Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA
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The Metamorphosis of Fairy Tales during the 20th and 21st Centuries

Abel Sánchez Fernández

Tutor: Enrique Cámara Arenas

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Abstract

This study analyzes how fairy tales have changed during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. It compares landmark collections of fairy tales (Basile, Perrault, and Brothers Grim), to several post-World War II collections, from three different approaches: its relation to children, the presence or not of moral lessons in them, and the role of women and feminism in them. Most changes observed in contemporary fairy tales can be interpreted as a reaction against 19th-century censorship. The tendency of fairy tales now is to become elaborated, artistic creations, with these literary versions coexisting with simpler, more traditional tales aimed at children. While the role of women in fairy tales has greatly expanded, and has thus enriched them, the weight of morals in them is now reduced, something that could affect their strength and didactic value.

Keywords: Fairy Tales, Folktales, Morals, Children's Literature, Feminism

El presente estudio analiza cómo han cambiado los cuentos de hadas durante los siglos XX y XXI, mediante la comparación de colecciones clásicas de cuentos (Basile, Perrault, hermanos Grimm) con otras posteriores a la Segunda Guerra Mundial desde tres puntos de vista diferentes: la relación entre los cuentos de hadas y los niños, la presencia o ausencia de enseñanzas morales en ellos y el papel que otorgan a la mujer y al feminismo. La mayor parte de los cambios en el cuento de hadas contemporáneo puede interpretarse como una reacción contra la censura del siglo XIX. La tendencia actual de los cuentos de hadas es convertirse en creaciones artísticas elaboradas; estas versiones literarias conviven con cuentos más simples y tradicionales, orientados a los niños. Mientras que el rol de la mujer en los cuentos de hadas se ha ampliado, y de este modo los ha enriquecido, el peso de las enseñanzas morales en ellos se ha reducido, lo cual podría afectar a su fuerza y valor didáctico.

Palabras clave: cuentos de hadas, cuentos populares, moral, literatura infantil, feminismo.

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Fairy tales are a genre that dates back to Antiquity, with stories from ancient civilizations showing remarkable resemblances (Bottigheimer, 2014; Ziolkowski, 2007) to those stories known to so many readers from many countries: Red Riding Hood, Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty. The most famous fairy tale collections have drawn many elements from orally transmitted folk tales, and these refined, literary versions have, in turn, reshaped the tales of subsequent generations. Changes in fairy tales through history have been thoroughly studied by specialists, but the most recent production of fairy tales has been only partially studied, (Bacchilega, 1997; Zipes, 2006ª), with emphasis on the adaptation of fairy tale to other channels such as cinema.

In the present work, I have analyzed some of the changes undergone by fairy tales in the late 20th and early 21st century, with special attention to the changes of their content, rather than their form. Fairy tales can play a role in the upbringing of children, from teaching them valuable lessons to representing their first contact with fiction (Cashdan, 1999), and I think that the analysis of fairy tales written in the present day could give us some clues on how its writers reacted to those they read in their childhood: what they rejected, what they changed, and what they preserved.

I have divided the changes I found in three main sections: a) those concerning morals and teachings found in fairy tales; b) the influence of fairy tales on children and their suitability (or lack thereof) for them; c) the treatment of women in fairy tales, both as characters and as authors. Through tracing these elements in fairy tales from previous centuries (starting with the tales of Giambattista Basile and Charles Perrault), and in those contemporary to us, fluctuations may then be described and explained.

The study of fairy tales

The study of fairy tales is a discipline that reached its maturity during the 20th century. Russian formalist Vladimir Propp's (1928/1968) encoding of the fairy tale into 31 functions has been a reference work used by folklorists ever since. This study, however, is concerned with the study of changes in the fairy tale, and thus it needed works that studied the fairy tale from a diachronic perspective. The main works of history of fairy tales as a literary genre belong to the second half of the 20th century. J.R.R. Tolkien (1947/1998) and C.S. Lewis (1966/2008) studied the relation of children and fairy tales, as did Bruno Bettelheim (1976/2010), this time from a psychoanalytical point of view. Whereas Bettelheim recommends the reading of fairy tales to children for the sake of their psychological well-being, neither Tolkien nor Lewis consider fairy tales to be particularly suitable for children, and they rather encourage adults to read them. The opposite is defended by Cashdan (1999), who firmly advises both young and mature readers to explore fairy tales. The issues of psychological interpretation (1970), and the feminine elements in them (1972) were analyzed by Marie-Louise von Franz, who presented and developed a theory of archetypes, following the teachings of Jung. The reference works I used for this study were the two fairy tale encyclopedias by Briggs (1976) and Haase (2008), although the first one is strongly centered on Irish and British material. Nevertheless, since the object of this study was the change in fairy tales in times as recent as the 21st century, more recent studies were needed. Among the histories of fairy tales published at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, Bottigheimer's (2014) traces the evolution of magic tales and fairy tales from the ancient Egypt to the Renaissance, as does Ziolkowski (2007), who analyzes their

Roman and Greek origins. Folklorist Jack Zipes has studied the history and evolution of fairy tale deeply, including its subversive potential (2006a), its influence in society (2012), and how it has evolved and adapted through different times and countries. His works have been the basis for this study.

