

DANIELA CARPI

Fairy Tales in the Postmodern World

No Tales
for Children



Universitätsverlag
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CHAPTER I

Re-reading the fairy tale from a postmodern perspective

In the beginning were stories, people would tell enchanting stories. These stories might seem old and worthless, but performing their magic's many tricks once more unleashes new powers which in turn can expose the magic as trickery and thus unmake its spells.¹

In our own time, writing is pervaded through and through by skepticism, and the artifice of literature has become the only form of reality that the mind can grasp.² Whereas art for the modernist writers gave form to an otherwise formless reality, in the twentieth century there has been an explosion of issues: the problem of creative originality, the sense of the literary tradition as burden and opposition, the awareness of one's own belatedness and the impossibility of saying anything new, given that everything has already been said.

As R. Bodei³ puts it, we are now in a phase of "unsaturated tradition," meaning that we no longer subscribe to established traditional values, which, however, continue to exist and to loom large. Bodei maintains that rather than speaking of a crisis of tradition we should speak of a "crisis of tropism," or a "crisis of orientation," that is, a crisis in our stance toward tradition. Contemporary writing can be ascribed to the "hermeneutic circle" of Gadamer⁴ in the sense that it is impossible for it to leave the circle of tradition in order to establish "the new." Hence the self-reflexive, claustrophobic aspect of writing that speaks only of itself. Thus, still according to Gadamer, we have the "fusion of horizons," whereby the individual author dialectically opposes tradition, calling it into question in hermeneutic mode. This concept can be related to Nietzsche's "feast of memory" with its continuous and contaminating reprise of tradition.

In this way, writing has almost entered a quasi-eschatological phase, focused on going beyond "the old" by thrusting itself into a time that is "other." But above all, what emerges in the twentieth century is a perception of the word as an uncontrollable entity, as a force that is opposed to that of the intellect. As Jean-

¹ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 24.

² See Daniela Carpi, *L'Ansia della scrittura. Parola e silenzio nella narrativa del ventesimo secolo* (Napoli: Liguori, 1995).

³ Remo Bodei, "Tradizione e modernità," *Moderno/Postmoderno*, ed. G. Mari (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1987), 33.

⁴ Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Ed. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

François Lyotard⁵ puts it, legitimizing metanarratives do not exist anymore. We are no longer subject to a Newtonian anthropology. Instead, language manifests itself as fragmentation and atomization, no longer reducible to an original unity. The “peaceful notion of linearity” is now replaced by fragmentary superimposition, by a Babel-like simultaneous presence of past and present. Writing seems to arise from a sort of formless magma, comparable to the biblical state that preceded the creation of Eden. The author, therefore, might try to situate himself inside the text as Creator: but in the crisis of transcendence characteristic of our time, language turns against its creator, like a rebellious and damned angel, thus turning the biblical myth upside down. If there was a time when the world was God’s book, written for his creatures, the undermining of the concept of transcendence has made of writing an empty gesture: the world as a book about nothing. Thus, if the world could once be read as book, now the book has replaced the world, the book has become a book about nothing, self-inclusive and self-reflexive.⁶

Although the indiscriminate use of the term postmodernism is such that it has not yet acquired a precise meaning, we can still determine three principal ways in which it is used. Postmodernism refers to: (1) the non-realist and non-traditional literature and art of the period following the 19th century; (2) the literature and art which carry to extremes some of the characteristics of modernism, as John Barthes proposes in *The Literature of Exhaustion*; (3) a more general human condition in the world of late capitalism after the Fifties, a time period that Lyotard calls the great “metanarrative” of Western culture.

The beliefs with which in earlier times knowledge and practice were legitimized (Christianity, Science, Democracy, Communism, and Progress), no longer have the incontrovertible support necessary to sustain the projects undertaken in their name. From this there follows a radical decentralization of our cultural sphere. It is not simply the fact that postmodernism does not believe in “truth”, as much as that it sees truth and meaning as historically constructed concepts, and thus it tries to expose the mechanism by which the production of such beliefs is hidden and made to appear natural.

