

The fairy tale: recent interpretations, female characters and contemporary rewriting. Considerations about an “irresistible” genre

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Abstract

Since the ancient times, the fairy tale manages to catch the imagination of human beings everywhere in the world. Its appeal comes to us even thanks to reinterpretations, constant contaminations from different media, from the oral writing, from cinema to theatre, from advertising to animation. This article will highlight the key features of a very much analysed genre, after the most recent studies and will follow it also by referring to the new routes that it has embarked on in our time. Special attention is then paid on the woman presence and on her origin and evolution that she, in her most varied personifications – innocent girl persecuted by the fairy and by the witch – has suffered up to the latest rewriting of the fairy tales.

Keywords: fairy tale, studies about the fairy tale, literature for children, female figure

The fairy tale: origins of a genre

The migratory characteristic of the tale, which already lies in its character of find in the re-narration potential brought to light by the work of storytellers and authors, is also manifested in the its origin. The oral versions of the fairy tale have long constituted a body in motion, mixed with other forms of narration, defined by the scholar André Jolles as “simple forms” (Jolles, 1980): legend, myth, poems in verses, but also nursery rhymes and folk songs; a diverse set of texts that crossed the written productions and that was at the same time crossed by them in a continuum of plots, cross-references, flashbacks and forth of the oral material.

The fairy tale goes through the space by keeping its character of transmission of information, knowledge, emotions, feelings, visions of the world: the mankind in general has used the fairy tale to express its wisdom and symbols and techniques to pass it, to make it immediately understandable, and to imprint it in the depth of our soul. The fairy tale, like the myth, is an articulated path in space and time, constantly telling the adventure of the protagonist and of the world. Determining its origin is complex and perhaps impossible; in the collection *Cabinet des fées*, as recalled by Claudio Marazzini in the book *Le fiabe* (2004), there is already an essay on the origin of the fairy tale, trying to establish the probable sources from which the fairy tales were found, and their presence in literary texts: the anonymous author of this essay, says the scholar, tells that the fantastic literature is very far from the world rationality of the XVIII century because the “marvellous” and the fabulous are by their nature “fruits of ignorance” (Marazzini, 2004, p. 105). The fairy tale, in this sense, can be considered closely related to a kind of “primitive spirit” that, as Marazzini highlights, should not be

interpreted in the romantic manner as referring to specific people, but as a universal spirit, an evolutionary phase of all mankind.

During the ages, the fairy tale undergoes progressive transformations; it has become from popular oral narration to written literary tale, gradually passing through childhood, since the French XVII century. The transformation process that the tale has faced since its “fall” toward childhood has undergone a significant change when the influence of pedagogy became stronger and the transcribing of oral narrations began. Especially during the XIX century the attention turns to the adult child and preteen, who become the recipients of moral recommendations. In this context, not surprisingly, transcripts and reinventions of fairy tales and fables with obvious didactic intent spread, responsible for the transformation of the original material now submitted to meet moral and literary needs. The link between adult and child, which was established in the traditional narrations, is missing: the problems of self-affirmation, security, conflict, abandonment, competition, friendship, love, hate, death, authentic existential problems lived at all ages, don't have anymore space in fairy tales expressly produced “for children”, sweetened and private narrations of everything considered cruel and bloody. It would seem confirmed, even in the migration from an historical period to another, that the distinctive feature of the tale is related to the narration and to the particular mode of oral transmission of the stories; it is no coincidence that the Grimm brothers, whose work marks the beginning of the philological research on the folk tale, and particularly on the fairy tales, have focused their attention on orally transmitted narrations. According to the theories of their time, they start from the idea that every people has its own soul, expressed at its highest level by language and poetry, songs and stories; in this sense, the fairy tales would be merely remainders, finds to return to the idea – already expressed – of the ancient people's unitary culture once it has partially lost its own soul over time. The Grimm's aim is to define the tales collected as “fragments of a precious stone”, i.e. traces of pagan, Germanic, mythological stories about the origins and the order of the world. According to the tradition, and as they state in the preface of *Le fiabe del focolare*, they would have collected them from the simple rural population; in reality the research has shown that the two scholars partly wrote down their stories directly in their bourgeois environment, and partly by correspondence, bourgeois sources too. Also in view of the interpretation, it is important to consider that the Grimms do not literally transcribe their fairy tales in compliance with the rules of modern research, but they give them their own tone and style, and in some cases they integrate them with themes taken from other fairy tales to create a good story, or to create the ideal reading, starting from the various versions known to them. So, the finds accumulate, the traces of different stories intertwine, the fairy tale starts to build as a genre in its migration from one place to another, from one society to another, from one culture to another, from one historical period to another.