The Metamorphosis of Fairy Tales

A delimitation of the concept of fairy tale for this study

The definition of fairy tale seems to be somewhat elusive. Jack Zipes, currently one of the foremost specialists on the subject, warns us that "there is no such thing as *the* fairy tale; however, there are hundreds of thousands of fairy tales. And these fairy tales have been defined in so many different ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can be categorized as a genre." (Zipes, 2000, xv). A purely literal approach would force us to consider only those stories which feature the appearance of fairies, that is, of "supernatural ladies who directed the destiny of men and attended childbirths" (Briggs, 1976, p. 131); "ancient foremothers […], all are female, all are as powerful as the gods themselves in presiding human destiny" (Haase, 2008, p. 321). While this definition may be useful for the study of a very specific genre of stories, I consider it insufficient when it comes to the study of fairy tale in the 20th and 21st centuries, as the term *fairy tale* has grown more and more encompassing with time, and it covers a vast array of stories. As Haase (2008) pointed out, a problem with such term is that "not all fairy stories include fairies" (p. 322), and in such stories we may find that the supernatural takes other forms rather than the fairy, or that there is not any supernatural element at all.

Another problem that arises when trying to define the fairy tale is the fact that it usually overlaps with the folktale: "The term *folktale* is often used interchangeably with *fairy tale*, *märchen*, and *wonder tale*, their histories being interrelated" (Haase, 2008, p. 363). And this can hardly be a surprise, as the term *folktale* encompasses an even wider array of stories than just fairy tales. A folktale is, essentially, any story that stems from

the *volk,* the people, usually without any known author and with many minor variations depending on the country (or region, or town) studied. The main element of difference that might be brought forward in fairy tales would be the presence of a supernatural element, but, as it was mentioned before, this is not necessarily the case in many of them. Another line that could be drawn between the two types of tale could be the oral nature of the folktale, which in many cases would precede a more elaborated, written version, in the form of fairytale. Zipes (2006b) describes the process:

> As is well known, there is a classical fairy-tale canon in the Western world that has been in existence ever since the nineteenth century, if not earlier […]. In my previous works, I argued that these tales became canonized because they were adapted from the oral tradition of folklore for aristocratic and middle-class audiences as print culture developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and basically reshaped and retold during this time […]. (p. 1)

Nevertheless, not even this allows us to establish a clear difference: Folktales may begin their existence as spoken stories, but at some point they are registered, and written down. The question then would be: Should they be considered fairy tales from the moment they appear in print, or is it possible to still consider them as folktales, only in written form? There is no clear answer to this. Furthermore, were it not for this written registration, the number of tales (of both kinds) would be quite reduced, most likely circumscribed to our own and, perhaps, neighbouring communities,[1] and thus it might be argued that while folktales may not depend on the written word for their sheer

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[1] Jan Harold Brunvand (1981) argues that the most widespread example of folktale in the present day could be the "urban legend", as it has no clear author and it is transmitted orally (or,from the 1990s on, via the Internet).

survival (tales do pass on from one generation to the next), they depend on it to be known outside their place of origin, and to shield themselves against the erosion of time.

It seems clear then that fairy tales and folktales are deeply connected, and that the task of finding differences between them raises some difficulties. But every study must establish some boundaries for its object. Ziolkowski (2007) poses the following questions:

> What qualifies a tale as a fairy tale? Is it features of orality that are etched into it from its folktale beginnings? Is it a particularly literary style? Or does the baseline from a fairy tale have to do not with written or oral style ("once upon a time") but, rather, with content […]? (p. 8)

My selection of fairy tales for this study is an answer to the fourth question: It has to do with its content. Changes in the form of fairy tales were already manifold in the past, as Propp (1928/1968) corroborates: "[…] functions are really few in number, but characters are extremely numerous. This explains the double nature of the wonder tale: its extraordinary diversity, its motley picturesqueness, coupled with a no less extraordinary uniformity". (p. 33, my translation). This should not be understood as a statement that there are no interesting changes in the form of fairy tales in recent times, but as a consideration of them as secondary in importance to those of content. If the fairy tale can appear in hundreds of forms, but its functions are few, changes in the latter will surely affect the final result to a larger extent. In other words, the hero may rescue the princess under many identities, and in many ways, but it would be quite a shock to see that hero harm the princess, or forget about her (we would ask, and rightfully so, if he can still be considered a hero). In order to limit, to some degree, the scope of the

study, I have restricted my selection of the fairy tales in two different ways. Among those fairy tales from the 20th and 21st centuries, I have picked the primary material mainly from two anthologies: *Black Swan, White Raven* (1998), edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling; and *Beyond the Woods* (2016), edited by Paula Guran. With more than 40 authors in total, I have considered their books a good showcase of contemporary fairy tales produced around the beginning of 21st century. In addition to this, some works by Angela Carter are included, because of her pioneering work in the renovation of fairy tale, which I will refer to in some of the sections. On the other hand, regarding older fairy tales (which I will use as the reference to compare to the newer), I have preferred to restrict the selection mainly to those collections considered landmarks of the genre (brothers Grimm, H.C. Andersen and Giambattista Basile), because they were, and are, far more influential than any other compiler of past centuries, as explained by Zipes (2000, 2006a).

