Introduction

Fairy tales are quite distinctive, and you likely know one when you hear (read, or watch) it. There is a '*logical* structure' peculiar to the wondertale, one specialist noted, which we feel even though we may not be aware of it (Propp 1996: xxvi, 6, original emphasis). Another expert remarked that in magic tales the 'numinous excites neither fear nor curiosity'—the hero meets with speaking animals, winds, or stars without evincing astonishment or fear (Lüthi 1982: 7). In the same vein, the international folktale index has taken (ever since its inception in 1910) the presence of marvelous, supernatural elements in the stories as the defining criterion for this class of 'magic- or wonder-tales' (Aarne 1910: vii–viii).

I just said you likely know one when you read it—but do we know fairy tales, really? How well do we understand them? Take for example *Little Red Riding Hood.* This most popular story is classified as tale type 333 (ATU 333) in the folktale index. [1] This means it has been filed in a cluster of tales hinging on a supernatural adversary. Is there more to the resident wolf than being *Canis lupus*, then? As it turns out, the short answer is 'yes.' A number of variants in the oral tradition feature a werewolf (Vaz da Silva 2017: 174–76)—but you would not guess that from either Charles Perrault's 'Le Petit Chaperon rouge' (1697) or the Brothers Grimm's 'Rotkäppchen' (1812). Because these literary variants are the foundation of the story we are familiar with, learning that the "wolf" is a supernatural entity may come as a shock. And although recent movies have popularized the werewolf figure (see Zipes 2010: 144–57), the disconnect between the bland stories we think we know and the wonder in wondertales is no less real.

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1   The first version of the tale type index (Aarne 1910) was translated and twice amplified by Stith Thompson and became known as the Aarne-Thompson index or AT for short (Aarne and Thompson 1981). A major revision and expansion was recently undertaken by Hans-Jörg Uther (2004), which became known as the ATU (short for Aarne-Thompson-Uther) index.

Wondertale

There is a reason for that disconnect. Perrault's famous book of mother-goose tales with morals (*Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye*, 1697) was part of a literary movement prone to casting oral wondertales into elegant *contes de fées,* whence the term 'fairy tales' derives. This vogue was predicated on an ironic distancing from the supernatural in the tales, which were retold as childish narratives endowed with pedagogical value (Seifert 2006: 8–9, 11). Several significant aspects of the oral tales, which seemed awkward for one reason or another, eventually became invisible in the stream of prettified tales. In a converging trend, the Brothers Grimm's wish to make the collected tales suitable for the nursery led them to sanitize the stories (Tatar 1987; Rölleke 1991: 107–08).

The scope of the fairy-tale domain has become huge. From the time of the first vogue of *contes de fées* (1690 to 1715), including Perrault's stories, the production of fairy tales (first in literary forms, then in movies) increased prodigiously. [2] Nowadays the term encompasses almost any story featuring a wonderland. Alas, overstretched categories tend toward meaninglessness—that is one reason why I use the term 'wondertale,' rather than the all-purpose term 'fairy tale' (cf. Zipes 2007a). I call 'wondertales' the overall field of stories—both oral and literary, in their multiple interactions—that keep the wondrous aspects in sight.

Because the tidal vogue of literary fairy tales edulcorated the stories, it takes looking at the oral variants as well to get a fresh look at tales we thought we knew. For instance, taking *Little Red Riding Hood* as a wondertale entails comparing the familiar texts by Perrault and Grimm with folk stories. The werewolf anecdote is a reminder that the popular knowledge we have of *Little Red Riding Hood* is wanting. Consider this yarn that a destitute illiterate woman, Nannette Lévesque, told a French folklorist in 1874:

> A little girl who had been hired to watch two cows at a farm returned home. She met the wolf in the woods and informed him about where she was headed. Then the girl took the path of pins to her mother's house. The wolf, who took the path of needles, got there first. He killed the girl's mother, ate a half of her, and cooked what was left.

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2   Actually, literary transpositions were extant before French writers started writing fairy tales. The most significant early transpositions are probably the 'Tale of Cupid and Psyche' by Lucius Apuleius, on which see Hansen (2017: 47–83) and Swahn (1955); and the early seventeenth-century Italian collections by Giovanfrancesco Straparola (2012) and Giambattista Basile (2007). For suggestive samples of the great literary fairy-tale tradition, see Tatar (1999), Zipes (2001), and Jones and Schacker (2012).

He also filled a bottle with the dead woman's blood. When the girl finally arrived, she found the wolf in the bed pretending to be the old woman. The wolf told the girl: 'Help yourself to some meat from the pan; and there is wine on the table, drink some.' There was a little bird on the windowsill. While the child ate, the bird tweeted: 'Ri tin tin tin tin. You are eating your mother's flesh and you are drinking her blood.' The girl asked: 'What is this bird saying, mom?' 'It's saying nothing, just keep eating, it has the leisure to tweet.' The girl ate some more meat and drank more wine. When she was done with the meal, she joined the wolf in bed and was eaten. (I abridge from Tenèze and Delarue 2000: 99)

Whereas in the familiar texts by Perrault and Grimm the girl wears a red cap and picks flowers on her way to granny's house, in Lévesque's variant there is neither a red hood nor a flower-picking scene. Instead, the paths in the woods are named after pins and needles, and—more disquietingly—a cannibal act unfolds at the heart of the plot. Remarkably, these two motifs are standard fare in the oral tradition (Delarue 1989: 17–20). The cannibal act in *Red Riding Hood* opens a window to the scope of cannibalism in wondertales (Katrinaki 2008); the pins and the needles point to the symbolic dimension of feminine handiwork (Verdier 1979: 181–89). (Cf. also p. 115.) In short, the oral variants complicate the stories we thought we knew. Heeding the oral variants shatters our sense of the normality of each tale; hence, casting a fresh look on the stories becomes possible.