The fairy tale has ancient roots, it was born as development, transformation of the mythical tale told around the fire when the tribe is quiet and safe, when each of its members can look inside himself and tell about himself, and the tale, in its turn, is valid if there is someone who listens to it and enters into it talks about himself. The man feels the need to move from confusion to order and therefore he imagines an invisible thread that includes and explains the visible world by inserting the individual experience in the wider morphology of the universe. At the same time the man expresses and makes visible something that exists inside himself; the mythical tale does not only serve to explain the reality, it is above all the man's attempt to make it real, to found it through a review process that makes it such, because it has already been lived in another time, in another place: the myth never represents something just happened in this place, but it is always able to explain the reality of this moment in this place. Through the tale, then, the man finds the reality by carrying out the most vivid and true part of him, while the other men feel relief in hearing that what everyone feels is shared by the others, and therefore it is more real. The ancient myths are replaced by more modern ones, but the archetype and symbols remain the same because they express the common heritage of all. The fairy tale is often referred to as “the product of imagination”, but these are, we might say, unsettled fantasies, persistent across generations, for centuries; it can get a kind of spread “consensus” from which it draws its own permanence in time and its spread in space; this “consensus” tells us that the fairy tale deals with universal problems, specific to each individual and, as such, it expresses them in a symbolic form. Finally, the migratory nature of the fairy tale is the driving force that gives this kind of story the possibility to switch from public to private; some traces that remain in the endless cycle of the fairy tale starting from a voice and handing down through memories, listening, reading, up to the vision.

The fairy tale: the state of the art of an “irresistible” story

The fairy tale is a find, says Milena Bernardi (2007), since it is composed by other parallel stories already told before, next to it and yet to be told. “The surfaces speak, tell stories; indeed the things, through them – a sudden roughness or the invisible pore of a larva – have their say and express themselves in their own language that “comes back to us full of all the human aspects that we put in things”¹ (Lavagetto, 2001, p.118). Entering the forest of the fairy tales and identifying the essence of the tale as a genre is therefore necessary to carefully observe the surface, to recognize and bring out the finds that lurk in it, those intertwined stories, those ties between stories that are repeated over time, that persist as “memes”² retold in endless combinations. It is necessary to retrace the paths that lead to the roots of the fairy tales through an analytical, let’s say regressive method, which starts from what we see in the back to reveal stories which are circumstantial evidences of broader stories, in the narrative contexts they belonged to and of which they send us back some residues of sense, by forcing us to a regressive work. The fairy tale will then prove to be on the one hand a story defined by a system of expertly described and deciphered internal rules, and on the other hand a set of findings to be attributed with a past, thanks to references and parallels, to the connections that the fairy tale establishes with History and with the stories. The fairy tale, in fact, like the myth, is a treasure of stories belonging, because of its roots and re-readings, to the deepest and most unconscious heritage of mankind and this is why it continues to keep its charm despite the passing of time and millennia. Jack Zipes, in his recent work (2012), attributes to the fairy tale “irresistible” features, partially identified by that fascination aspect that inextricably links it to the history of mankind. This genre is primarily configured as an allusive, metaphoric tool, telling a single story, i.e. the life flow, in order to urge in the listener or in the reader, not an imitation of the events described, but rather an alienation process from the given information; a way to escape from himself, from the space and time of his story, thanks to which the reader or the listener can live other stories, other existential dimensions, qualitatively different from the daily ones.

Many people claim that the fairy tale became an officially recognized literary genre when the French fabulists before the reign of Louis XIV started to write it. However, it is rather complex to give a precise definition of fairy tale: bearing in mind both the oral and writing component, both the distinction between the fairy tale and other genres, we can get to a definition through some of its fundamental characteristics, first of all related to its narrative nature primarily generated by an aesthetic need, by a “pleasure for the text” that perhaps oppose it to myths and legends more than to any other element. Among the various forms of storytelling, the tale can be considered the primary one, to which other narrative forms refer; we could say that it represents the matrix of every novel, every literary production. When the narration gets to the written form, it enters into the fairy tale scheme, uniform and repetitive, construction of virtual worlds, parallel experiences to real ones, thus giving rise to the novel, to the proper story. The tale’s characteristic is to be spread by “word of mouth” and for this reason it is perhaps the oral genre par excellence. Despite its transcription has cancelled the vocal modulations, the facial expression, the gestures of oral storytelling, the tale retains its deep oral feature which bound it to the origins of narration: “In the fairy tale we use a simple but highly metaphorical language, interrupted by frequent appeals to listen, full of images where the words represent an encouragement to another reality: the one that allows to write destinies, to make utopian trips and to meet better worlds”³ (Beseghi, 2003, p. 37).

This narrative game is expressed through the narrator; it is in fact in the link between tale and narration, tale and voice, that we identify another core aspect of its “irresistible nature”, its charm and its immortality, something closely related to the need of stories that mankind has always expressed. The story, the narration, belongs to mankind from the beginning. Everyone tells something to someone else every day and, in his turn, listens to the stories of the others in a constant interpersonal exchange. Mankind has expressed its presence in the world through the narration, its need to relate to others and to envisage worlds that are still inexistent and that maybe will never exist, but which are still conceivable and necessary for the construction of one’s being. When narrating, we give information, knowledge, visions of the world, emotions; this shows the intrinsically formative value of narration and of read and listened stories. Jerome Bruner (1997) states that what happens is always expressed by the human beings as a story, so that our life and our identities take shape and consistency within a narrative structure. The need for stories is essential to man, it most