Commonly associated with postmodern literary production are those aesthetic strategies that radically subvert Western metaphysics. Such strategies include disintegration of traditional notions of subjectivity, personality development, representation, language, interpretation, narrative, history, and binary logic in general. These take various aesthetic forms like juxtaposition or the collage of various kinds of texts and discourses, the dislocation of traditional temporal and spatial matrixes, the active and conscious refusal to resort to closure or narrative authority, and the appropriation and re-elaboration of popular forms.

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv: “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives...To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds most notably the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goals.”

⁶ See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981).

Postmodernism carries to extremes some of the principles already postulated by modernism. It rejects the distinction among genres and especially the one between “high” culture and “low” (or popular) culture, both with regard to choice of materials in producing works of art as well as for the methods of expression, distribution, and consumption of such art; it distances itself from the seeming objectivity of the third person narrator who expresses a fixed point of view with a clearly moral position. Postmodernism emphasizes the self-reflexivity and the self-awareness in the production of the work, so that every single element calls attention to its own status as something that is constructed and consumed in a particular way. Parody, bricolage, irony, word play characterize postmodern writing. In addition, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures) ambiguity, simultaneity, precariousness, and incoherence are seen positively and are used to emphasize the idea of a subject which is de-structured, de-centralized, and de-humanized. For Linda Hutcheon⁷ post-modernist production stands out for its conscious contradictions, its parodic intertextuality, its conflictual dialogue with history.

Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*⁸ is a milestone in the development of literary criticism in the second half of the 20th century. The author deals with the relationship between writing and tradition, today experienced with anxiety because tradition is considered as something crushing and suffocating: everything has already been said, everything has already been written, so much so that being original is impossible. Writers find themselves in a “hermeneutic circle,” as mentioned by Gadamer, namely that literary production cannot leave the circle of tradition and establish a new approach. Hence the self-reflexive aspect of a form of writing that speaks only about itself.

Thus, even the relationship with language becomes problematic. Whereas earlier “signifiers” were deemed to point always to “signifieds” and reality was inherent in the latter, for postmodern writers there are only “signifiers”. As Derrida⁹ claims, meaning is not inherent in the sign because the latter is the result of all that has preceded it and which is no more. It “is not” from the moment it is born. Communication is inevitably a distorted representation and the symbolic function of discourse is the symptom of an already mediated presence/absence. Therefore neither the narrator nor the writer can be considered as an immediate and consolidated source of meaning.

The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears and with it the idea of “signifieds.” The French philosopher Michel Foucault¹⁰ tried to demonstrate that the basic ideas about the way in which people understand permanent truths of human nature and society have changed in the course of history. Challenging the influence of Marx and Freud, Foucault argues that quotidian practices enable

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989)

⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1973). This text can be considered as the matrix for all those authors who can be defined as postmodernist. Starting from 1960 they have found their own form of expression in the realistic-documentary mode, in the meta-novel (a postmodern solution par excellence), and in the fairy tale.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967)

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970)

people to define their identity and to assemble knowledge. His study of power and of its changing course is a fundamental concept in postmodernism. History must no longer be considered as a chronology of inevitable facts, but as the result of repressed and unconscious knowledge caught up in norms and suppositions/pretextations of order, within structures of exclusions which legitimate the epistememes through which societies achieve their identity.

One of the most characteristic methodologies of postmodernism is *deconstruction*, an approach that emphasizes negative critical capacity and implies the demystification of a text in order to expose its hierarchies and internal assumptions. By examining even marginal elements in a text, deconstruction analyses what is repressed, what is not said, as well as its incongruities. Not only are errors unmasked, but the text is redefined by undoing and inverting opposite poles. Such methodology does not resolve incongruities, rather it exposes implicated hierarchies in order to filter the information the text may contain.