Fairy tales and children

There is a widespread cliché of fairy tales being meant only for children: little more than bedtime stories with simplistic morals, offering scarce literary interest. At best, they would have some teachings that the young could use and some artistic value, but this would not make them worthy of the attention of mature readers. Some authors, however, would beg to differ. Tolkien (1947/1998) declared that the attraction to fairy tales during childhood is not usually remarkable, and that such attraction grows only with age (p. 305,), and concluded that "it is better that fairy tales are written for adults, by adults. They will convey into them, and receive from them, more than children could ever convey or receive" (p. 314, my translation). C.S. Lewis (1966/2004) supported this

view too: "A children's story only liked by children is a bad children's story. Good ones live on. A waltz that we like only while waltzing is a bad waltz." (p. 66). Sheldon Cashdan (1999) rejects the notion of fairy tales being meant for children. He first presents a secondary reason for this: "One thing I learned in studying fairy tales was that a substantial number never made their way into children's storybooks […]. Some fairy tale collections contain so many stories that they would become unwieldy…" (p. 15). He then proceeds to explain the main reason, which is its inadequate content:

> Fairy tales were never meant for children. Originally conceived of as adult entertainment, fairy tales were told at social gatherings, in spinning rooms, in the fields, and in other setting where adults congregated – not in the nursery. This is why many early fairy tales include exhibitionism, rape and voyeurism […]. As late as the eighteenth century, fairy tales were dramatized in exclusive Parisian salons where they were considered divertissements for the culturally elite (Cashdan, 17-18).

Rape, exhibitionism, and voyeurism seem reason enough for any sensible parents to keep such tales away from their children. Nevertheless, many people nowadays remember fairy tales being told to them in their childhood, and no trace of those things mentioned by Cashdan ever appeared in them. Austrian Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1976/2010) stated that "the fairy tale proceeds in a manner that conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world" (p. 56), so there must have been a change at some point to account for this discrepancy. Again, Cashdan (1999) explains that it was during the 19th century that fairy tales became part of children's literature (p.18), and that a market flourished of books that contained "folktales, legends, and fairy tales that

had been simplified to appeal to less literate audiences" (p.18). This is the origin of the fairy tale as it is known today in its most plain meaning, that is, a story meant for children without too much complication. Given the weight of Victorian England in the world during the time that this "watering down" of tales took place, it is not surprising that such versions have lived on until our days (albeit we probably would not think of them as Victorian, but rather as simply traditional). Tales fashioned and tailored in such Victorian manner would be an agent of social cohesion, of conservatism: "…the fairy-tale discourse was controlled by the same sociopolitical tendencies that contributed towards strengthening bourgeois domination of the public sphere in the first half of the nineteenth century" (Zipes, 2006a, p. 106). Through censorship and careful selection of materials, fairy tales would become apt for children, but in a rather narrow way: deprived of elements that could be seen as harmful for young minds, and of course of anything that could be considered subversive. From the ruling class' point of view, such a rendering of fairy tales was just the right thing for the masses to read. It would not be long, however, until this concept of the fairy tale met a response, which came from some well-known authors of the time. Zipes (2006a) explains how changes in Victorian society from 1860 onwards (increased industrialization tied with a development of proletariat, attempts of social and religious reform) caused some writers to introduce changes in the fairy tale genre as it was then known, writers such as Lewis Carroll, John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, Christina Rosetti, and, specially, George MacDonald and Oscar Wilde (pp. 106-107). Their reaction did not consist in an effort of recovering the somewhat wilder or shocking elements of those "raw" fairy tales of old; instead, they used the tales to denounce what they saw us unfair, and to suggest how it could cease to be so. Instead of a solidifying, and cohesive force, some fairy tales began to appear as an invective against those abuses that the rich visited upon the poor. Fairy tales

conveyed the chance of presenting a world in which an author's idea of justice had triumphed, and to contrast it against the miseries of the real one, in keeping with the basic tenets of utopian literature, albeit within certain limits. It should not be forgotten that this kind of "subversive" fairy tales was a more elaborated, literary product, and thus its readership, especially young readership, was naturally smaller than that of popular literature, with its adapted versions printed in cheaper books, easier for children to access. Furthermore, caution should be used when speaking of the power of any kind of literature to actually change society, because, as Zipes (2006a) explains, some fairy tales "offer a pseudocriticism of real social conditions to guarantee that children of all classes will mind their manners and preserve the status quo"(p. 107). Even so, the potential of some of those tales remain. George MacDonald, who I already mentioned, is a good example of a producer of fairy tales that ventured a step further in social criticism: He believed that men could become civilized beings through a natural, individual process, and harboured doubts about the possibility of attaining such degree of civilization for society as a whole (Zipes, 2006a, p. 116). MacDonald's distrust of society here is a mark which may be found in the anarchist or the Christian (the latter, in the case of MacDonald), and which found its way into his fairy tales.

We may then see that there was a tension between different types of fairy tales, between those that complied with the dominant social order and that contained social or religious critic, be it hidden or patent. A division was, too, between those fairy tales that were meant specifically for children, and those whose intended readership tended to shift toward grown-ups. As we mentioned before, the "watered down" versions have survived to this day, and the proof to this is the fact that they are the first that spring to the mind of the majority of people on hearing about the concept of fairy tale. I do not

mean by this that they have been preserved in a form exactly like that they had in Victorian times; rather, it is their general traits they have been repeating themselves during the turn of the century and for the last hundred years, with the additional impulse that cinema provided, and which tended to fix some definite images of fairy tales in the imagination of children of two or three generations. The most conspicuous examples are, of course, Walt Disney films, as they have reached a worldwide audience through the decades (other film schools, such as the Soviet one produced very interesting material as well, but its dissemination was restricted to the USSR, and, to the present day, it is still scarcely known in the West). Such material, thanks to the cinema, has become a cultural reference that children from many countries share, and, as Cristina Bacchilega (1997) explains, this has important consequences:

> While […] many children may not have been exposed to versions of Snow White of Cinderella other than Disney's, we nevertheless respond to stereotypes and institutionalized fragments of these narratives sufficiently for them to be good bait in jokes, commercials, songs, cartoons, and other elements of popular and consumer culture. Most visible as entertainment for children […], fairy tales also play a role in education (p. 2).

