

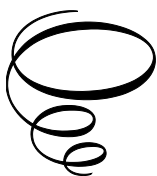
Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Fiction

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Edited by

Alexandra Cheira

**Cambridge
Scholars
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MYTH AND FAIRY TALE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

ALEXANDRA CHEIRA

Over the centuries we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives.

Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*

Myths are examples, novels are pictures, fairy tales are beloved lies told by people who find the failed myth of life intolerable. In myths people live forever. In fairy tales they live happily ever after. In novels there is, at the end of the 'ever after', the beginning of unhappiness, and usually even before. In myths everything is solved in some way or other; in novels nothing is ever solved; and in fairy tale the solution is postponed, but if it ever takes place it will be outside the scope of the fairy tale. That is the lie.

Cees Nooteboom, *In the Dutch Mountains*

“What’s in a Name?” The Histories behind the Stories: Fairy Tales, Folk Tales, Wonder Tales

Angela Carter opened her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) by remarking on the suitability of the term “fairy tale” to describe a type of tale in which fairies are often notoriously absent:

Although this is called a book of fairy tales, you will find very few actual fairies within the following pages. Talking beasts, yes; beings that are, to a greater or lesser extent, supernatural, and many sequences of events that bend, somewhat, the laws of physics. But fairies, as such, are thin on the ground, for the term ‘fairy tale’ is a figure of speech and we use it loosely, to describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon

a time and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth – stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennial refreshed entertainment of the poor. (Carter 2010, xi)

Carter’s pertinent observations – which highlight three core qualities of fairy tales: orality, unknown authorship, and adaptability – lead to a consequent speculation into the story of the very term, given the fact that a “fairy tale” is not always equated with “a tale with fairies”. Hence, the terms “fairy tales”, “folk tales”, or “wonder tales” – used to describe tales in which “we hear the formula ‘Once upon a time’, or any of its variants” and therefore “know in advance that what we are about to hear isn’t going to pretend to be true” (Carter 2010, xiv) – emphasise a unique, yet different trait of the tales, in addition to a symbiotic relationship between teller and tale in the first two cases, as a brief investigation into the origins of the names illustrates.

The most common term, “fairy tales”, was first coined in the late 1690s by the *conteuse* Marie-Catherine D’Aulnoy to describe her own tales. The *conteuses* – the aristocratic and highly educated women storytellers who gave birth to the literary fairy tale in the *salons* in late seventeenth-century France – were important figures in the literary history of their time, as well as canonical writers. Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve (1695–1755), Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–1780), Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier de Villandon (1664–1734), Henriette-Julie de Murat (1670–1716), or Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy (1650–1705) wrote a remarkable number of tales (seventy-four out of the one hundred and fourteen published between 1690 and 1715). These tales were constantly anthologized in what Anne E. Duggan terms “essentially unofficial canons targeted at a readership of *salon-goers*” or “worldly anthologies” (Duggan 2005, 13).

In addition to the sheer body of tales they produced, *the conteuses* were also and foremost subversive authors because they dared enter a province of men and wrote in their own names, not hiding behind a male pseudonym. Renowned *salonnières* who had long been reputed prominently fashionable and leading figures in the literary scene of Paris, *the conteuses* could boast of congregating around them the elite of writers and thinkers of their time by hosting gatherings where accomplished men and women wittily yet seriously discussed art, literature, morality, metaphysics or politics. Hence, the *salons* were the elected space where learned women matured a unique style of talking which celebrated the innate gifts that distinguished them from ordinary individuals, since the *conteuses*’ purpose was to criticise and reform social customs, at the same time they reclaimed the right to be treated more consistently as intellectuals by their male peers.

Telling fairy tales to amuse and instruct the audience was therefore a common practice in the *salons*. These intellectual games played orally as a symbolic means of rendering personal experience by favouring spontaneity and spur-of-the-moment inventive skills were, we now know, anything but unplanned. In fact, these apparent improvisations were actually sophisticated constructions which the *conteuses* carefully prepared long before they set foot in the *salon*, bearing witness to both the world of fairies and to the genre of wonder tale writing by the use of self-reference and the allusion to a shared literary culture, as Elizabeth Wanning Harries significantly points out:

Their *contes*, in fact, are often self-referential, ‘fairy tales about fairy tales’ (...) or *mises-en-abyme*. (...) [T]he *conteuses*’ tales tend to make self-conscious commentaries on themselves and on the genre they are part of. In d’Aulnoy’s ‘La Chatte Blanche’, for example, a prince lost in the woods finds a castle covered with scenes from her own earlier tales and from Perrault’s. In another of d’Aulnoy’s tales, ‘Le Pigeon et la Colombe’, the good fairy (...) read the stars with the same ease that one now reads the many new tales that are being printed every day. In her 1698 story ‘Anguilette’, Murat gives her hero an ancestor who comes from one of d’Aulnoy’s tales. (Harries 2001, 32)

Taking into account the widespread oral circulation and popularity of the fairy tales in the *salons*, their written rendition was to be expected. It was thus in 1690 that Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy – the *salonnière* widely acclaimed as the Queen of Fairies – wrote “The Happy Isle”, the first literary fairy tale ever published in France as an embedded narrative in her novel *Hippolytus, Earl of Douglas*. For d’Aulnoy, magic was indeed the creative power to change both her and her heroines’ lives by overcoming great odds, as well as the Circean power of metamorphosis bestowed on some of her unfortunate lovers as a metaphor for social criticism; it was both a coping mechanism and a powerful tool of change.