characterizes us as human beings; re-elaborating the lived experience in the form of story involves the possibility of ordering what happens, preserving its memory, creating a sense of belonging. The stories, thanks to their structure made of a beginning, a central part and an end, help to put together the fragments of our experience with that of people who came before us and who told them. The sound of the narrating voice, although historically passed through areas of oblivion, in a gradual transformation of places, themes and ways, has finally achieved its childhood and has found a place in those moments of closeness between adult and child framed by the story and the narrating flow. Therefore the childhood, until now, has kept alive the fragments of oral storytelling in family rituals and in the appointments of educational communities (Bernardi, 2007). This need to keep stable a “narrating” relationship, albeit in different ways and places, goes hand in hand with that need of stories, that narrative desire which we referred to. The fairy tales always weave the universal aspects of the man in the human world, of his relationship with life and death; they involve the listener in a liminal dimension, as threshold of those territories where all the wonderful can happen. The need for wonderful, the need for fairy tale and for illusion live next to the desire to listen, to read stories placed elsewhere, which we know are not true but which, however, are accepted and lived as absolutely true in the tale space. In this way, even through the metaphor, the tale allows to say the unsayable, to put on stage what would not be possible to tell otherwise: the death, the taboos, the social and the religious bans. The story becomes the “as if” area and it welcomes what is hidden, dark, deviant, painful; the subject accesses to new forms of self-knowledge, of his world and of his own emotional experience through a journey in the improbable and the unspeakable.

This aspect, linked to the narration from the past and from the tradition to the contemporary production, emphasizes not only the vitality of the fairy tale genre, but also the fact that we should not strive to build new fairy tales, for today’s teens and for their super-technological and super-scientific world. The important thing is to keep the fairy tale lesson alive, as many great writers did, to urge readers not to abandon the narrative game, which is both the idea of existence and the tool to give it meaning and sense.

Women storytellers.

Heroines, helpless maidens, fairies, witches: female declinations in the fairy tale

“Fairy tales are sacred to the pleasure principle”, reminds Angela Carter (1991, p. 11), while transmitting to us, sometimes with extreme fidelity, the lives actually experienced by the poorest populations of the past. They want to tell first of all stories to entertain their audience. The archetypal female narrator of the folk tales, the English Mother Goose, the French Mère Oie, is an old woman sitting by the fireplace, spinning as she rows and unravels her story by inventing “old wives tales”. The fairy tale, in fact, is first of all a story (Cambi, 1999a, pp. 15-19), an oral folk tale attended both by literate and illiterate people who, through it, express their way of interpreting the nature and the social order, but also their desire to meet their own needs and dreams. Male and female storytellers enjoyed a certain social identification within the group, they were not people but subjects with remarkable expressive skills. This transmission of knowledge, due to the need to remind events and to transmit them, ensured continuity between generations and gave power and identity to those who transmitted it. The fairy tale peculiarity consists, then, in its genesis connected to the spoken word, to oral transmission; it is identified not by its compliance with the original, but only because it is recognized by a community as a constituent part of the stories’ patrimony.

And the tale, from that archetypal “Mother Goose”, often speaks with woman’s voice, yet all women who tell and transcribe stories, as claimed, among others, by Angela Carter (1991) and Jack Zipes (2012), have remained more often in the shadows, so that the fairy tales we know and we continue to tell and re-write today are those transmitted by the great collectors and writers, from Perrault to the Grimm Brothers to Andersen, just to mention the most famous ones. In the introduction to his collection *Le fiabe delle donne* (Carter, 1991, pp. 5-24), Angela Carter notes that fewer female protagonists of fairy tales occupy the scene than male ones, and this is generally due to class and gender issues related to the collector and therefore to

expectations, inconveniences or desire to please. The narrators tend to describe women from his own point of view, according to the male vision of the women's role in society; however, Carter adds, even when women are the storytellers, they do not always assign to themselves the role of the heroine and they sometimes prove quite capable of telling stories dominated by little sisterly attitudes, the society they live in is often patriarchal and it is difficult to subvert its order, even if in a story (p. 9 and following).

Even the study by Jack Zipes (2012) focuses on the role that male collectors and writers had on the affirmation of a female model in fairy tales. The character of the beautiful innocent girl is fairly widespread in fairy tales⁴, but the hands of male storytellers, writers and collectors, tend to paint the stars as helpless or otherwise passive maidens, considered good only if obedient and industrious, represented in an image tending to stereotype the young heroine. Underlying this phenomenon is the more general patriarchal view of the female figure as housewife and purveyor of food, created to serve the interests of men. Yet there certainly were thousands of stories that women transmitted with each other, some of which were collected and transcribed only in the late nineteenth century, where the heroines were brave, reliable, courageous and not servants of anyone; there are in fact many nineteenth-century stories told to or gathered by women and authors whose works have been largely neglected⁵. Stories about rape, starvation, attempted murders, physical and psychological abuses and incest, because often only in the "other" world, that of fairy tales, women could find a little justice. Stories not directly usable in the classic collections of fairy tales by Perrault, the Grimm brothers, Andersen, because even if they sometimes dealt with abuse, incest, murder and persecution of innocent heroines, they did it to paint them as totally candid, by taming them, without saying how cunning and determined these heroines were in reality.