Mythism

It is my assumption that the stable images in wondertales—such as werewolves, pins and needles, and cannibal meals—amount to snippets of the collective imagination crystalized in narratives. Traditional processes are at stake here. Because in oral settings stories and motifs will die out if they are not retold over and over, as the linguist Roman Jakobson suggested in a memorable essay he penned with the folklorist Petr Bogatyrev, the creations of individual taletellers will endure only insofar as they are accepted and retold in the community. In the long run, as individual creations are delivered to the traditional crucible, anything not in line with the shared values and norms of the community is pruned away (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1982; see an example in Dégh and Vázsonyi 1995: 180–83). As a result, in Lévi-Strauss' suggestive words,

only the structured levels that rest on shared foundations will remain stable, while the probabilistic levels will manifest an extreme variability, itself a function of the personality of the successive narrators. However, during the process of oral transmission, these probabilistic levels will … wear out against each other, progressively releasing from the mass of the discourse what one could call its crystalline parts. Individual works are all potential myths, but it is their adoption in the collective mode that eventually brings out their 'mythism.' (Lévi-Strauss 1971: 560)

It is noteworthy that Lévi-Strauss uses for the shared parts of discourse crystallized in traditional stories the word 'mythism,' which is otherwise for him the inherent trait of metaphorical or mythical thought, the *pensée sauvage* (savage mind)—thought 'in its wild state, blooming in every human mind, contemporary as well as ancient, as long as it is not cultivated and tamed to increase its effectiveness' (Lévi-Strauss 1962). [3] The interesting point for me is that mythism goes beyond 'myths' taken as a narrative genre. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss vowed to look for mythism in 'all manifestations of the mental or social activity of the populations under study,' including in folktales and legends (1964: 12). And, as a specialist in ancient Greek stories pointed out,

to recognize in mythism one of the major phenomena of memorability in a culture of the word is to begin to put between brackets myth as a literary genre or as a certain type of narrative. (Detienne 1981: 86)

The notion of mythism as a property of traditional processes is useful in that it helps us keep in mind that metaphorical thinking is rife in wondertales across Europe as much as in the sort of alien narratives we usually call myths. Folklorists tend to associate myth with (i) etiological narratives, (ii) purportedly sacred, (iii) believed to be true, whereas they recognize wondertales as fictional narratives involving neither belief nor the sacred/religious sphere. Actually, a closer look reveals that 'myth' has been a blanket designation for the fanciful narratives that *others* supposedly *believe* to the point of holding those narratives *sacred*. As a French anthropologist put it judiciously, 'myth belongs to the other, but that other is an *alter ego*' (Pouillon 1980: 86). Frog (2018: 2) summed it up when he called myth an 'othering' device.

My own point is that there is no fundamental discontinuity between the spontaneous metaphorical thinking conveyed in wondertales and in so-called myths. Bluntly put, I assume that in wondertales we meet our own *pensée sauvage*. This means that I concur with Lévi-Strauss' assessment that 'myth and the folktale use a common substance, each in its own way' (Lévi-Strauss

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3   This quite metaphorical definition appears on the back cover flap of the book.

1984: 178). Back in 1887, François-Marie Luzel—one of the foremost tale collectors in Brittany—shared the thought that the 'inherently mythological character' of Breton tales was one of the things that struck him most in the stories (Luzel 1996, I: 29). Indeed, wondertales enact—on their own scale, in their own way—mythic themes, courtesy of what Frog (2022: 573–75) calls the fractal recursivity of mythical discourses. For example, the act of slaying a dragon, rife with cosmogonic implications in mythological narratives, mostly concerns the conquest of a bride in wondertales (see p. 80). (In a similar vein, in marriage and harvest songs the cosmic World Tree with a bird on top and a snake by the roots bears the added meaning of a bride poised between her blood kin and her bridegroom, see p. 92).

There is a bride added to the dragon in wondertales (as there is a bride added to the World Tree in wedding songs) because wondertales offer imaged discourses on reality (like 'myths' do) through the specific prism of coming of age. Wondertales frame the fluid, transformative process of puberty and sexual initiation in terms of dying (to a phase) and being reborn (to another). What is more, this genre associates the cycles of enchantment and disenchantment with cosmic rounds, mostly moon cycles (see p. 104). The point that mythism in wondertales shines through the prism of coming of age is crucial in my view. Granted that the individual stories are fictitious, the core pattern of dying and being reborn provides a pervasive model—repeated in myriad images, and bearing cosmic overtones—for personal transformations. [4]

The notion that the mythism in tales is essentially metaphoric deserves some attention. Metaphors, of course, map one domain of experience (the source domain) onto another (the target domain). Such mappings bring together individual items from each domain. These one-to-one links across domains I call symbols. Take for example the recurring association in wondertales between maidens and flowers. This association (of which you will find many examples in this study) hinges on a metaphorical pattern. Per the mapping of the reproduction of plants (source domain) onto human reproduction (target domain), flowers are to fruits (in plants) as womb blood is to babies (in women). Within the framework of this particular metaphor, the flower is a symbol for fertile womb blood (see p. 77 for an example), and the fruit is a symbol for babies (see p. 122 for an example).

Spotting a metaphor is often just the start of a complex discovery process, for multiple entailments to any given metaphor are possible. An example must suffice here. The correspondence between flowers and menstrual blood entails imagining maidens in possession of flowers; hence, linguistic expressions such

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4   The train of thought in this paragraph owes a debt to Frog's inspiring comments.

as maidens in bloom and *jeunes filles en fleurs* are entirely predictable in colloquial language. By the same token, the sexual shedding of a girl's blood will predictably be represented as a defloration—a trope still in use. Now recall the popular image of Red Riding Hood collecting flowers on her way to her impending defloration by the wolf (Vaz da Silva 2017: 183–84; Verdier 1997: 105–08). When I speak of wondertale symbolism, I mean such myriad entailments of metaphors in the tales.