It seems clear that, if fairy tales are readily recognized by children, if they have found their way into our culture to the point that they are integrated in our consumer culture, and if they have a place in children's education, then the fairy tale as a creation meant for children not only is not gone, but rather enjoys a healthy vitality. Nevertheless, Bacchilega (1997) also points out that "fairy tales […] accomplish a variety of social functions […]. Thinking of the fairy tale predominantly as children's

literature […] cannot accommodate this proliferation of uses and meanings (p. 3). The question now would be: Are there any fairy tales in the 20th and 21st century akin to those more literarily crafted tales, such as those "subversive" tales described by Zipes (2006a), or those of Perrault or Basile, more suitable for mature readers?

The answer seems to be affirmative. During the latter half of the 20th century, and continuing in the present, "a myriad of fairy tales are being marvelously reinterpreted or retold or newly invented […] gritty, transformative, subversive, weird, and powerful (Guran, 2016, p. 12). Especially in the English-speaking market, anthologies of fairy tales (retold, revisited, newly crafted, adapted, or parodied) have appeared with a steady (albeit moderate) pace, and in many cases aimed at an adult, or young-adult readership, or at Guran offers in his book a brief list of compilers of fairy tales, among which stand out the Ellen Datlow, Terri Windling, Kelly Link, and herself (p. 11). A fundamental difference should be noticed here between the fairy tale compilations of past times and those of the present. No longer are the names of compilers alone in the books they produce: now, every tale has its author, who usually has a brief biographical sketch featuring in the book. This means that, unlike what happened in the past, fairy tales are not adscribed to a handful of authors, who concentrated the majority of the canon in five or six names. Even in a single anthology, the number of fairy tale writers has grown exponentially.

The tone and style of all these new fairy tales vary, but the literary elaboration is present throughout the vast majority of them. Tanith Lee's *Beauty* begins in the following fashion:

His hundred and fifty-first birthday dawned aboard the sleek ship from Cerulean, high-above the white-capped ocean that was the Earth. By nightfall he would be at home, in his beautiful robot-run house. Beyond the tall windows a landscape of the Western hemisphere would fall away, pure with snow, to a frozen glycerin river (in Guran, 2016, p. 493).

In a sharp contrast, *Three Dwarves and 2000 Maniacs*, by Don Webb, resorts to a different style:

I've heard it said that many people study psychiatry on the "physician, heal thyself" plan. Well, it was certainly true for me. I was neurotic in high school, psychotic in college, and saw my first padded cell during a Jung seminar in graduate school (in Datlow & Windling, 1998, p. 180).

These two examples showcase a twofold tendency in the writing of fairy tales in the recent decades. If the first echoes the more classic style of Perrault, the second one represents a more ground-breaking attempt at a contemporary fairy tale, from the more colloquial style to the mention of mental disorders (something quite absent from canonical fairy tales, and certainly not described there in clinical terms).

All the tales in these two anthologies, from the selection of themes to the different styles, eschew the Victorian adaptations and style. In an interesting move, these new fairytales seem to move in two different directions. Some of them return to the ancient style and content (more classic style, more mature content), while others explore new ways of approaching the fairy tale both in form and content, and others

combine both tendencies freely. Regression and evolution live together among the new tales.

In the present day, all this new fairy tales coexist with the traditional, 19th-century inspired, more traditional ones, in a process that started with the many social changes in the post-World War II years, and whose catalyst would be, if I have to choose one, the publication of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979, (which I will mention later), because the elements that began appearing in the literary fairy tales during the decades to come were already present in her work.

Evidently, most of these new fairy tales are too recent to guess if they will resist the passage of time and become classics in their own right. Although fairy tales are counted by the thousands, the number of them that endure the years is rather low. Zipes (2006b) explains:

> Fairy tales have evolved as humans have evolved. I am tempted to say there has been a "survival of the fittest" that we sometimes designate as a classical canon. In the course of the past five centuries, approximately fifty t seventy-five tales have rise to the fore in the Western world and have been repeatedly told in diverse forms, rarely in the same way, always adapting […]. But they stick (p. 130).

These tales that Zipes describes are the ones that carry on through the centuries, have survived until our time, and they will surely survive us. Children in the present day know them just as Victorian children knew them. As Cashdan (1999) points out, they

are an "unparalleled source of adventure […], but […] are more than suspense-filled adventures that excite the imagination, more than mere entertainment […] Whereas the initial attraction of a fairy tale may lie in its ability to enchant and entertain, its lasting value lies in its power to help children deal with the internal conflicts they face in the course of growing up." (p. 21).

With regards to that, not much has changed for children and their relation to fairy tales. It is in the fairy tales *not* meant for them that greater transformations are to be found: children of today will grow up to know different "strains" of fairy tale than those their Victorian counterparts knew, in whose themes they will recognize some of the old tales from their childhood.. I would propose the following simile to illustrate this. Fairy tales may be compared to a choir: Some of the accompanying, deep voices repeat their motifs using a reduced range of notes, while others above them move in ampler and faster intervals, even to the point of discordancy. The latter need the former to sound whole, and the song is only complete when all of them occur in balance.