In what way then can we today look at the fairy tale and its tradition? The long-established opposition between folklore and literature based on the Saussurian concept of the distinction between *langue* and *parole* no longer exists the moment when perspectives change. If the distinction between “low” and “high” production is no longer considered, even oral literature exists the same level as writing; therefore the same concept applies to folklore and literature. Both are artistic forms of communication which interact systematically and are mutually transformed; consequently their texts require an intertextual interpretation.

The “classic” fairy tale is a literary appropriation of the older folktale and it continues to show and reproduce certain folkloric characteristics. As a borderline or transitional genre, it bears traces of oral narrative, folk tradition, and socio-cultural performance, even when it is edited as children’s literature or commercialized with little respect for its history and specificity. Conversely, even when it claims to be folkloric, the fairy tale is shaped by literary traditions with varied social usages and users. Thus the fairy tale has constituted and continues to constitute for writers or narrators, and also for readers or listeners, a source of access to the collective past of social communities, an access which allows, through a seeming narrowness, a highly idiosyncratic re-creation of “Once upon a time”.

Fairy tales lend themselves to be read in innumerable ways according to the personal interest of the interpreters and according to the historical context in which their interpretation – and perhaps their function within the framework of human experience – occurs. As Valentina Pisanty affirms, “the function of the fairy tale is precisely that of allowing itself to be read in different ways from time to time, and therefore of helping the interpreter to deal with that which is most urgent for him at every given moment of his existence”.¹¹ Already Bettelheim had written that the meaning of fairy tales is different for each person and it is different even for the same person over time. The child draws different meanings from the same fairy tale according to his changing interests through time.¹²

¹¹ Valentina Pisanty, *Leggere la fiaba*, [1993] (Milano: Strumenti Bompiani, 1998), 81. My translation.

¹² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, [1975] (New York: Vintage, 2010), 18.

Bettelheim is referring to a children's audience for the fairy tale, but children grow up and thus, citing Gianni Rodari:

At a certain point – perhaps when *Little Red Riding Hood* no longer has much to say to them, when they are ready to distance themselves from the tale just as they separate from an old toy that has been used up – they are willing to accept a parody of the story [...] in part because the new viewpoint renews their interest in the story itself [...].¹³

When the user of the fairy tale is an adult, the fairy tale itself is no longer interpreted exclusively in an innocent way, but becomes the stimulus for further creative activity; the user makes personal use of the fairy tale, resorting to manipulations and re-writings helpful for his particular needs. By user, we mean not only the one who reads the fairy tale, but also the one who writes it. It is now clear that the study of fairy tales requires an interdisciplinary approach, the same approach that is required for any product of the literary panorama of contemporary postmodernism.

Jack Zipes, Ruth B. Bottingheimer, Maria Tatar, and other critics have taught us the value of breaking the “magic spell”. From *Breaking the Magic Spell* (1979) to *Spells of Enchantment* (1991), to *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994), Jack Zipes has relentlessly focused our critical attention on the changes in the social functions of fairy tales in Europe and the United States. He has identified the ideological narrowness and the repressive usage to which the fairy tale has been subjected, but he has also called attention to its own emancipatory drives.

In their multiple narrations, fairy tales are that variable and “in-between” image in which folklore and literature, continuity and individuality, consensus and challenge, child and adult, woman and women, face and reflect one another. In fact, the dominating metaphor of the fairy tale is the magic mirror, since it combines mimesis (reflection), refraction (transgressive desires), and structure (artifice). Many specular or mimetic strategies – extrinsic factors, nature metaphors, invisible extra-diegetic narrator, the mirrors themselves – support the magic of the fairy tale by making it easy to recognize the correspondence between the natural world and the human psycho-social world. If, for example, within the narrative structure the beautiful princess is the crystallized image of the woman who reflects man's desire, by examining the construct of such a structure or by deconstructing it, we can contribute to destroying the power of that image.