A word on the scope of the metaphors addressed in this study is in order. I assume that the spontaneous metaphorical thinking unfolding in European tales is comparable to the *pensée sauvage* ethnologists recognize in faraway cultures. And I mean to show that wondertales rely on some metaphors that are quite widespread across cultures. That does not mean I have a universalist agenda, nor do I claim that any metaphor is universal.

Take for example the flower metaphor. I am aware that it has been recorded—beyond Europe—in sub-Saharan Africa, all over India, and among California natives (see p. 83). It probably exists in other places as well. But I do not claim this metaphor is universal. The interesting point, for me, is that the metaphor has been reported from faraway places with no discernible historical connections to one another. One could ask, of course, whether we are dealing with independent invention, cultural diffusion, a faraway common heritage—or maybe a mix of those factors? However, such hypothetical guesses are quite irrelevant to my purpose. My point is simply that transposing a causality chain from the sexual life of plants to the field of human reproduction has been an appealing option in widely different cultures *as well as* in wondertales. Acknowledging that wondertales participate in a wider field of metaphorical thought is just another way of recognizing that we meet in them our own *pensée sauvage*.

This Project

This study, by the ideal measure of what it aspires to, fits broadly in the landscape between the renewal of the art of mythography by Roberto Calasso, an Italian literary theorist, and Lévi-Strauss' famous tetralogy, *Mythologiques*. Calasso's masterful retellings of ancient Greek and Indian stories links up the individual tales in vast coherent mental tapestries. Weaving together the manifold threads relies on a scholarly understanding of the mental universe of the tales, yet the exegetic apparatus remains largely implicit—it percolates through the storytelling itself (Calasso 1994; 1999). As one critic remarked, Calasso 'thinks in stories rather than arguments or syllogisms,' and his stringing of

stories yields 'meanings from a hidden vantage point' (Khilnani 1998). How the retellings achieve their alchemy of meanings remains a mystery, which is inherent to Calasso's artful scholarship. Lévi-Strauss, on a different tack, explicitly discusses how empirical categories in the tales 'serve as conceptual tools to bring out abstract notions and articulate these in propositions' in order to disclose 'a logic of sensory-based qualities' in the stories (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 9)—a patterned web of metaphors, in my terms.

Both Calasso and Lévi-Strauss played the 'very dangerous game,' as Lévi-Strauss once described it, of putting their own 'intellectual mechanisms at the disposal of the traditional pattern, to let it live and perform that mysterious alchemy that gave it solidity and permanence throughout continents and millennia' (Lévi-Strauss 1954: 107–08).

I find it helpful to portray the difference between the two approaches in terms of Karl Popper's pronouncement that 'in a certain sense, science is mythmaking.' Popper meant that scientific hypotheses often start as bold flights of the imagination, which are crucial in finding possible explanations for complex phenomena. What then turns 'myth making' into scientific hypotheses, Popper emphasized, is passing them through the sieve of 'the critical or argumentative attitude' (Popper 1965: 127–28). The scientific tradition, in other words, resorts to intuition and the imagination but then whittles the stories by means of criticism and testing.

Calasso's endeavor, seen in this light, is by design on the side of myth making. Calasso chose to make his points in the imaged language of the tales rather than in the conceptual language of academia. He made sense of the tales by tacitly conversing with kindred spirits across millennia; thus he updated the stories and brought them to our bedside tables. But his insight process is not replicable—his books will remain unique gems in a category of their own. On a different path, Lévi-Strauss (1964: 39) called for sustained criticism of his *Mythologiques*, thus setting up a branch of myth analysis that should be falsifiable (in Popper's sense) and can be collaboratively improved.

The present book draws inspiration from Calasso in that it seeks to convey the thought processes in the stories untrammeled (as far as possible) by academic lingo. And it takes from Lévi-Strauss the aim of formulating the semantic codes that allow tales to talk to one another. The main tenet of this study is that wondertales are to be elucidated by means of other wondertales—the bewitching imagery of the genre is to be understood in its own terms—as opposed to bringing preset external theories to bear on the stories. In this sense, it would not be wrong to say that this book proposes a mental ethnography of the wondertale—a cartography of its symbolic landscape.

Let me start with a basic fact: wondertales follow dependent children on their way from home to a subsequent stage in life—these are maturation stories (see Holbek 1998: 412–13). But there is more to the matter. *Wonder* tales describe coming-of-age processes hinging on the acquisition of *supernatural* powers, which usually requires a symbolic death and rebirth.

To be more precise, wondertales share with the heroic saga and 'the myth,' as Jan de Vries (1958: 9) put it, 'the normal course of an initiation' whereby the young man (or young woman, one might add) 'comes under the power of a primeval being' to a simulated death, then after harrowing trials 'is reborn to a new life.' Specific to the wondertale is the fact that, de Vries adds,

> [the hero] must rescue a woman or carry out other difficult tasks, in which he gets supernatural help, either from animals or from magic objects. But the journey does not lead straight to success; he comes into the power of a demoniacal creature, finally saving himself from the danger. Then the fairytale often takes a surprising turn: a swindler comes on the scene who tries to cheat the hero out of his reward. All ends well, however; the crook is unmasked, the hero rescues the lady he sought, or he is delivered from his enchantment. (de Vries 1958: 9)

Per this description, the hero goes through a wretched phase as he seeks to liberate the captive maiden; or else, he falls into enchantment. Both instances imply a cyclic pattern of death and rebirth.