The analytical psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz dedicated a work to the study of women in fairy tales (Von Franz, 2007), finding two fundamental female archetypes: the first reflects women psychology and shows the real reactions of a woman against difficulties and problems, and the other represents the projections of what a woman should be and how she should behave according to people. As stated by Carter and Zipes, and even according to von Franz, if we take into account these two types, it is little important that a fairy tale talks about women or has as protagonist a woman in order to classify it in the first or second model, while she also thinks it is essential to know if the person who wrote or transcribed the fairy tale is a man or a woman, because this influences the way he/she creates the characters, which reflect him/her or his/her way to see the other by himself/herself. Starting right from Von Franz's idea, Simonetta Ulivieri points out three main female models in the fairy tale: "The woman considering herself only as a mirror of man's desires, the woman identifying herself with the strong male model, rejecting weak female models, and finally the new woman, assertive, conscious of the value of her belonging to the female world, capable of representing herself as an existential model for future generations by building a feminine genealogy"⁶ (Ulivieri, 1999, p. 247); three models which obviously intersect, intertwine, alternate and are sometimes in contrast inside the same tale, and once again the emphasis is on the gender of the collector or transcriber or author of the fairy tale. Moreover, for the third model identified, the scholar brings as example the tale *Caterina la Sapiente* (Calvino, 2001, pp. 786-793), collected in *Fiabe Italiane* by Italo Calvino, and she stresses how it describes the victory of the protagonist's intelligence on the violence perpetrated by her husband, intelligence that does not marginalize Caterina, does not force her to be "male" in order to be accepted, but that can become part of the characters and of the typical female feelings.

Something arises both from the opinions of Carter and of Zipes, as well as from the positions emerged in the work by von Franz and Ulivieri: when women tell, although the female protagonists follow the rules and the social roles entrusted in a patriarchal society, it is clear that they always try to represent the female perspective and to keep it alive. Their stories recommended women's salvation and prosperity, never sought through passive submission, and the women's project is quite utopian and brings with it a form of heroic optimism.

The female figures, therefore, act inside the fairy tale as narrators, collectors, authors, and protagonists, courageous heroines often subjected to adventurous journeys to overtake dangerous proofs, like male heroes. However, there are still other characters living since ever in the enchanted environments typical of the fairy tales: the fairy and the witch. Liminal characters, as the fairy tale narration in itself, mediators between Here and Elsewhere. Despite they deserve a broader and more detailed separate study in this discourse about the role of women in fairy tales, it is perhaps worth to make a brief reference to them at the end of this paragraph.

Although today we consider the fairy and the witch as two different figures, the first one bringing positives and salvific aspects, the second one negative and malefic ones, we must however keep in mind that the original distinction was not so clear. Both share their origin from the ancient and pagan gods and goddesses, passing through the classical Greece, especially in the figure of Moiras, and with regards to the Latin world, of the Fates, until a contamination with the medieval literature and taking then their specific connotation in the French XVII century's literature and in the *Contes de fées* tradition.

There are no certainties about the origin of the fairy and the witch since written records of the early paganism are missing; however, there are artefacts such as amulets, vases, statues, as well as names of forests and caves, that testify how women were often portrayed as goddesses and were venerated for the powers they possessed, which allowed them to perform miraculous acts. As goddesses and gods they were charitable entities and powerful supports: they could guide the young men and women through the initiation rituals, protect them against disasters, guide people in the realm of death; they generally carried positive events but, if offended, they could take revenge, or be destroyed. These pagan goddesses of the Western world have also given rise to the Greek and Roman goddesses who, in turn, gave rise to fairies, witches, nymphs and other supernatural creatures. In folktales, in fact, the two figures of the fairy and of the witch keep these connotations and there is no clear distinction among them. If we take once again as example the collection *Fiabe Italiane* by Italo Calvino (2001), we often find the character of the old sorceress, expert of magic arts, who sometimes, at night, dances with her companions around a tree; she is more easily inspired to the traditional witch but, in the story, she is the magical assistant of the hero or of the heroine or she is the ally of the betrayed lovers, she offers the long life water to heal fatal wounds or she donates magic items to solve spells. In these same tales, however, the so-called “fairy” often represents a tough obstacle to the protagonists and imposes them to overcome though challenges, or she is the guardian of the treasure or of the princess, sometimes a cruel and malefic character who uses her powers against heroes and heroines like a witch.

The *weise Frau* of the Germanic tradition and Babayaga of the Slavic mythology – namely Russian – are linked to these complex figures, who often bring into them both salvific attributes and disturbing connotations, despite never malefic, and who embody both the fairy and the witch, although neither the one nor the other.

The first comes from central areas, is linked to the power of birth and knowledge of the past and usually accompanies the girl in her initiatory journey. Comparable to pagan priestesses, the *weise Frauen* practice the art of medicine based on the observation of natural phenomena and on intuition, on the knowledge of laws that govern the natural, human and supernatural world, therefore they are able to act in various situations. They can recognize and treat various diseases, they know contraception means and remedies against unlucky loves. Like Babayaga, they live on the forest threshold, they are usually represented as very old women, repositories of practical and scientific, medical and magical knowledge, they are wise, like the adjective *weise* suggests. The *weise Frau* is closely linked to the mythical figures of Moiras and therefore they are connected with the determination of men's fate, they in fact help during the birth, growth, and the rite of passage, they know the past and, as demonic creature, they are familiar with the other world, the world of death. The link with the initiation rites makes this character a close relative of the fairy godmother and, as pointed out by Bernardi, we find a paradigmatic portrait of her in the album *Cinderella*, illustrated by Roberto Innocenti: we can in fact find her in the old tailor who Innocenti poses next to the protagonist, welcomed in her shop to create the enchanted dress.