The fairy tale, born as an oral process based upon formulaic repetitions, becomes in contemporary writers a typically literary process founded upon the play with tradition and the recovering of formulas in an experimental sense. The expansion of the fairy tale shows its endless literary evolution thanks to the monumentalisation of the written word. The classic fairy tale needs to die in order to be reborn as literary play. In fact the writing of the tale of wonder absorbs its oral antecedents and reconstitutes original human consciousness.

Only at the moment in which the fairy tale as mere oral tale (founded on the repetition of identical and/or narrative stereotypes for memorisation) is tran-

¹³ Gianni Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1973); Gianni Rodari, *The Grammar of Fantasy. An Introduction to the Art of Inventing Stories* (New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1996), 33.

scribed does it becomes canonical literary legacy. In this way fairy tales also become shared property, subject to different adaptations throughout time, and consequently subject also to the mutation of historical conditions of narration, and of re-writings and parodies. Characteristically, contemporary writers love to confront strong elements of the canonical tradition, re-reading them in a constant parodic play and making their semantic certainties meaningless. The charges made against the fairy tale are numerous: they are often considered authoritarian, classist, racist, and sexist. However, a question should be asked: if the fairy tale can be used as a powerful means of cultural and moral manipulation, then, reversing this perspective, could it also become a means of liberation from these same attitudes?

The fairy tale could, then, represent a conscious form of protest used to attack and subvert the conventions of a hypocritical society with the aim of formulating a new process of socialisation. Hence, in order to neutralize the power of the traditional fairy tale as repository of sexist and patriarchal ideologies, it is necessary to deconstruct it through an act of revision and, later, of rewriting that is above all a social act pointing at the necessity and the possibility of social transformation.

Such a process of re-elaboration makes use of two main types of experimentation. On the one hand, we have the transmutation of the classic fairy tale, the content of which, assumed to be widely known, is here used in a different, unusual manner. Such a transformation does not imply a cancellation of those characters and events which were recognizable in familiar fairy tales, but it simply annuls their negativity. This demonstrates that it is possible to relativize its values so that we may encounter princes who are rescued by daring princesses, wolves who are seduced by lusty Red Riding Hoods, damsels who are saved by mothers arriving on a white horse (substituting for the classic prince) and so on. The aim is to deconstruct, to transform, and to recompose the traditional motifs in order to free the reader from a habitual and expected response. This deconstructionist and subversive approach is typical, for instance, of Angela Carter.

Moreover, we have the fusion of traditional configurations with contemporary elements. This technique produces uncanny effects in the readers, unsettling their expectations and inducing them to abandon their complacent attitude towards a hypocritical, repressive, and classist *status quo*. In both types of experimentation the aim is to instil doubts, to infringe on shared certainties about the relationship between the sexes and about their social and sexual roles and, as far as sexual identity is concerned, to consider it something produced by historically and socially determined conventions, rather than as something “natural” and biologically determined.

In fact, if it is possible to state that the fairy tale is the mirror of human fears and desires, we must conclude that:

This mirroring, or highly-stylised mimesis is no value-free or essential distillation of human destiny, but a “special effect” of ideological expectations and unspoken norms, a naturalizing technology that works hard at, among other things, re-producing Woman as the mirror image of masculine desire.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 29.

Since orality constitutes the essence of textuality in fairy tales, and furthermore an orality that is not lost in its written transposition, the contemporary tales of wonder maintain the narrative simplicity of oral tales and their structural clarity and memorability. At the same time they incorporate those changes that epochal and cultural shifts impose on society.