Fairy tales and morals

It seems natural to tie some kind of moral to fairy tales, like we do with fables. We tend to think of fairy tale morals as simple teachings that may well help us in our life, usually by dissuading us from a bad behaviour or warning us against some kind of danger, hence the name, sometimes used, of "cautionary tale": the story of someone who did not heed the warning and had to suffer the consequences, told to children so

they do not make the same mistake. Fairy tale, because of their structure and length, would seem to neatly fit this mold: easy to listen, easy to remember, with only a handful of characters and straightforward action. In the old, landmark collections of fairy tales, the moral is not only clear but explicitly expressed. Perrault (2000) added a verse section titled "the moral of this story" to his fairy tales, in which he explained what could be learned from them. For his story *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood,* he adds " Lovers lose nothing if they wait / And tie the knot of marriage late […] / young girls, though, long for married bliss / so ardently that, for my part / I cannot find it in my heart / to preach a doctrine such as this" (pp. 96-97). His moral to the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* is one of the best known: "Young children, as this tale will show / And mainly pretty girls with charm [...] / It's no surprise that some are caught / By wolves who take them out to eat / I call them wolves, but you will find / That some are not the savage kind / No howling, ravening, or raging / their manners seem, instead engaging […] / These are the most dangerous wolves of all" (p. 103).

While the moral of *Sleeping Beauty* has more of a fatalistic tone (young girls will not ever heed such advice, so the author does not have the heart to say it firmly), the tale of *Red Riding Hood* offers a much more complete instance. Although it plays with the metaphor of the wolf, the object of the warning is clear: men who seduce younger women, perhaps those who, in the times of Perrault were called "rakes". It is a perfectly explained warning for young girls not to stray off their paths (not only in the literal sense). Any ambiguity that could linger after reading the tale is carefully solved by the author himself, out of, concern for those young girls who might hear it.

Some of Perrault's morals oscillate between the naïve and the cynical. In the first category, a good example is the one from *The fairies* "If you have gold and jewels galore / You'll make a great effect, of course, but gentle words are worth much more / And move us with much greater force" (Perrault, 2000, p. 129). For the second category, the perfect instance is that of *Cinderella:* "You have a great advantage, I admit / If you receive from heaven at your birth / Good breeding, courage, sense, a ready wit / And other things of comparable worth / But that is not enough, unless you know […] / A Godfather or Godmother" […] (p. 141). The contrast between the two is clear enough. If the first one offers advice that, while not useless, seems too idealistic for the real world, the second takes a turn for the cynical. While the mention of the Godmother is a direct reference to the magic-wielding woman of the tale, the true meaning of it can hardly be concealed: someone with enough influence and power to open the right doors for you.

In his *Tale of Tales*, Giambattista Basile offers advice as well, but he prefers to do it in an extremely condensed way. At the end of each tale, a single sentence sums up a moral: "Those who resist win" (Basile, 2016, p. 425), "those who sow thorns should not go barefoot" (p. 454), "those who oppose the stars are crazy" (p.114), "a ship steered by a good skipper is only rarely dashed on the docks" (p. 99). These examples are less specific, more of general advice, and not so closely tied to the tales they close. The *Tale of Tales* abounds in this kind of sentences, dotted throughout the tales to better illustrate the adventures and misfortunes of the characters. The intention is always to warn the reader about what is advisable and what is not. In the introductory tale, Basile (2016) begins (bold added by me):

A seasoned proverb of ancient coinage says that those who look for what they should not find what they would not, and it's clear that **when the monkey tried putting on boots, it got its foot stuck**, just like what happened to a ragged slave girl, who although she had never worn shoes on her feet wanted to wear a crown on her head. But since **the millstone grinds out the chaff and sooner or later everything is paid for**, she who deceitfully took from other what was theirs ended up **caught in a circle of heels**, and **however steep her climb up was, the tumble down was even greater** (Basile, p. 64).

In a short paragraph, we find that half of the content is made of different proverbs and sayings. Aside from it being a manner in which to present the morals of the story, it also reminds us of the intertwined nature of the folktale and the fairy tale, as proverbs and sayings are one of the trademarks of popular, orally-transmitted stories, to the point that a fair percentage of those sayings need footnotes to be fully comprehended, as they are taken form the Italian language (and, specifically, the Neapolitan variant) of the 17th century: the expression "caught in a circle of heels" is a reference to a game played by Italian children in those times.

The works of Basile and Perrault present morals that do not stem from religion, but rather may be considered as a product of that wisdom that comes from the common experience shared by one or another community, lessons that may seem self-evident, but that it is advisable to recall from time to time. They would be the last major collections to include them, however. The explicit morals in fairy tales faded away in favour of less obvious ways of presenting them. Donald Haase (2008) explains the process:

Morals are often evident in fairy tales […]. In the case of Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century French tales, each story's moral […] is set in verse and pronounced explicitly […]. In Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's Kinder-und Hausmärchen (Children's and household tales, 1812-1815) is a collection replete with didactic tales, and although Grimms' stories may not have explicit morals like Perrault's tales, the moral messages are no less obvious. Similarly, the tales of Hans Christian Andersen […] abound in moral lessons to be inferred by the reader (p. 637).

. Rather than preach, Brothers Grimm are didactic, preferring to present moral lessons in a (slightly) subtler manner. Not all of them have straightforward morals, though. Some of them are just-so stories, in the manner of Rudyard Kipling's: stories that tell how things came to be, like *The Nightingale and the Blindworm.* It is a brief story that explains how both animals were one-eyed until the worm lent his eye to the nightingale out of selflessness, and never recovered it, as the bird grew fond of it (Grimm & Grimm, 2014 p. 25). Such a tale has more of an artistic (or fanciful) explanation than it has of teaching a moral. Other story, *The Wolf and the Seven Kids* tells the story of a wolf that tries to eat seven kids and is eventually outsmarted by them, which leads to his demise (p. 23). Again, here we have a funny and enjoyable story, but without much moral content. Nevertheless, these are a minority. Brothers Grimm's stories often have a moral, and it is fairly easy to grasp, usually by checking who lived happily ever after and who did not.