Specifically, there is a lunar pattern involved. As Arnold van Gennep (1960: 180–81) pointed out in his pioneering study of rites of passage, the 'idea of a renewal, a periodic death and rebirth' in such rites often relates to 'the phases of the moon.' In the same vein, Victor Turner (1977: 99) noted that the symbolic death in initiation rites hinges on the notion of '[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition … accompanied by processes of growth, transformation and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns.' In such ontological transformations, Turner noticed, 'logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens,' as happens in lunar symbolism because 'the same moon waxes and wanes,' in snake symbolism because 'the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and reappear in a new one,' and in bear symbolism because 'the bear "dies" in autumn and is "reborn" in spring.' Notably, the hybridity of such 'logically antithetical' processes applies to wondertales as well. As Eleazar Meletinsky noted regarding wondertales,

> Almost every personage can perform temporarily some opposite functions. To consider such cases as mechanically superimposed is incorrect. … [I]t is obvious that functional fields are continuous, and that they form a cyclical structure. (Meletinsky et al. 1974: 117)

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Another point is worth making. Although de Vries expresses an andro-centric point of view set on the hero's initiation, he acknowledges that the hero's quest is often predicated on a maiden's enchantment. A feminine focus at the core of wondertales indeed befits the lunar template—menarche, after all, consists in meeting moon cycles in one's body for the first time.

It is a major contention in this book that wondertales cogitate (in meta-phorical idioms) on the dangers and the powers inherent to women's intimacy with the lunar sphere; hence, all the hags and fairies, the snakes and dragons, the werewolves and trolls—all the lunar agents in the stories. In other words: the lunar realm of deaths, rebirths, and transformations (mostly associated with feminine enchantments) is the background for the hero quests that de Vries describes. I take inspiration from Isabel Cardigos' lucid demonstration that the 'ideology of male supremacy' found in a masculine tale, *Faithful John* (ATU 516), 'is in fact patterned on a female syntax' (Cardigos 1996: 124). This is true, I gather, of all tales hinging on death-and-rebirth enchantments—it is true of wondertales as a genre—for the good reason that a reversible other-world spell specifically fits feminine cycles. An important transcultural study on dragon-related rites and narratives, unfortunately little known among folk-lorists, shows that the steady link between women and dragons/snakes relates to lunar symbolism:

> Women, in shedding their own blood, seem to die, but this kind of death is only temporary. The blood-flow, instead of continuing until death, is set into reverse, so that women return back from seclusion into marital life…. Women resurrect themselves monthly, just as does the moon… (Knight 1983: 42)

If lunar symbolism indeed underlies enchantment in wondertales, then androcentric models can only take us so far. Other perspectives are needed. Consider for example Roger Sale's proposition that the gamut of tale transfor-mations unfolds from a simple female-centered nucleus:

> A girl is in a wood. Give her a brother and one has 'Hansel and Gretel,' give her many brothers and sisters and one has 'Hop o' my Thumb,' send the girl to dwarves and one has 'Snow White,' to bears and one has 'Goldilocks,' to grandmother and one has 'Little Red Riding Hood.' Make the girl a boy and one might have Jack, either the one who climbs beanstalks or the one who kills giants; make her a man and one has 'The Wonderful Musician'; give her three drops of blood and a servant and one has 'The Goose Girl.' (Sale 1979: 29)

At first sight, Sale's girl-focused model and de Vries' hero-focused scheme are at odds with one another. Yet, each of them is illuminating; integrating the two perspectives is surely the way to go. Bearing in mind Cardigos' suggestion

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that even masculine tales draw on feminine patterns (see for example p. 170), this study addresses the semantic realm of lunar transformations underpinning wondertales.

Earlier Approaches

One might assume that the baseline assumption of this book—wondertales are meaningful, and the stories should be understood in their own terms—is self-evident. But, in fact, a longstanding reluctance on the part of fairy-tale specialists to acknowledge that the genre is meaningful has been in place. Magic tales have long been deemed the survivals of customs and beliefs that became obsolete (Lang 1893). From Lang to Bettelheim, a match between the tales and the mindset of children was assumed—as the Grimms charmingly put it, the 'stories are suffused with the same purity that makes children appear so wondrous and blessed to us' (cited in Tatar 1987: 216–17). Or else, an abstract style conveying no meaningful contents has been presumed (Lüthi 1982). In a genre featuring 'only relics of belief', the thing to do would be to seek 'formalistic rules of the game' (Meletinsky et al. 1974: 84). The bottom line is that substantial contents—therefore, relevant meanings—are lacking in this genre. While 'myth' is meaningful, the wondertale is but its shadow—as Nemanja Radulović and Smiljana Đorđević-Belić put it, '[the] fairy tale is described genre-wise as a *secularized* myth... marked by the *passivity* of the mythical... the *latent* presence of myth' (2021: 15, my italics).

Granted, studies of narrative in performance contexts have sensibly assumed that folk tales are meaningful for taletellers and their audiences. This trend has proved illuminating in various contexts (see for instance Dégh 1989, 1995; Falassi 1980; Þorsteinsdóttir 2015). I do not mean to disparage its accomplishments when I say that the emphasis it places on the conscious interpretations by local actors, in specific cultural settings, leaves the issue of the cross-cultural intertextual coherence of the tales out of the picture. Also, this performance-focused trend has no use for the wealth of orally-collected texts languishing in archives and libraries, which call out for scholarly attention.

Also granted, psychoanalysts have often proposed ingenious readings of fairy tales. But their overarching interest lay in validating preset theories rather than in elucidating the tales, with stunningly incompatible interpretations as a result. For instance, Erich Fromm's interpretation of *Little Red Riding Hood* in the perspective of 'the male-female conflict'—most notably, his conclusion that the tale 'is a story of triumph by man-hating women' (Fromm 1980: 241)—is at odds with Bruno Bettelheim's oedipal focus on the girl's

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budding sexuality and her unconscious desire to get rid of her grandmother (i. e., her mother) in order to be seduced by the wolf (i. e., her father. Bettelheim 1978: 173–75). And while it is inherent to Bettelheim's reading that the girl 'has outgrown her oral fixation, no longer has any destructive oral desires' (1978: 170), Róheim drew attention to an element of oral aggression perpetrated by the 'cannibal child' in oral variants of the tale (Róheim 1989: 164; cf. Dundes 1991: 77). Because Freudian analysts tend to apply select articles of faith to cherry-picked variants of each tale, the interpretations tend to feel dogmatic—and they have an awkward tendency to contradict one another. Plus, psychoanalysts often fail to get acquainted with folklore before setting out to interpret folktales (Dundes 1991: 76).