The fairy tale can be considered a genre that is allowed to tackle in exemplary manner the problem of cultural circulation of literary forms from orality to writing and vice versa.¹⁵

The writing of the fairy tale prevents its loss by allowing its assimilation into a wider repertoire. Within this repertoire the “belated” writing of the fairy tale (its adaptation) creates its own choices and transformations of time frame. The currently predominant written literary context allows us to speak of “oral literature” while underlining the origin from which the written process has removed it. In such a literary and monumentalized context, the contemporary author allows him/herself to re-adapt ironically certain classic fairy tales. A sociological and realistic context is superimposed on the timeless and codified context required by oral memorability.

However, even at its oral stage, the transmission of the fairy tale itself was subjected by various narrators (who would never tell the same fairy tale in an identical way) to additions and to different interpretations. Therefore, we have a “plurality of versions of the same tale, which is identified via its invariable traits.”¹⁶ Later on, in the stage of its written transposition, twentieth-century writers, in their parodic re-use of tradition, play with the constraining form of the genre, re-establishing a sort of mutable realization in continuous transformation, and thus almost a re-appropriation of orality. A hybrid form is created, which is founded on memorability and on the repetition of the identical, but also on the subjective additions of the author; he/she plays with the changes occurring in the time between the creation of the fairy tale in the past and its contemporary re-writing. This makes the fairy tale itself liable to re-adaptation in a continuous oscillation between the characteristics of orality and those of writing.

Modern fairy-tale studies were born in the 1970s. In the midst of the cultural turmoil brought about by the student movement, feminism, the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, scholars had rediscovered, of all things, the fairy tale. It was not an impulse to escape the era’s conflicts that drew scholars to the genre and its magical world. Rather it was the recognition that fairy tales played an important role in cultural conflict and the debate over social values. While some critics of traditional fairy tales warned exclusively of their outdated ideologies and complicity in promoting repressive politics, others insisted that the fairy tale’s special form of enchantment offered a way out of cultural chaos and a return to the moral certainty of the past.¹⁷

Therefore, the fairy tale becomes a shared legacy that we take pleasure in mystifying. Different drafts are thus superimposed on the text, startling the readers

¹⁵ Cristina Lavinio, *La magia della fiaba tra oralità e scrittura* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1993) 1. My translation.

¹⁶ Nicole Belmont, *Poetica della fiaba* [1999] (Palermo: Sellerio, 2002), 11-12.

¹⁷ Kay Stone, *Some Day Your Witch Will Come* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), ix.

and undermining their expectations, for example, by adding psychological motivations that were absent in the hero/heroine of the classic magic fairy tale.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, many writers made use of the fairy tale in their own different ways. To cite just a few, the fairy tale provides Charlotte Brontë and William Faulkner with the structural mechanism respectively for *Jane Eyre* and *Absalom, Absalom!*; in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and Anne Sexton's *Transformations* it functions explicitly as ideological motivation; for Henry James in *What Maisie Knew* and for Italo Calvino in *The Path of the Spider's Web*, it serves as "an expectation-setting allusion". Authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in *The Fairy Tale* or George MacDonald in *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* have written their own "original" fairy tales or *Kunstmärchen*, not necessarily for children. These and other authors have re-written certain classic fairy tales in order to offer their own individual interpretation. The fairy tale makes available to the creative writer well-known material, flexible enough to lend itself to political, erotic, or narrative manipulations. Contemporary feminist writers, first and foremost Angela Carter, doyenne of postmodernism, have taken hold of the inherited tradition of fairy tales in order "to refuse to obey their authority by revising and appropriating them."¹⁸

At this point it is helpful to delve further into the relationship between postmodernism and feminism so that we may have a better understanding of what are, and continue to be, the motives that have led many contemporary writers to re-write traditional fairy tales. The aesthetic strategies which radically subvert Western metaphysics and are generally associated with postmodern fiction actually are prevalent in feminist writings from the Sixties on, even if most of these texts have been neglected by literary critics who discuss postmodern fiction. The use of postmodern characteristics often gives drive and power to feminist issues, so that such characteristics become in themselves feminist. Just like the political activity of opposition, feminism transforms or adapts the strategies that it incorporates in order to satisfy its own political agenda. If certain aesthetic postmodern strategies can be useful to feminist programs, then detecting the intersecting points between feminism and postmodernism becomes a potentially advantageous project for feminists. Literary examples of such fruitful intersection are surprisingly widespread; they can be recognized not only in radical experimental fiction with a limited number of readers (like, for example, in the novels by Kathy Acker and Christine Brooke-Rose), but also in novels of wider circulation whose texts contain feminist elements.