[...] the old lady by Innocenti lives in a clear dimension of between and transversality, capable to put into communication the real and the imaginary, the concrete and fantastic skills. On her workbench there are models of future magic acts. Frogs, lizards and rats wind in her courtyard, at all bothered by a white dove inspired to Grimm, despite Innocenti illustrates Perrault. The protective gaze of the old fairy observes the girl, by representing a nurse and a fairy godmother at the same time, without losing her irony and her smile, which brighten her smart and wise face. So, the illustrator's interpretation summarizes into a single characters the characteristics of the woman who perhaps tells the story and of that who acts in the story as magic ally, the same role of the storyteller⁷ (Bernardi, 2007, pp. 130-131).

In a similar way Babayaga, belonging to the Russian tradition, is not only a dangerous witch, but also a maternal benefactress, definitely tied to pagan gods. It is impossible to define her, for she is composed of a set of divinities mixed and held together by a certain dose of witchcraft, shamanism and fairies traditions. Babayaga is master of herself, mother by parthenogenesis, she looks scary and is cannibal, her favourite preys are children and young women; she decides case by case whether she should help or kill those who get close to her shack, a house turning on chicken legs and placed, as mentioned, at the forest borders. The forest is, in fact, Babayaga's reign, the animals venerate her and she protects those places as Mother Earth. When she leaves the wood, she travels inside a mortar whose pestle acts as a rudder, with a mop of silver birch that she uses to erase the her traces. It is not uncommon that she dispenses good advice, however her suggestions or helps have a price, because Babayaga always tests those who go – both for the case either by choice – to her shack, seeking her help is always dangerous and, to do it, preparation and purity are essential. There are many Babayagas appearing and acting in different kinds of stories of the mid-nineteenth century, giving a special Russian aura to the events; she is always feared because she can oblige the characters to test themselves, with no illusion of easy ways to solve conflicts, this also explains why Babayaga have then transcended the Russian environment to become an integral part of the socio-cultural tissue of other countries.

Even the fairy shares a basic identity with the witch, which defines her as a power capable of dominating nature, custodian of magic powers. This identity is then re-elaborated by history and culture, both popular and not, and it comes to us enriched by features and meanings that make it a complex figure of collective imagination; features and meanings that revolve around the female identity, by highlighting her material and salvific appearance, already present in the Great Mother, by moving her away from the witch, who gradually takes upon herself only demonic and bad traits. In the French XVII century, the fairies will become part of a specific, refined, cultured, courtier literary genre, so that the magical and popular figures, related to a fantasy and secret realm of natural and animistically represented forces, represent a wonderful and aristocrat world made of wealth and ceremonies; however, they maintain that complexity deriving from their origin, layered and mixed with traditions, beliefs, different contributions. An example, the blue haired Fairy of Collodi's Pinocchio: she is first a blue haired girl, fantastic being, messenger of the world of the death, who does not help the poor puppet chased by the killers, then she will be the beautiful Lady of the circus, but also mother and sister; beneficial and "assassin" character, as said by Manganelli (2002), ambiguous, elusive, friend and cruel at the same time. Pinocchio experiences through her the contact with death and he begins his new path toward the transformation in child made of meat and blood; the Fairy in fact shows him the way to the final metamorphosis and accompanies him until the end. Nevertheless, the Fairy described by Collodi owes very much to the determination she has in going towards the King Sun's court, and particularly to the representation by Perrault, whose fairy tales were translated by Collodi in 1875 (Collodi, 1976), shortly before the publication of *Storia di un burattino* on "Giornale per i bambini". After meeting the blue haired girl, at the beginning of the following chapter, the sixteenth, the fairy is described as follows:

In that moment, while the poor Pinocchio was hanged from the assassins to a branch of the Big Oak, and he seemed more dead than alive, the beautiful Girl with blue hair looked out the window again and moved to pity at the sight of that unhappy [...], clapped for three times her hands together and made three small strokes. At this signal a great noise of wings was heard, flying with precipitous heat, and a large Falcon came and settled on the windowsill – What do you command, my charming Fairy? – Said the Falcon, bending his beak for reverence: (because you must know that the blue haired girl was nothing else that a Very Good Fairy that for over a thousand years had been living close to that forest)⁸ (Collodi, 1993, pp. 106-107).

Woodland character, lady of the forest, who lives in a palace and has an army of liveried servants or animals of the forest, she follows the French fairy model, old godmother of princes and princesses, surrounded by servants dressed up according to the fashion of Louis XIV court, although she will soon abandon these clothes to dress those of the middle-class and folk woman ready to offer rosolio comfits and to prepare "four hundred sandwiches with butter below and above" for the puppet's party.