Andersen's tales differ to some extent. Haase is right in describing his work as abounding in moral lessons (*The emperor's new clothes* is a good instance), but there

are two elements that are mostly absent from those by Brothers Grimm. Firstly, there is religious influence in Andersen, in contrast with the canonical collections of fairy tales, which show little. Secondly, there is in some of his tales a tone of that ideology of social reform movement of which Charles Dickens is perhaps the foremost literary example. I have chosen *The Little Match Girl* to illustrate this. This story tells the tale of a little girl who sells matches in the freezing cold of Danish city winter in New Year's Eve, and of her yearning for a warm place and some food. The girl, whose name is not revealed, freezes to death, and in her last moments he sees a vision of her beloved grandmother (Andersen, 2014, pp. 268-273). The story is certainly heart-wrenching. There is no intervention from any worldly or otherworldly agent, no final twist. Andersen softens the passing away of the girl by the means of her grandmother: "Grandma […] gathered the little girl in her arms, and together they flew […] to where it is no longer cold, and there is neither hunger nor fear. They were now with God! (p. 272).

The mention of Grandma and God cannot really hide what happens: The little girl freezes to death in an alley. While the reunion with her grandmother is meant to dulcify, if only minimally, her demise, this tale is a severe reminder of the conditions of many children from the lower classes, hence its Dickensian echoes (*A Christmas Carol* had been published only four years earlier), and its tone of social reform, so characteristic from 19th century and protestant countries. Andersen wants here to move the reader; he is not teaching us anything for our own well-being, but for the well-being of others. This moral does not present what should be, but what should *not*.

In another of his stories, *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, the reader is again faced with a story that is rather ruthless. A crippled tin soldier (lacking one leg) falls in love with a

toy ballerina, but he is incapable of even speaking to her, and, by accident, they both burn down in the hearth of the house (Andersen, 2014, pp. 279-286). In this story we find a sort of fatalism, a sense of fate crushing the tin soldier mercilessly. As the troll-in-a-box warns him at the beginning, the soldier is supposed to keep his eyes to himself, and forget about the toy ballerina. After being swallowed by a fish and recovered (p. 283), he finally gets to be back at the side of her beloved, but only to die right away, in a rather anticlimactic ending, to which the moral we may gather seems rather obscure.

Stories form both Andersen and Borthers Grimm were considerable popular in Victorian England, but they were usually deprived of any subversive or disturbing or unsettling potential they might have, as Zipes (2006a) remarks that the literary fairy tales of Perrault, the Grimms, and Andersen sometimes contained a mild critic of social problems, only to avoid a systematic, bold, attack on such issues. Fairy tales were frequently adapted during the Victorian era to suit the ideals of the ruling class of the time. Thus, fairy tales, especially those aimed at children, were infused of a moral which, rather than universal (as any moral ought to be), was functional to England and its stability. Rodríguez Almodóvar (1982) explains that any radical idea of change was absent from those fairy tales: "At any rate, class struggle, or any attempt to tackle social issues do not appear at all. The only way out of poverty is marriage […] the psychoanalytic approach may explain a sublimation of class struggle in the form of a royal marriage […], while the sociological approach explains the fatality of it, for such outcome never happens in real life" (p. 71, my translation).

The reaction against such kind of morality can explain the shift in the moral content of fairy tales that would begin in the second half of the Victorian period. In

contrast to the conformity of the most widely fairy tale writers of the period (namely Andersen and Brothers Grimm), who "legitimized the normative standards of *civilité* through their symbolic constructs" (Zipes, 2006a, p.105), some other writers undertook the task of "sharp criticism of traditional child rearing and the rationalized means of discipline and punishment employed to make children into good and responsible citizens" (p. 105). I have already mentioned how George MacDonald rejected the social mores of his time and chastised society as a hindrance to the development of virtue in children. He trusted the individual much more than the collective. In a brief sketch of his views on fantasy, he explained how he saw fairy tales:

> The natural word has its laws, and no man must interfere with them […], but they themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws […]. When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call the products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of Fancy: in either case, Law has been diligently at work […]. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairy tale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature […] (MacDonald, 1999, pp.24-26)

I would say that this approach marked the morals in fairy tale for several decades after the Victorian era. It was the first form of reaction against Victorian morality, that of a law (moral, religious) superior to the mundane and repressive laws of society. The reaction against old and ossified morals, however, would not stop there. In the last decades of the 20th century, the issue that was being discussed was whether fairy tales

should have morals at all. Zipes (2006a), despite his fondness of fairy tales, admits that "our views […] have changed to such a great extent since World War II that the classical folktales and fairy tales appear too backward looking to many progressive critics and creative writers" (p.169). Kevin P. Smith (2007) concurs with Zipes, and advocates for a relativist approach, stating that there is no universal moral substrate to fairy tales, nor do they stir some mysterious forces in our psyche. Even Bettelheim (1976/2010), who describes in detail (perhaps with too much psychoanalytical apparatus) the beneficial effects fairy tales have in children, abstains from openly defending morals. On his part, Cashdan (1999) agrees: "Fairy tales have many appealing qualities, but teaching lessons is not one of them (p. 21).[2] Already W.B. Yeats (1892/1979) had written about fairy tales purely as escapist fiction: "Come away, O human child / To the woods and waters wild / With a fairy hand in hand / For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand" (p. 58).