Recent works that make use of postmodern strategies to pursue feminist goals differ however from much postmodern fiction because feminist fiction is linked to specific politics; it cannot break its bonds with the actual situation or with its activist agenda. Although feminist fiction cannot simply be reduced to political propaganda, still it cannot separate aesthetics from political action. For feminists, literature has the "social function" of bringing about "changes within cultural

¹⁸ Nancy A. Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 83 (in particular the second chapter entitled "Twice Upon One Time").

and ideological spheres.”¹⁹ The problem with extreme forms of aesthetic experimentation is that they necessarily imply an elitist audience, constituted by those who want to become involved with the unfamiliar, and thus limiting the diffusion of the political implications of a text. Furthermore, radical experimentation can be so deconstructive as not to leave any base for reconstruction. Actually, a large part of recent feminist fiction makes use of the conventions of realism together with postmodern disruptive strategies, thus transforming traditional representation rather than totally uprooting it. Such fiction does a balancing act in order to secure for itself a wide readership: while remaining anchored to material conditions, at the same time it engages in a subversive critique of Western tradition in order to create a space for reconstruction. Indeed, this is a way to maintain an active link with the political process since, as Rita Felski argues, “There exists no obvious relation between the subversion of language structures and the processes of social struggle and change”,²⁰ and aesthetic processes do not always result in or reflect changes in material conditions.

Because of their long tradition, fairy tales have proven to be an excellent instrument of power for patriarchal society; therefore re-reading, reinterpreting, and rewriting fairy tales represents an important challenge for women. The long tradition of representing woman as nature, or as hidden artifice, contributes to the success and to the power of such images in fairy tales. As demonstrated by historical and anthropological research, women are commonly seen as being closer to nature than to culture. In a patriarchal system, this view makes them the symbol of an order of inferior and intermediate beings. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that according to the way in which man represents woman she embodies his dreams: “she is the wished-for intermediary between nature, the stranger to man, and the fellow being who is too closely identical,” and therefore competitive, perhaps even hostile.²¹

At any rate, the fairy tale should not be considered exclusively as an intrinsically masculine narrative that offers narrow-minded and dangerous models for young readers. Feminists are able to see fairy tales as a powerful discourse that produces gender representations, “gender technology,” as de Lauretis²² puts it. The study of the mechanism of such production can shed light on the complex inter-dependence between women in fairy tales and women narrators/writers and listeners/readers. Marina Warner,²³ for example, takes up the challenge and concentrates on women’s images in classic fairy tales, especially on the symbol of beauty, in light of the interests and social status of the narrators; these “professionals,” mostly women, also deal with strategies of gossip and silence within their own specific historical and social context. Within a feminist framework, which acknowledges critically the power of magic in fairy tales, the fairy tale is

¹⁹ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 7-8.

²⁰ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 5-6

²¹ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Penguin, 1972), 172.

²² Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

²³ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1994).

the locus of competitively structured historical and social desires. These narratives continue to play a privileged role in gender production and as such they are deconstructed and reconstructed in a variety of ways.