A look to today: fairy tales rewriting and feminine features

The fairy tale has its own connate “transgender” which determines the migration of its themes and icons not only among historical periods, but also among genres and narrative techniques. The fairy tale remains as text structure, as narration of the mankind history, as synthesis and metaphor of the need for dreams, utopia, and yet it changes when it comes into contact with societies and cultures. Therefore permanence and metamorphosis, structure and contents that are almost unchanged over time, and constant contamination between genres. So the fairy tale passes from the voice of the first oral storytellers to the pen of its transcribers first and authors then, until the narrative core, the illustrated page, the cinema, the reviews, the representations by contemporary artists; however, in the rewriting of the fairy tale, the narrative element is key even in the transition to different media: despite the rewriting complexity, the presence of a narrator seems to give special meaning to the tale transmission. Also in the illustrated books, for example, the narrator is often used to introduce a double narrating level as to suggest a return to the original orality of that particular type of story. Roberto Innocenti provides us again with an example in his illustrated rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood, a modern fairy tale* (2012). The starting point is the classic fairy tale: a little girl, a forest, a wolf, a grandmother. The book opens on the image of a room that could be an abandoned classroom or basement, a large table around which there is a group of boys and girls and, at the table, in the centre of the scene, the classic granny, halfway between fairy character and toy fairy who, while knitting a coloured striped scarf, tells a story: “Come closer, children, and I’ll tell you a story interwoven with charms. Toys can be fun pastimes. But a good story is pure magic. And there is no better time than when the rain knocks on the window”⁹ (Innocenti, 2012, without page). The curtain opens; we enter in the Elsewhere, in the story of Sofia, a little girl in red cape who, in a stormy day, starts her journey into the woods of a contemporary city, among the bright lights of trading commercial and degraded slums, where some hunters-wolves on their motorbikes try to eat the child and her grandmother. The happy ending is not guaranteed and the story told in this book is raw, dramatic but also started from the beginning, with the expedient of an external narrator, in a symbolic and metaphorical frame that provides a safe distance, allowing to live the story without living it, to cross the forest-city together with the protagonist, to feel the terror of meeting the wolf through the safe curtain of “once upon a time”. The story is similar to the crime pages, the ending is tragic, the final scene describes the boys and girls who have listened to it in tears, the old lady is still there, at the centre, she has finished her story and her knitting (the scarf is longer now), the curtain closes and the reader too is invited to come back to the Here: “Now, children don’t be ashamed of your tears. They are natural as rain. But, in this case, they are not necessary. Do you remember what I said about stories? Stories are pure magic. Who says that they can only have one ending?”¹⁰ (ivi, without page).

Also the cinema, in its adaptations of fairy tales, often uses a narrating character; it is as if the story were told by someone who has lived it or who has been told it by someone else and that can reunite, by plotting them together, the imaginary worlds, by following the continuous transitions between Here and Elsewhere. So, the narrative frame enters into the film story, where the real world and another world scroll across the screen while keeping alive the credibility of the incredible. In the great communication machine represented by the cinema, the fairy tale finds its spaces of story, creeps between the frames of stories that do not seem to belong to it or of which it is, instead, the explicit protagonist.

The film industry has made and still makes great use of the fairy tale; further to the explicit transpositions in cartoons, from Disney onward, or in films for children and teens, the fairy tales traces are disseminated in films not specifically dedicated to a young audience and not explicitly consisting in remakes of classic fairy tales. Jack Zipes largely devoted his studies to analyse the relationship between the fairy tales and the cinema, particularly the cartoons (Zipes, 2004; 2011). In his *Spezzare l’incantesimo* (2004), the American scholar states that in our society, in the transition to childhood, the fairy tales and the folk tales have increasingly become a commercial product and that their arrival in the Western world is heavily influenced by Disney Corporation and by similar companies, to the point that people tend to have preconceived notions about what a fairy tale is, or should be. Zipes tightly criticizes this production, emphasizing its virtues and vices, he does not demonize it for sure, but he carefully analyses and precisely examines the elements of the game, accompanied by a working proposal, by the need for a critical attitude toward any product present on the market.

Although there are today fairy tales transpositions with completely different stature, they are often subjected to the cancelation of the ingredients that are instead specific of this gender: the metaphorical and finding aspect, the close connection with the needs and desires of mankind, the impertinence, the fear, the journey, even dangerous, towards the Elsewhere, the contact with the deepest and unmentionable feelings.

The elements that play against the rewriting of the fairy tale in “mass cinema” version, seem therefore to rotate around the lack of narrative rhythm [...], the absence the anesthetization of the unspeakable and the denial of risk, of conflict and of monstrous – considering the monstrosity as emblematic incarnation of death, personification of annihilation, representation of anguish and fear¹¹ (Bernardi, 2007, p. 287).

This aspect of the contemporary rewriting of fairy tales is also reflected in a relatively recent article on the magazine “Hamelin” (Servidori, 2012) which, starting from the observation of the great revival of fairy tales, especially in their adaptations for cinema and television, analyses their critical aspect. The first one is that the new tales are mainly aimed at an audience of young adults and adults, not any more of children or families; this involves a change in the characters, from “fairy tale icons” to “lifelike characters” in which the audience can identify, only for the fun of the great mass audience and therefore for great profit. From *Red Riding Hood* (Hardwicke, 2011) to *Mirror Mirror* (Singh, 2012) and to the following *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012), the original fairy tale is progressively emptied of its deepest and unspeakable meanings, of the metaphors of life represented by the narration and the characters, to make room for the “patina of enough gothic watered horror” (Servidori, 2012, p. 35). In the second transposition of *Snow White* (*Snow White and the Hunter*) it may be worth to pay attention to the two female figures, absolute protagonists of the film: the malefic witch Ravenna convicted by a spell to keep her only source of power, the beauty, and therefore forced to eat the blood and the heart of young abducted girls, a true dark lady dominating the first part of the story, and Snow White, whose figure occupies the entire second part of the film, where the dark and gothic tones become more clear and airy. In particular, the character of Snow White, as Servidori points out, marks a change of the imagination, traceable in the new cinema production particularly aimed at teenagers and young adults, especially in the key scene of the film when, driven out by the dwarves and the hunter, enters the sanctuary of the Fairies in the heart of the Black Forest; but not only, i.e. the emergence of the warrior maiden, closer to a young Queen as Elizabeth I of England as not to Joan of Arc: “It is no longer season of vampires and the like, now relegated to the past and without heirs anymore. This is the time of warriors, fighters in the arena of the *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, who surpassed even *1984* as the most read dystopia at all time”¹² (p. 38). Women who change and migrate from a narration to another, from one mean to another, by recovering tones, modes, characters of ancient fairy tale icons, sometimes reinterpreted in the light of the contemporary society’s changes.