As it can be seen, the role of morals in fairy tales is now subject to harsh criticism. In the two fairy tale collections that I have analyzed for this study, the number of stories in which the reader finds an explicitly stated moral is extremely low, and the way of conveying them is not the same:

> Misery is a heart that can never by content with what it has and, by always craving something more, brings about its own destruction. And desolation is a heart so fearful of losing what it hoards that it never knows the richness that comes from being able to give (Bishop, in Datlow & Windling, 1998, p. 108).

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[2] Cashdan incurs in contradiction here: after stating this in the introduction of his book, he devotes seven full chapters to each of the seven capital sins and how fairy tales depict them. If we are to believe such tales are devoid of morals, it is a rather odd way of proving it.

We are here rather far away from the highly condensed morals of Basile's *Tale of Tales.* This example is the closest we have to a moral in the two collections I have studied, and it has more of psychological introspection than it does of moral teaching. The predominant tendency in both anthologies is that of art for art's sake. All tales in them are highly elaborated, crafted to be literary objects. The reader will find many complex psychological portraits, and highly detailed descriptions. There are even examples of inner monologue, such as this one in which a Sleeping Beauty recalls the needle of the spinning wheel that sent her into slumber:

> It is remarkable how like a syringe a spindle can be. That explains the attraction, of course. A certain kind of sixteen-year old girl just cannot say no to this sort of thing, and I was just that measure of a girl, the one who looks down on the star-caught point of a midnight needle, sticking upwardly into the air like some ridiculous miniature of the Alexandrian Lighthouse and breathe: yes. The one who impales herself eagerly on that beacon, places the spindle against her sternum when a perfumed forefinger would be more than enough to do the job, and waits, panting, sweating through her corset-boning, for a terrible rose to blossom in her brain. Well, we were all silly children once (Catheryne M. Valente, in Guran, 2016, p.98).

An inner monologue would be an extremely rare element in any of the classic fairy tales. Yet here it serves the purpose of retelling the story of Sleeping Beauty from another point of view: that of herself during her long sleep. The story is fundamentally introspective, to the point that the main character ends up conversing with the needle in her chest. With many variations, this is the tendency and the key aspect in most of the

tales found in the anthologies. Moral is cast aside in favour of psychological description. Conveniently, many of the stories switch to the first person instead of the usual third person point of view of fairy tales.

The concept of fairy tale as a story underpinned by a moral, a moral that stems from a superior law or creed, is thus considerably undermined. It is remarkable that two of the foremost defenders of the role of morals in fairy tales were deeply religious men. George MacDonald (1999) despite his discrepancy with the Victorian uses of his epoch, made a firm defence of morals: "In the moral world […] a man may clothe in new forms, and for this employ his imagination freely, but he must invent nothing. He may not, for any purpose, turn its laws upside down" (p. 25). G.K Chesterton (1908/2009), a great admirer of MacDonald, would reinforce this idea: "If you really read the fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other –the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea […] is the core of ethics" (p. 146). This concept of morals as a key part of fairy tales is nowadays, as I have tried to show here, rather abandoned, and the consequence of this is that they have lost some of its strength.

Fairy tales and women

The relation of women with fairy tales has, more often than not, been a tortuous one. The main complaint is usually that there seems to be only two roles reserved to women in fairy tales: that of the "pretty, passive, feckless girls [that] grow up to marry their rich Prince Charmings" (Datlow & Windling, 1998, p. 2), and that of wicked

mothers, stepmothers, or witches, or all combined. While a serene look at traditional fairy tales will reveal some resourceful, brave, female characters, we have to admit that, in many occasions, women in fairy tales tend to remain passive or be wicked. Concerning the wickedness of some female fairy tale characters, Maureen Duffy (1974) states that "the most common form of Black Mother is the witch. In her we gather up all our resentments, fears and guilts against our own mothers, and, by displacing them […] onto the fictionalized symbol of fairy story and pantomime, attempt to make them harmless or rather guiltless. Mother is black for many reasons" (p.219). She also warns that such Black Mother would be white if we were studying stories form dark-skinned people, as "it is the principle of inversion that matters, not which colour" (p. 219).

And not only to witches: Fairy tales reserved fearsome roles to mothers. Psychotherapist Sybille Birkhäuser-Oeri described a whole range, a whole typology of fairy-tale mothers, among which we encounter such types as the lethal mother, the jealous mother, the fire mother, the jailer sorcerer, the indifferent mother, the poisoner, or the mother as the power of fate (2003). On the other hand, she also describes types like the life-giving mother, the healing mother, or the great goddess of our time (2003). As Datlow and Windling explained in the paragraph mentioned before, the most widely known fairy tales were those collected during the Victorian period and according to Victorian customs, which were especially repressive towards women. There was a whole catalogue of "evil undertakings" that women were capable of. An example collected by Katharine Briggs in his sampler of British fairy tales has an old crone named Allison Gross, "the ugliest witch i' the north country", trying to seduce a man and then turning him into a worm after he rejects the woman's advances (Briggs, 1977).