At least this gripe does not apply to professional folklorists driven by psychoanalytical lights. Take Dundes, who issued a 'plea for psychoanalytical semiotics' (1980: 33). Dundes sought to bring folklore and psychoanalysis together on two grounds. First, he argued that folklore may be useful for testing psychoanalytic hypotheses because folklorists can use intertextual comparison to find symbolical equivalences in the tales (as opposed to reading extraneous meanings into texts). I think this is the fruitful part of his contribution, and I propose to make it fit for extended use (see Allomotifs, p. 72).

Second, Dundes argued that 'psychoanalytic theory can greatly illuminate folklore' (1987: 38). For that purpose, he advocated using 'the crucial device of projection'—a psychoanalytical tool—to illuminate folk stories (1980: 37). Regrettably, this part of Dundes' contribution involves considerable arbitrariness. For instance, in a particular tale (*Love Like Salt*, ATU 923), there is a father who is set on marrying his daughter. Dundes interprets this behavior as the projective inversion of the daughter's own incestuous desire for her father. To be clear, Dundes assumes a projection by a fairy-tale character. This must be a projection by real-world daughters, he acknowledges—hence, this tale purportedly expresses the Electra complex (1982: 236–41). Unfortunately, this sort of interpretation—assuming projections by fairy-tale characters, which ultimately rest on presumed projections by unknown persons in abstract settings—is both improvable and unfalsifiable. Hence, it is worthless for rational discussion: you either adhere to it on faith, or you do not.

Holbek developed this trend in his important contribution to fairy-tale interpretation. He surmised that real-world people project on the tales feelings associated with their 'sensitive, even painful' problems (Holbek 1998: 439, cf. 428). Like Dundes, Holbek assigned those feelings to the characters themselves. The same objections apply as for Dundes. But there is more. In a typical exegetical move, Holbek interpreted the fact that in a given tale (*King Lindorm*, ATU 433B) a prince was born in a snake shape that keeps him from

marrying as a projection expressing the prince's 'unrestrained sexuality coupled with mental immaturity' (1998: 490). Again: a child born as a serpent is deemed a projection of his own latter-day sexual overindulgence—an 'externalization' of his own 'unrestrained sexuality,' as Holbek also put it (1998: 492). That a purported projection by a fairy-tale character yet to be born should even be offered for serious discussion suggests how freewheeling psychoanalytical speculation can get (see also Vaz da Silva 2002: 21–29, 143–46). Holbek was otherwise a levelheaded scholar with keen insight for matters of plot and pattern, which I gratefully use at important junctures of my own argument.

Nicole Belmont's *Poetics of the Wondertale*—a study of French wondertales in a Freudian light*,* written in an evocative language brimming with insights—raises another sort of problem. It claims that the wondertale, 'like the dream, … cannot ever be fully interpreted. Indeed it is created not to,' as its 'obscure loci' mysteriously suspend in interpreters 'the desire to understand' (Belmont 1999: 113–14). As our intimacy with wondertales grows, Belmont asserts, one forsakes the 'desire of interpretation,' for 'the telltale words say more of it and better' (1999: 237). In short, there is in this book the pervading suggestion that the tales cannot ultimately be understood. Yet, I take it that a scholar's business is to devise paths to understanding. The work of Carl Gustav Jung should stand as a warning that there is little advantage in leaning toward a mystical reverence for the unknowable elements in the tales. Here I stand with Freud (1989: 347), who steadfastly set to 'transforming what is unconscious into what is conscious.' Fortunately, Belmont's work shows in practice that the desire to understand prevailed.

A word on Jung may be in order to explicate my point above. Marie-Louise von Franz, arguably the most lucid exponent of the Jungian approach to wondertales, makes it clear that before you can understand a symbol in a fairy tale you have to amplify it. '*Amplification means enlarging through collecting a quantity of parallels*' (von Franz 1996: 43, italics in original). Thus you get 'to know the comparative anatomy of all the symbols' in the tale, and you can proceed to 'construct the context' (1996: 43). All of which sounds hopeful. But then comes 'the last essential step, which is the interpretation itself—the task of translating the amplified story into psychological language'—and von Franz is adamant that 'we must use strictly psychological language. Only then do we know what the interpretation is,' she cautioned (1996: 43). This caveat addresses a fundamental point in Jungian interpretation. Jung maintained that '*[c]ontents of an archetypal character are manifestations of processes in the collective unconscious,*' and since they refer to something unconscious '*it is impossible to say what they refer to*' (Jung 1970: 104, italics in original). Jung added, even 'the best attempts of explanation are only more or less successful

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translations into another metaphorical language.' The most one can do 'is to *dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress' (1970: 104). In precisely this vein, von Franz acknowledged that her own translation of 'the fairy tale myth into Jungian psychology' amounts to 'replacing one myth by another—by our myth, the Jungian myth' (von Franz 1996: 43–44). So the Jungian psychological 'myth' becomes the template for all interpretations—we find meanings read *into* tales. And, given Jung's notion that archetypical contents are a 'twilight… which too much clarity only dispels' (cit. in Segal 1998: 18), interpreters enjoy untrammeled freedom in that 'twilight.'

