfil perfectly the editors' aim of vindicating the figure of James Matthew Barrie "taking his name out of the children's literature drawer and distancing the quality of his work as far as possible from his personal life, the extravagance of his biography and the charges that have been made against him" (xiii), particularly the accusations of homosexuality and paedophilia, merciless after the writer's death. The nature of R.D.S. Jack's scholarship makes its juxtaposition with Céline -Albin Faivre's "The legacy of the Phantoms, or Death as Ghost-Writer in *Peter and Wendy*" seemingly ironic; for if the Scottish scholar research aims at "exemplifying the vulnerability of the mother-obsessed thesis" (5), the French philosopher provides a reading of *Peter and Wendy* fully based on the author's problematic relationship with his mother so as to suggest that Peter Pan's shadow is the symbol of the absent reflection of his Self in his mother's face. Faivre's interpretation of Barrie's work, substantiated by psychoanalytic theories -mainly Winnicott's- and Derridean thoughts on mourning and memory, provides a much darker view of the origins of the Peter Pan myth and the Neverland, which emerges less as "a land devoted

to the imagination and to play, and more a land dedicated to memory and forgetfulness, a place where things and facts never happen but yet leave their mark, a hollow form, a form of regret or remorse” (28); but this darker view of the island and its leader is shared by many authors in this collection. The article is the first of a series of essays following, which compose the second section of the volume, “The Shadow/La sombra”, where Faivre’s work might have fitted perfectly as well, for they all touch, with a greater or lesser degree, upon the subject of psychoanalysis. David Rudd’s essay, “Never, Never, Never Land: The dangerous appeal of the Sublime Object of Ideology” is another magnificently crafted and argued challenge to the easy Oedipal reading of *Peter Pan*. In it, the expert in Children’s Literature proposes instead a Lacanian interpretation in which Peter Pan, a “Betwixt-and-Between” figure, as Barrie himself described it in 1902, can be seen in fact as being trapped between the orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Rudd explains, the boy impossibly elects not to become part of the Symbolic order and thus remains impulsive, amoral, un-self-conscious; more to the point, he is the only boy in the island who could not write nor spell, a character then in complete contrast to Captain James Hook, who with his elegance of diction, incarnates the Paternal Metaphor. If in Rudd’s interpretation Peter Pan emerges as figure of unlimited *jouissance*, being capable of experiencing “ecstasies innumerable” (Barrie, 135), precisely because he is a fantasmatic figure, an imaginary being standing outside time, Alfonso Muñoz explores instead the true identity of Captain Hook in the homonymous essay. What strikes us about Muñoz’s article, as it does in other essays written by graduate students -such as co-editor’s Di Biase “On that Conspirational Smile between Peter Pan and the Mermaids”- are the fresh perspectives on the myth they provide: against more standardized and often a bit rigid model of interpretation in which everything seems to have an unquestioned traumatic explanation, these readings take more adventurous critical paths. Muñoz Corcuera, in particular, proves to be among the leading Spanish experts in the figure and the work of James Barrie. In his essay he outlines an exhaustive genealogy for Hook, including its literary models, and its real life model -Captain Swarthy in the games Barrie played with the Llewelyn Davies children in the summer of 1901- to underscore, combining both detailed textual evidence and psychoanalytic models and tracing a fantastic game of doubles, that it is however in the character’s relation with Pan and with Barrie as literary figure that its true identity emerges.

Parts III and IV of the volume, “Neverland/Nunca Jamás” and “The Lost Boys/Los niños perdidos”, contain an array of quite diverse essays that propose very original readings and perspectives on the boy who wouldn’t grow up and his literary world. Thus Di Biase, by focusing her attention on a detail that might go unnoticed, the unique relationship between Peter and the mermaids living in the Lagoon, manages to connect their shared mythological status; Pradeep Sharma, on the other hand, explores how Barrie’s work is the “creation of a colonial mindset” (139) and thus suggests that Neverland is not just an imaginary land created

out of nowhere, "but an amalgamation of the characteristics of lands and climes in British colonies- such as India, the Caribbean, and some African countries- at the height of colonialism (143); and we find another refreshing study in Fabio Vericat's essay, which somehow takes up with R.D.S Jack's previous consideration of Barrie's Edwardian theatre to enquire further on the issue of literary genealogy "as it passes from novel to theatrical performance, then back into novel, and finally adopts the form of a printed play" (108) and the relation between Barrie's experiments in hybridity and literary commercialism.

In the essays by Jaime Cuenca, Esther Charabati and Paige Gray that complete Part IV of the volume -which, as diverse as they are, share however an interest in challenging the preconceptions surrounding the Peter Pan myth with a focus on addressing social and cultural implications for educational purposes- it is possible to sense already a shift in the volume from issues related to the author and the book within its literary context, towards a full exploration of the contemporary myth. In that sense, then, Silvia Herreros de Tejada's essay "El disparate de ser niño para siempre: Peter Pan como metáfora de la vida humana" is indeed a perfect text to open Part V of the volume: "The Pirate Ship/El barco pirata", where the critical readings seem to sail the seas to explore the adaptations, re-readings and sequels who have fed from Barrie's original creation. Herreros de Tejada's interesting thesis that, as a matter of fact, Peter Pan's recreated existence throughout the twentieth century in several media challenges the archetype of *puer aeternus* in order to become a metaphor for human life, finds an excellent example in John Keith L. Scott's essay "Lost Boys, *Lost Girls*, Lost Innocence: J. M. Barrie and Alan Moore", an outstanding critical exercise on Moore and Gebbie's defiantly pornographic rereading of three female characters from the Edwardian Golden Age: Dorothy, Alice and Wendy, in a work that, as Scott suggests, is far from the worst type of slash fiction. Finally, in Part VI "Skull Rock/ La roca calavera" we find those articles which, in the same line, focus specifically on the different film versions that take up Barrie's fictional world.

All the aforementioned essays *and* those that were not reviewed for lack of space show insightful readings and high standards of scholarship. If the scope of the book was essentially to insist, successfully, that J.M. Barrie and his most well-known creation, Peter Pan, still matter a century after the latter's appearance, it actually transcends greatly that purpose; for after reading it, the reader is perplexed at the remarkable richness of Barrie's world and its unexpected evocations. Both authors and editors should be highly praised for it.

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**NOTES**

1. Barrie, James Matthew & F.D. Bedford. *Peter and Wendy*. Kindle Edition: 2012 [1911], p. 22.
2. This and subsequent parenthetical references refer, unless otherwise stated, to the volume here reviewed.