In the universe of fairy tales, the just often find the way to prevail and, generally, the wicked are punished. But at a closer reading these stories reveal more than a simple formula of mistreatment and punishment. The tests that our heroes have to undergo in their quest show a process of transformation: from youth to adulthood/maturity, from victim to hero, from mutilation to wholeness, from passivity to action. All this gives to fairy tales their special power: they are not a picturesque escape from the harsh realities of modern life, instead they offer a symbolic portrayal of all that life, with its dark – or not so dark – sides, has to offer. The literary fairy tale is a marvelous genre, hybrid and versatile, which addresses the primitive anxieties of the individual, correlated also with narrative motifs which it then uses to invite a conscious reflection on human beings and the world.

The postmodern fairy tale is a story which, more or less explicitly, reflects on the self, on the characters and their motivations. The clues that a psychological analysis of Snow-White's dwarves or of Cinderella's step-sisters can offer are multiple and extremely interesting: they may amuse (while at the same time giving food for thought) by showing alternative points of view, or they may question gender archetypes, precisely as Margaret Atwood does in her collection *Good Bones*. The rewriting of fairy tales entails a high frequency of intertextuality. Like all postmodern literature, it is a "borderline" experience, the ultimate experimental writing which, by crossing the borders between genres, creates something new.

However, we may consider the main feature of postmodernism to be its relationship with tradition. Tradition is confronted, challenged, subverted and revised, in an agonistic struggle to impose one's own perspective. The classic fairy tales are readapted to a contemporary world which has lost its "métarécits", which revolts against patriarchal society, which considers literature also as a deconstructive game, which is self-reflexive and metafictional. Very often in the tales we will analyze we find that the characters are aware of being part of a narration and openly declare their refusal to follow the literary canon of the genre. These frequent intrusions into criticism and the critical act itself is what characterizes experimental literature, a literature that incorporates self-examination into the very act of creation. The writers we will take into consideration as examples of such subversive operations find their inspiration not only from classic fairy tales, but also from myths and legends (for instance that of the vampire). In the postmodern collapse of borderlines between genres, myths and legends, folk and fairy tales merge so as to create new stories from the older ones.

We are experiencing the emergence of a new renewed poetics and politics of wonder that, although hardly cohesive, are situated responses to the hegemony of a colonizing, Orientalizing and commercialized poetics of magic.²⁴

My main perspective in this book will therefore start from a focal point found both in T. S. Eliot and Harold Bloom: how do contemporary fairy tales position

²⁴ Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), Preface ix.

themselves, not only in relation to classic fairy tales, but to literary tradition at large? I completely share Eliot's dictum that the present lives with the past in its bones and that we must speak of the presentness of the past and of the pastness of the present if we want to make sense of contemporary literature. And this is what contemporary writers do when they make use of fairy tales: they root their narrations in the past, thus renewing them from within. The re-reading needs to be set in a traditional background, even if the context is today's world. Furthermore, what is particularly innovative is the relation that fairy tales have with contemporary novels: we have examples of novels shaped as fairy tales (for instance Rose Tremain's *Music and Silence*, that secretly and subtly includes a revision of Cinderella in the story of Emilia Tilsen), or of novels that mix more than one fairy tale (as Tanith Lee's *White as Snow*, where the tale of Snow White merges with Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella or with myths and legends), or of novels that include a collection of fairy stories as subplot (Kate Morton's *Forgotten Garden*, where Eliza Makepeace writes a collection of fairy stories for children, that reflect events of the main plot). Novels as fairy tales, therefore, where the canonical elements of the genre are subverted and readapted to a contemporary situation, or even novels that use fairy tales to convey a sociological or ecological message (as Sheri Tepper's *Beauty*).

As a final point and to show how far the genre has been extended, I will attempt to demonstrate how the new media, and advertising in particular, have enhanced the fruition of fairy tales in a multivocal way that has brought them onto a media platform of production and distribution, the latest trend in criticism dealing with fairy tales. What advertisement has done to fairy tales exhibits their enduring quality, but it also underscores the elimination of high and low literature in a constant transformation of "high literature" into a merchandising product. This is how literature can pass from an elitist creation into a new popular system that reproduces folkloric narration based on new technologies.