In and Out of the Echo Chamber

With the reflexive turn in the humanities over the last few decades, the attention shifted to the ways the tales can be repurposed to fit the needs and tastes of today's plural audiences in a globalized landscape. Asking how old tales can relate to modern audiences was like a breath of fresh air. But the call for renovation brought along some unhelpful assumptions. It became commonplace to assume that, as Donald Haase put it,

> (1) fairy tales consist of chaotic symbolic codes that have become highly ambiguous and invite quite diverse responses; and (2) these responses will reflect a recipient's experience, perspective, or predisposition. (Haase 1993: 235)

Some of the most consequential scholars in the field explicitly subscribed to this view. Pauline Greenhill and Kay Turner stated that '[r]eaders are central to queer and trans folktale and fairy-tale theory. … Reader and text participate in a making of meanings similar to those associated with the oral precedents of teller and story' (Greenhill and Turner 2016: 846; cf. Turner and Greenhill 2012: 7). And Cristina Bacchilega and Jennifer Orme (2021: xix) pointedly agree with this 'emphasis on the role of the reader in responding to a tale's queer invitation.'

I have no issue with the notion that reading a text is an act of interpretation. But notice how, in Greenhill and Turner's analogy between the teller of yore and the modern reader, the reader has *replaced* the taleteller in the production of meanings—the reader has become the sole creator. Therein lies the problem bedeviling this approach. It befits Haase's meticulous scholarship that he eventually acknowledged that his continued 'focus on the fairy tale as a creative or emancipatory experience for the *reader*,' based on 'the production and reception of Anglo-European texts,' ignored 'the infringement, distortions, and disrespect that can occur when tales of marginalized creators

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and cultures are displaced and framed for the benefit of new readers' (2019: 18, original italics). That is a good point.

Haase provided an example of this disconnect as he investigated how three Arab folktale collections position the translated tales for English-speaking readers. In doing so, Haase kept to the 'paratextual commentary and framing' by the collectors/editors/translators (2019: 19). He conspicuously left the stories—the myriad voices in them—untouched, as though unseen. I take it that the elision may be inevitable. The postulate of chaotic symbolic codes discourages making sense whenever falling back on Western views is not an option. My point is that the reader bias has consequences—focusing on the wishful thinking of contemporary Western audiences elides the voices embedded in tales from other times and places.

The folktales themselves have gradually been excluded from the pur-view of critics following this trend. Greenhill and Turner's assessment that 'with only a few exceptions... queer fairy-tale readings have looked at revi-sions and rewritings, not at traditional texts' (2016: 844), applies quite beyond queer readings. To think through the consequences of this stance, I call on the lucid musings of Bacchilega. A decade ago, she asked: 'How and to what uses are fairy tales being adapted in and to the twenty-first century?' (2013: 6). Recently, in the introduction (co-written with Orme) to a collection of twenty-first-century stories, the answer is:

> Twenty-first-century wonder tales respond to older tales and traditions
> in light of contemporary and located interests, desires, and concerns. All
> readers—students, instructors, 'general audiences' (a misnomer if ever there
> was one)—experience art in specific contexts. Our readers are, like us, living
> in various versions of a cultural and political 'now' in the Globalized West.
> (Bacchilega and Orme 2021: xi)

The nod to 'older tales and traditions'—encouragingly buttressed by the statement that the authors call the stories in this collection wonder tales 'to reactivate the wondrous dimension of the fully-animated and in-flux story-world of older fairy tales' (Bacchilega and Orme 2021: xiv)—displays a clear awareness that the modern tales belong in a deep tradition wherein, they rec-ognize, the tales 'continue to transform' (2021: x).

And I would agree with the authors' claim that the modern stories respond to the older tales and traditions in light of 'contemporary and located interests, desires, and concerns.' But the spin they put on this statement gives me pause. Bacchilega and Orme do not recognize 'the centrality' of the 'inter-textual relationship' between each modern story and the corresponding tale type (which contains the myriad known folk variants of each theme), which I take to mean that the old tale tradition is not central for making sense of

modern retellings. Instead, Bacchilega and Orme trust readers 'to divine information from context or research and to provide at least some intertextual links to other tales of wonder and enchantment' (2021: xviii). Crucially, the appropriate 'context or research' to 'divine' information from is the tenets of contemporary critical approaches; readers are invited to:

> consider media studies, eco-criticism, disability studies, and Indigenous studies as relevant to your understanding of wonder tales. (Bacchilega and Orme 2021: xix)

In addition, Bacchilega and Orme point out that—given that 'the confluence of fairy-tale revisions and fairy-tale scholarship has been a productive force for rethinking the genre from the 1970s on' (2021: xix)—the retellings have incorporated the theory. Indeed, the modern stories themselves work as theory:

> we recognize how these wonder stories function as theory: theories that envision ways for us to abide in the world and that challenge the status quo. (Bacchilega and Orme 2021: xvii)

To sum up: Bacchilega and Orme designate contemporary critical theories as a prime context for tale readings, and they acknowledge that the modern retellings convey the critical theories. Again: the modern tale revisions embody (in imaged language) the critical scholarship that is relevant to make sense of the stories. This is a crucial point. Bacchilega and Orme's description shows that Haase's dictum that the tales will reflect each recipient's predisposition has been raised to the power of two—it is not only that the symbolic codes in traditional tales are ambiguous and thus invite contemporary readings; it is also that the symbolic codes in modern retellings are those of the critical readings bearing on the tales.

Notice the perfect loop: the contemporary retellings convey the tenets of the critical theories that interpret the retellings. The clear implication is that, even as contemporary critics allow ever fewer folktales into their purview, fairy-tale studies look more and more like an echo chamber. I mean, a situation in which like-minded scholars refer to more or less the same critical-theory tenets, quote each other, and focus on tale revisions that draw on the selfsame critical-theory tenets.

The main problem with such tight exegetic loops is that they offer no ready way to counter the confirmation bias inherent to human cognition. As succinctly described by Paul Mercier and Dan Sperber,

> The confirmation bias consists in the 'seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand' …. It is one of the most studied biases in psychology …. While there is some

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individual variation, it seems that everybody is affected to some degree, irrespective of factors like general intelligence or open mindedness. (Mercier and Sperber 2011: 63)

One consequence of the confirmation bias is that we all tend to be unable to falsify the hypotheses we ourselves generate—but we are pretty good at disproving opposing claims—hence, we need peer criticism to produce better arguments (Mercier and Sperber 2011: 72–73). Criticism is the most crucial service scholars can offer one another—in the absence of challenges, we all get stuck with pet assumptions—calling to mind Popper's insistence on the need to keep alive 'the critical or argumentative attitude' (see p. 27).