Again, it was after World War II that this state of affairs began to change. Zipes (2000) explains how the process began: "During the Vietnam era, feminist fairy tales began to be produced by writers such as Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Angela Carter, and Tanith Lee […]. Other feminist writers began publishing collections of feminist fairy tales or tales in which traditional sexuality was questioned" (p. xxxi). The production of fairy tales by women has kept steady ever since. Angela Carter may be credited as one of the key figures in this merging of the fairy tale and the feminist currents, both as author and anthologist. One of her main contributions was *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), a set of ten tales penned by her that took some of the best-known female characters and plunged them into stories where we may find that melange of rupture and regression mentioned earlier. One of the most prominent examples is the tale of *The Tiger's Bride*, a re-telling of *Beuty and the Beast,* that boasts a much darker hue, and a sensuality that has a somewhat disturbing undertone. The story, told by the bride herself, starts with the sentence "My father lost me to the Beast at cards" (Carter, 1979, 123), which is one of the classic motifs of fairy tales, the very first of the 31 functions that Propp (1928/2968) describes (the protagonist leaves or is forced to leave home), and describes an obscure relationship between the bride and the Beast, with some scenes that are a little more explicit than what is usual in fairy tales. The final lines depict the contact between them:

He will lick the skin off me! And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur (Carter, 1979, 165).

Modern fairy tale writing (feminist or not) owes much to Angela Carter. The *Tales of The Bloody Chamber* attained a richness that can be traced in ulterior works of modern fairy tale, from the taste for deviancy to the use of Gothic or Romantic traits, and, of course, to the construction of female characters. It was her new approaches to the characters of Red Riding Hood, the Beauty and the Beast that paved the way for many retellings of both stories in the decades to follow, and to the present day. It is not that classic fairy tales were scarce in female characters: they were not. The two axes through which feminist vindications entered the writing of fairy tales were the presence of female fairy tale authors and the role of female characters. Concerning the first aspect, there was a situation, described by Maria Tatar (1999), that has a tinge of irony in it: "Although virtually all of the national collections of fairy tales compiled in the nineteenth century were the work of men, the tales themselves were adscribed to women narrators […], old wives' tales" (p. x). M. L. Von Franz (1979) too recognised this problem: "Feminine figures in fairy tales might have been formed by a man, and therefore do not represent a woman's idea of femininity but rather what Jung called the anima –that is, man's femininity" (p. 2) Contemporary fairy tale collections have "corrected" this, and in the anthologies of Datlow and Windling (1998) and Guran (2016), more than 50% of the contributors are women.

The second aspect, the role of female characters, evolved in the way that Angela Carter had already suggested, with princesses, and heroines, or just common women, becoming more active characters, and being psychologically more complex (again, the use of the first person is the norm). Even evil female characters received more attention, and served to present well-known tales in a new light; in one of the stories collected by Datlow and Windling (1998), Hansel and Gretel stand trial after shoving the old witch

that wanted to eat them into the oven, and have to defend themselves against the charge of murder (pp. 83-92).

The weight of women, either as characters or authors, in the writing of fairy tale, is at an all-time peak at this moment. The immediate effect on fairy tales has been that of a multiplying of the points of view, with the consequent enriching of the already rich heritage of tales. Some female authors have hailed this in good spirits: "[…] for girls and women, in particular, the fairy tale's magic has assumed the contradictory form of being both a spiritual enclave supported by old wives' wisdom and an exquisitely glittery feminine kingdom" (Bacchilega, 1997, p. 5). Others, like Angela Carter (1990), preferred to be more cautious: "I haven't put this collection together […] to show that we are all sisters under the skin. I don't believe that, anyway. Sisters under the skin we may be, but that doesn't mean we have much in common." (p. xiv).

Conclusions

Changes in fairy tales during the last decades have had as much of a breakthrough as of a regression. The reaction against those adapted (or, rather, censored) versions of the classic fairy tales has been two-fold: Authors have sought the origins of tales in search of raw, primal renditions of those characters everyone knows so well; alternatively (or even simultaneously), they have tried new forms of writing fairy tales, trying new techniques and styles and thus opening new territories that were, to a large extent, unexplored. The same goes for the role of women in fairy tale: doors are open now that will enrich an already rich genre, whether new material is recovered from old times or created for the future. Such endeavours have produced finely crafted fairy tales,

artistic works of the first order, sometimes more akin to literary short stories than to popular tales. I would venture to say that this tendency will continue, as fairy tales are a field too attractive to simply be forgotten. Literary forms of fairy tales will continue to appear, presumably aimed at a mature readership.

It would be wrong, however, to infer from this that this is the only kind of fairy tale we will know in the years to come. As I explained before, among the thousands of fairy tales known to mankind, there is a core that children know and love; a handful of tales that have withstood the passage of time and are virtually indestructible, for they inhabit thousands of minds, a shard of a collective cultural heritage. Furthermore, it is those stories that form the substrate form which the literary fairy tale stems, and both coexist in a sort of symbiotic relation, mutually affecting each other. The fairy tale as a creation for children has a capital importance, and is the necessary condition for every other tale to appear.

As for the issue of morals in fairy tales, I consider the warning of George MacDonald as valid now as when he first wrote it. We may invent fairy tales, but not the Law that governs them. It seems that the tendency now is to reject morals in fairy tales, and I consider this a danger. Not for their survival, because there is no risk of fairy tales disappearing, but for their vitality. It is of course possible to craft exquisite tales without morals, but writers should be advised that this would deprive them from much of their strength and turn them into pictures in an exhibition: something fairy tales were never meant to be. Without the Law, without a moral sense (not the poor and sad morals of those Victorian censored versions), authors could find themselves with a thousand colours to paint and no idea of how to draw a single line.

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