In conclusion, it is perhaps appropriate to mention Zipes (2012) and what he calls the “collision fairy tales”, i.e. the re-creations of the classic fairy tale by some contemporary artists. Assuming that, following Baumann (2000), everything became relative and liquid in our society, we could say that, as a matter of fact, nothing is unimaginable and the boundaries between reason and imagination seem to be collapsed. So, and this is Zipes’ thesis, accepting the traditional structure of the fairy tale and its characteristic of absolute goodness has become impossible for the true artists, i.e. the interpretation of the fairy tale up to now, in their artistic and mass media reinterpretations, in a globalized world that seems to have made short circuit. The classic fairy tales, however, continue to talk, to resonate archaic echoes, and may still have something to say about today’s complex social reality, even entering in collision with it. So, the contemporary artists have dealt with the usual themes of the fairy tale under a critical, sceptical perspective, with the intent to cause a disturbance in the viewer and to remind him that fairy tales do not offer any alternative to reality. Their works collide with past interpretations and give rise to new narrations of images that force the audience to ask questions and to see the world from new perspectives. Many artists, for example, have paradoxically begun to use the fairy tale to cancel its artificial illusions and thus to allow the spectator to face the reality through the images that provoke, trouble and force him to stop and to think about the meaning of fairy tale and happiness.

The artistic reinterpretation referred to by Zipes goes toward this direction; it deals with one of the two trends that he points out in the contemporary fairy tales collisions, i.e. the remake of classic and well-known fairy tales, such as *Bluebeard*, *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Snow White*; among these ones, the remake by the artist

Paula Rego¹³ of *Little Red Riding Hood* in 2003, which represents a mother and a grandmother who protect a little girl from male predators. Not surprisingly women, the representation of two female figures. Many artists are attracted by the character of *Little Red Riding Hood* and by her story, because of the gender conflict and because the versions by Perrault and Grimm tend to make the little girls responsible for the violence and/or the destiny they are subjected to. Instead in Rego's remake, re-elaboration, women are able to save themselves.

The fairy tracks and seeds seem therefore to appear in different stories and narrations; in this way the tale regenerates from age to age, from culture to culture, constantly re-establishing the dialogue with its potential as narration of the wonderful and unspeakable.

Notes

¹ “Le superfici parlano, raccontano storie; anzi sono le cose che, attraverso di esse – una rugosità improvvisa o il poro invisibile di una larva –, prendono la parola e si esprimono nel linguaggio che è loro proprio e che “torna a noi carico di tutto l'umano che abbiamo investito nelle cose”” (Lavagetto, 2001, p. 118). Translated by the author.

² In the book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale. The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, Jack Zipes, addressing the issue of the fairy tale's origin, assimilates this narrative gender to a “biological species” that, starting from its spread in the oral tradition, continues to grow during the various historical periods thanks to the press and to new forms of social and technological transmission up to the rewriting in contemporary arts with the so-called “collision fairy tales”. According to the American scholar, who explicitly refers to the memetic studies by Richard Dawkins (Dawkins, 1995), the tale would be a typical case of “cultural replication”. The “meme” is made up of cultural transmission unit, as well as its melody, ideas, phrases, fashions. Like the genes spread in the genetic pool from one body to another via the sperm and the egg cells, the meme pool propagates from one brain to another, via a process that Dawkins defines as a kind of imitation. Compared to the fairy tale, the idea of “meme” helps to build traditions by creating stories based on the human communication of shared experiences. The relevance of meme fairy tales which propose actions related to social and biological practices, such as procreation, abandonment, hunting, planting, etc., becomes a cultural mark indicating that men and women have tried to communicate through the historical periods in order to help each other in adapting to a changing environment. The minds of human beings have distinguished which fairy tales are more interesting than others, keeping in mind the most important ones to narrate and to recreate them, so the memetic crystallization of some fairy tales become classic does not make them static, because they are constantly re-created and reformed; the fairy tale, the oral tradition where it originated, produces various and different actions by using other media such as printing, electronics, design, photography and digital technology, to create other worlds, to keep them separate from our real world so to enable us to understand it and ourselves at the same time. According to Zipes' interpretation, therefore, the literary fairy tale comes from oral narrations that have then become conventional and coded in a community of speakers who used them in their interest, to give voice to the desires, to explore the social components of communities, to represent the different instances of civilization through symbols and metaphors. Therefore the tale as “meme” is interested in its own perpetuation, and it will adapt to changes and social conflicts, by becoming “irresistible”.

³ “Nella fiaba si parla una lingua semplice ma di alto contenuto metaforico, interrotta da frequenti appelli all'ascoltare e ricca di immagini dove le parole sono un viatico verso un'altra realtà: quella che consente di scrivere destini, di compiere viaggi utopici e di incontrare mondi migliori” (Beseghi, 2003, p. 37). Translated by the author.