But the lack of peer criticism is not the main problem here—the lack of kickback from data is. Retellings that incorporate the same assumptions as their interpretations offer no resistance—the stories are chummy with the critical discourses bearing on them. Because the modern retellings will beam back the critics' own axioms, the resulting loop reflects whatever is in the cultural agenda of the day. Traditional tales, in the meantime, languish in oblivion.

My point: because the echo-chamber situation hinges on ideologically complicit retellings, going back to traditional tales should help break the tight loop. Traditional tales include the crystallized mindsets from other times and places, and in that sense they are independent-minded materials. Stories that are innocent of our own pet assumptions should be reinstated as a required context for interpretations.

It probably is no accident that contemporary critics allow ever fewer folktales into their purview. Independent-minded materials may sound jarring to contemporary readers, they often do not fit our own worldview. So this question arises: how accepting of older tales are we, really? I ask because there is a pervading tendency to denounce traditional stories on ethical grounds. Take for example the old tradition of *Sleeping Beauty,* which features a beauty raped while sleeping. Granted, this scene relates to brutal assumptions of male dominion in previous centuries (Johnson 2003). Yet, when all is said and done along this line of inquiry, the rape of the sleeping beauty remains obscure. Asking why a slumbering girl must endure sex before waking up—genuinely trying to figure out an answer to this question—is a bid to advance our understanding of the traditional theme. It demands looking at the tale in its own terms. Whereas falling back on our contemporary ethics—e. g., focusing on decrying the girl's passivity and/or her rape—squanders the opportunity. Indicting the tales is, regrettably, no substitute for actually explaining them (see also Whose Ethics/Esthetics?, p. 176).

I take good note of the fact that the epithet 'transgressive' has been applied to the Grimm tales on the grounds that the Brothers 'likely never even

thought about ridding the tales of homosexual implications or other counter-normative, counterhegemonic queer alliances' (Turner and Greenhill 2012: 2). To this ingenious point I add that tuning in to the myriad voices in the Grimm tales (taken in the broader context of folk variants) helps replacing the sedate modern echo chamber with boisterous meeting halls full of dissenting voices, competing perspectives, and dialogical processes—another way the Grimm tales and their oral cognates may be deemed transgressive.

My point in a nutshell: obviously, traditional stories suppose a tradition. Forsake that tradition as an interpretive context, and you are left with chummy retellings that will reiterate what you already assume. Alternatively, heeding the multiple voices in traditional yarns brings different views and norms into the picture. In other words, the 'contemporary fairy-tale web … a twentieth-first century construct that accounts for, even depends to some extent on, the World Wide Web's impact' (Bacchilega 2013: 18) pertains to a wider field of transformations. Take the long view, and all taletellers dabbling with traditional materials appear as operators in creative processes that are 'collaborative, incremental, and distributed in space and time,' as Valdimar Hafstein (2014: 36) put it. One consequence is worth spelling out. If indeed the familiar literary tales—both the classical patriarchal sort and the critical-retelling vintage—have their roots in the oral traditions, then addressing the wondertale universe at the root level is a necessary step for grasping the symbolic underpinnings on which all the stories—old and recent, conventional as well as disruptive—evolve, complement, and challenge one another.

As it happens, Haase indicated a way forward when he lauded a concept of textuality that views each tale,

> not as a text assigned to a permanent place in a linear succession or hierarchy that takes us back to an original or primary form, but as a component in a larger web of texts that are linked to each other in multiple ways and have equal claim to our attention. (Haase 2006: 225)

Books that approximate hypertext 'create the potential for a very different—more cerebral? more scholarly?—experience of the folktale,' Haase (2006: 228) added. I have paid homage to this insight and suggested that it applies to folk stories as well (Vaz da Silva 2014). Haase's remarks converge with my own view that considering the tales intertextually—in their own terms, I repeat—is the way to disclose a stable matrix of interrelated symbolic codes, a sense of which (I hope to show in this study) provides an enhanced understanding of the tales.

I am sympathetic to 'the growing legions' of '"irresponsible" recipients of the fairy tale,' proudly so-called by Turner, who would pursue 'daring

examinations of little-known tales with big promise for both critical analysis and self-discovery.' Turner, a leading exponent of queer readings, remarks that the realm of enchantment is a 'special time-altered place reserved in fairy tales for transformative experiences and experiments.' And she pinpoints in enchantment scenarios 'a central relationship between an old woman and a young girl' (Turner 2015: 43, 45; see also Turner 2012). A number of discussions in this book resonate with this insight. For instance, a girl's enchantment may unfold alternatively as an heterosexual affair with a dragon—yet, the very notion of 'heterosexual' is complicated by the fact that the dragon and the maiden are, in certain aspects, one and the same—or as the feminine interaction between a crone and a girl.

There is much in this study to explore from queer perspectives. I say, bring it on, 'riot grrrl scholars' (Turner and Greenhill 2012: 7)! Imaginative readings are needed. But I must insist that the notion of chaotic symbolic codes is out of date. The tales carry the baggage of myriad voices interacting across space and time. Preserving those voices requires intertextual readings that respect the plural perspectives, glean the overall semantics, and bring out the metaphors embedded in the stories. From this comparative basis, both critical analysis and self-discovery can hopefully unfold.