⁴ For the classification of the various types of persecuted heroin see also (Aarne, Thompson, 1961).

⁵ We find an interesting study about some of these collections in the book by Jack Zipes *The Irresistible Fairy Tale. The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*. The scholar particularly focuses on four narrators and collectors: Nanette Lévesque (1803-1880), illiterate narrator from the mountain region of Fraisses in northern France; Rachel Busk (1831-1907), collector and translator of stories both from books and from conversations with narrators; Božena Němcová (1820-1862), among the first to collect and to adapt Czechs and Slovaks folktales; Laura Gonzenbach (1842-1878), author of several collections of folk tales and in particular of the book *Fiabe popolari siciliane* in 1870, the only one in the XIX century filled by a high-class woman on the basis of materials provided by low or medium-class women and by farmer women, directly collected from their voice. Zipes reports that the issue of the persecution of innocent heroines is central in the folktales of these narrators and collectors; they are also important for at least two aspects: on the one hand they provide relevant data about the beliefs, the habits of particular XIX century's communities and about the role played by women; on the other hand, as part of the studies on folklore, they allow to understand the problems related to oral transmission and to culture dissemination, to

literacy, as well as to the interpretation of specific types of fairy tale, such as those related to the persecuted innocent heroines where violence, abuses and women's reactions are very different from those described by male narrators and collectors.

⁶ “[...] la donna che è cosciente di sé solo come specchio dei desideri dell'uomo, la donna che si identifica con il modello forte maschile, rifiutando il modello debole della femmina, ed infine la donna nuova, assertiva, conscia del valore della propria appartenenza al mondo delle donne, capace di rappresentare essa stessa un modello esistenziale per le future generazioni costruendo una genealogia al femminile” (Ulivieri, 1999, p. 247). Translated by the author.

⁷ “[...] la vecchietta di Innocenti vive in una chiara dimensione di *between* e di trasversalità, mostrandosi capace di far dialogare il reale e l'immaginario, le abilità del concreto e quelle del fantastico. Sul suo tavolo da lavoro si adagiano i modelli dei futuri atti di magia. Nel suo cortiletto serpeggiano rane, ramarri e ratti per nulla infastiditi da una bianca colomba di derivazione grimmiana, nonostante Innocenti illustri Perrault. Lo sguardo protettivo dell'anziana fata osserva la fanciulla, vestendo, nello stesso tempo, i panni della nutrice e quelli della fata madrina, senza perdere di vista l'ironia e il sorriso che ne rallegrano il volto astuto e sapiente. Così è la chiave interpretativa dell'illustratore a condensare in un unico personaggio i caratteri di colei che forse narra la storia e di colei che nella storia agisce e del ruolo magico di alleata, lo stesso assunto dalla narratrice” (Bernardi, 2007, p. 130-131). Translated by the author.

⁸ “In quel mentre che il povero Pinocchio impiccato dagli assassini a un ramo della Quercia grande, pareva ormai più morto che vivo, la bella Bambina dai capelli turchini si affacciò daccapo alla finestra e impietosita alla vista di quell'infelice [...], batté per tre volte le mani insieme e fece tre piccoli colpi. A questo segnale si sentì un gran rumore di ali che volavano con foga precipitosa, e un grosso falco venne a posarsi sul davanzale della finestra. – Che cosa comandate, mia graziosa Fata? – disse il falco abbassando il becco in atto di reverenza: (perché bisogna sapere che la Bambina dai capelli turchini, non era altro in fin dei conti che una bonissima Fata che da più di mill'anni abitava nelle vicinanze di quel bosco)” (Collodi, 1993, pp. 106-107). Translated by the author.

⁹ “Avvicinatevi, bambini, e vi racconterò una storia intessuta di incanti. I giocattoli possono essere passatempi divertenti. Ma una buona storia è pura magia. E non c'è momento migliore di quando la pioggia bussa alla finestra” (Innocenti, 2012, without page). Translated by the author.

¹⁰ “Ora bambini, non vergognatevi delle vostre lacrime. Sono naturali come la pioggia. Ma, in questo caso, non sono necessarie. Vi ricordate quello che vi dicevo sulle storie? Le storie sono pura magia. Chi dice che possano avere solo un finale?” (Innocenti, 2012, without page). Translated by the author.

¹¹ “Gli elementi che giocano contro la riscrittura della fiaba in versione “cinema di consumo” sembrano dunque condensarsi intorno alla mancanza di ritmo narrativo [...] all'assenza e all'anestetizzazione dell'indicibile e alla negazione del rischioso, del conflittuale e del mostruoso – intendendo la mostruosità come incarnazione della morte emblematica, personificazione dell'annientamento, rappresentazione dell'angoscia e della paura” (Bernardi, 2007, p. 287). Translated by the author.

¹² “Non è più stagione di vampiri et similia, relegati ormai al passato e senza più eredi. È il tempo dei guerrieri e delle guerriere, dei combattenti nell'arena degli *Hunger Games* di Suzanne Collins, che hanno superato perfino 1984 come distopia più letta di tutti i tempi” (Servidori, 2012, p. 38). Translated by the author.

¹³ Portuguese visual artist, known for her work (paintings and prints), based on fairy tales books.

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