Turner and Greenhill (2012: 8), who offer the timely reminder that the tales—and theory—are also there for pleasure, state that their enjoyment of the tales 'relates to four recurring qualities—the eroticized, tabooed, perverse, and women focused … sometimes quite overt, and sometimes "secret messages … inscribed in plain sight" (Tatar).' By the standard of finding women-focused tales filled with secret (and not so secret) messages on sexual and other tabooed subjects, I dare hope they might find this book enjoyable—we share the pleasure of seeking what hides in plain sight in the stories.

In a Nutshell

It is time to bring this long introduction to a close. Allow me to briefly recap three leading assumptions in this study.

First, I assume that there are no original, fixed texts in traditional settings—all you ever find is a myriad of variants endlessly jostling with one another. And because taletellers are selective regarding what they accept and retell, stories are relentlessly shaped according to the successive taletellers' values and tastes. By dint of this cumulative mechanism of selective appropriations, materials in the traditional chain tend to comply with the shared

cultural norms and values at each point in time. This is why variants respond to cultural settings.

Second, each folktale exists in all its variants (which come from multiple points in space and time). That is, no single variant ever represents a tale (meaning that hardly any tale reflects a single socio-cultural setting). We could say that a tale is a stable pattern variously retold in symbolically equivalent variants; or we might say that variants transform one another in accordance with the stable pattern of the tale. Either way, the point is that traditional storytelling is about creatively using symbolic equivalences to spin new variants of each tale. This is why tales are stable although no two variants are ever alike.

My third point is that embracing the variation in the tales is the way to go. If different variants of a tale contain equivalent images, then comparing those images should clarify what the conceptual basis for that equivalence is. Often, wondertale images express that conceptual basis in the form of metaphors. Discovering those metaphors by means of intertextual readings is an empirical task—it is a puzzle-solving process, a trial-and-error operation. As Lévi-Strauss (1964: 13) put it, looking for pattern and meaning in traditional tales 'is very much like Penelope's task. Each step forward offers a new hope, which hangs on the solution of a new difficulty. The task is never closed.' Because this analytic process involves the comparative analysis of texts, it requires constantly returning to the stories. Thus, it is open for inspection; it can be challenged and improved.

In order to offer an overview of wondertale symbolism, this book probes different groups of tales. As the chapters follow one another, the recurring elements sticking out from different discussions are linked together so as to progressively bring out the metaphorical threads underpinning the tales. The first part lays out the theoretical and methodological groundwork. The second part delves deeper into the mazes of metaphorical entailments. The third part picks up loose ends while emphasizing that wondertales are a transformative genre.

The drift of the argument is as follows.

Chapter 1 provides a short, easy introduction to the once-upon-a-time realm. It focuses on a dragon-slayer tale, *The Three Stolen Princesses* (ATU 301), as an example of the sort of hero-driven plot that mainstream scholars, from Propp to Holbek, have focused on.

Chapter 2 highlights the aspects of Propp's morphological approach to wondertales that live on up through the present day, then exposes some questionable assumptions underlying his approach. The virtues and the limits of Holbek's influential sequel to Propp's model also come under discussion. Beyond the androcentric focus shared by Propp and Holbek, this chapter

draws attention to a female-centered leitmotiv in wondertales, which subsequent chapters explore from various perspectives.

Chapter 3 lays out in some detail the rationale for the comparative method deployed in this book, and it expands on the notion of wondertale symbolism. Both endeavors rely on a comparative study of the the link between girls and dragons on one hand, and girls and snakes on the other, in wondertales across Europe.

Chapter 4 zooms in on the intimate bond between maidens and dragons by peeking into bedroom scenes. This trick is possible by dint of *The Monster's Bride* (ATU 507), a tale that depicts dragon-possessed brides. Such stories reveal the sexual dimension of dragon slaying, and they introduce us to the view that the wedding night is dangerous for the bridegroom. The discussion strikes bedrock, I argue, as it shows that notions found in wondertales also permeate old European marriage customs as well as—astounding as it may seem—myths and rites worldwide. This chapter makes the point that wondertales are quintessentially a metaphorical genre.

Chapter 5 examines representations of enchantment and feminine destiny conveyed in *The Girl in the Tower* (ATU 310), *Sleeping Beauty (*ATU 410), and *Snow White* (ATU 709). These tales hinge on the crucial bond between an elder woman and a maiden during the pubertal period. That bond comes under scrutiny. The discussion unveils a number of metaphors for menarche, coitus, and the postnatal period, and discusses traditional representations of feminine destiny. Along the way, this chapter exposes the manifold uses of euphemism in the tales. It is shown that taletellers often practice euphemism by means of symbolic replacements (allomotifs). The joyful, artful creativity of taletellers comes into view even as some stark themes of sexual initiation and childbirth vie for attention.

Chapter 6 offers the most intricate analysis of symbolic replacements (allomotifs) in the book, and I recommend that it be kept for last. It examines a complex North-African variant of *The Dangerous Night-Watch* (ATU 304) with the help of European variants, in a purposeful reminder that the wondertale tradition extends beyond Europe. The fact that this story brings together a dragon slayer and a sleeping beauty draws attention to the symbolic patterns shared by the two themes. By and by, two other tales—*The Maiden Who Seeks her Brothers* (ATU 451) and *Cinderella* (ATU 510A)—are brought in to make sense of the multilayered symbolic field under examination. The interconnectedness of tales in a vast semantic tapestry stands out in this chapter, which brings together a number of strands in the book.

In the concluding chapter, I address some possible concerns of readers who may wonder whether unsavory acts found in tales, such as cannibalism

and rape, are inevitable. Essentially, I make two points. First, because wonder-tales are a symbolic genre, such images are signifiers of underlying notions that must be clarified. Second, the tales do evolve markedly. Revisiting the retellings of *Sleeping Beauty* by Angela Carter I argue that the British writer flips the classic theme for the benefit or our day and age even while her retell-ings reconnect with older traditions. This case study raises a number of issues concerning the symbolic conservatism of tales *and* the transformative power of their historically situated retellings, which the concluding discussion addresses.