“My fairy ladies”, as the *conteuses* called themselves, forged new identities for themselves in the tales they told in the *salons*, in which, as Patricia Hannon argues, “a more complex notion of aristocratic identity that involves both ambition and an interest in exploring the nature of the autonomous self” (Hannon 2005, 14) could be found. This critical perspective is likewise supported by Lewis Seifert when he argues that “[t]his is an important insight for the history of women’s writing in France because it suggests not only the vitality of aristocratic culture but also, and especially, the possibility of a new individualistic writerly identity among elite women” (Seifert 2014, 60). Instead, the *conteuses* demanded for themselves the

subversive role of Fairy Godmother, endowed with the agency of metamorphosis – both their own and their heroines’, their fictional alter egos, in a changing society – openly describing themselves as “modern fairies”. Significantly, as Marina Warner clarifies, the meaning of this deliberate construction of the *conteuses* as fairies is even furthered by looking closely at the etymology of the word “fairy” as the Latin feminine of “fate”:

The word ‘fairy’ in the Romance languages indicates a meaning of the wonder or fairy tale, for it goes back to a Latin feminine word, *fata*, a rare variant of *fatum* (fate) which refers to a goddess of destiny. The fairies resemble goddesses of this kind, for they too know the course of fate. *Fatum*, literally, that which is spoken, the past participle of the verb *fari*, to speak, gives French *fée*, Italian *fata*, Spanish *hada*, all meaning ‘fairy’, and enclosing connotations of fate, fairies share with Sybils knowledge of the future and the past, and in the stories which feature them, both types of figure foretell events to come, and give warnings. (Warner 1995, 14-15)

“Fairy tales” were afterwards renamed as “folk tales” by the Brothers Grimm, since they strived “to uncover the etymological and linguistic truths that bound German people together and were expressed in their laws and customs” (Zipes 1999, 69), in keeping with the eighteenth-century Romantic nationalist revival of traditional folk tales as a genuine, uncontaminated form of national literature and cultural identity. The Brothers Grimm, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859), can be numbered among the earliest and most prominent collectors of German folk and fairy tales, which they popularised in their best well-known work, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Nursery and Household Tales*), published in two volumes in 1812 and 1815, which would be further and often revised until the collection’s seventh (and final) edition in 1857. Although they were “neither the founders of folklore as a study in Germany, nor were they the first to begin collecting and publishing folk and fairy tales” (Zipes 1999, 69), the Grimms founded the methodological framework that became the basis for folklore studies in their process of collecting and recording folk stories. However, “[c]ontrary to popular belief, the Grimms did not collect their tales by visiting peasants in the countryside and writing down the tales that they heard”. In fact, “[t]heir primary method was to invite storytellers to their home and then have them tell the tales aloud, which the Grimms either noted down on first hearing or after a couple of hearings” (Zipes 1999, 69-70).

Significantly, given the Grimms’ contemporary critical disparagement of their tales’ narrators’ homeliness, most of their storytellers during this period were conversely “educated young women from the middle class or aristocracy”, who were familiar with “both oral tradition and literary

tradition and would combine motifs from both sources” (Zipes 1999, 69-70). Zipes describes this process as the “bourgeoisification” of the oral folk tale, since it was based on the appropriation of tales “belonging to and disseminated by peasants (largely nonliterate)” by educated people, “largely of the bourgeoisie”, who “adapted the styles, motifs, topoi, and meanings of the tales to serve the interests and needs of the new and expanding reading audiences”. For Zipes, this appropriation “thrived on an oral tradition and also enriched it”, since “even when it involved major changes, [it] enhanced the orality because it helped define and explain the rhetoric and contents of the tales and allowed residual folk elements to be preserved that otherwise would have disappeared” (Zipes 2002, 188-189).

Yet, and despite its long-standing popularity in the years to come, the collection was originally attacked by reviewers who, Maria Tatar suggests, may have been somewhat biased since their own work had been first negatively reviewed by the brothers (Tatar 2003, 15-16). Despite the title suggesting otherwise, the collection was heavily criticised for its unsuitability for children given the large quantities “of the most pathetic and tasteless material imaginable” (Friedrich Rühls qtd. by Tatar 2003, 15) – a covert reference to the many “graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest that fill the pages of these bedtime stories for children” (Tatar 2003, 3) – which completely overshadowed the few (unnamed) good things in it that would deserve praise.

In addition to the charge of tasteless and inadequate subject matter, the collection was also condemned on three scholarly counts. The first type of criticism argued that the collection was substantially contaminated by Italian and French sources, which belied the tales’ authentic Germanness. The second voiced the concern that the Grimms’ “seemingly slavish fidelity to oral folk traditions – in particular to the crude language of the folk” consequently flawed nearly all the collection via “the unrefined tenor of the narrative voice”, since the Grimms had been either unable or unwilling to search “high and low for an ideal folk narrator” and conversely just settled “for the first housemaid who happened to turn up”. Finally, the third type of criticism was informed by the belief that the collection “fell wide of the mark and missed its potential market because the brothers had let their scholarly ambitions undermine the production of a book for children”, with the unpalatable consequence that the “sketchy style” and “distorted plot lines” of the *Märchen* failed to satisfy either the academic public’s linguistic expectations or the children who were supposed to be its primary readership (Tatar 2003, 15-17).

Since the Grimms had originally started the collection with the double goal of preserving oral tales as they had been passed from generation to

generation by trying to account for regional variability in different versions of the same tale, and of writing a scholarly commentary on traditional tales, the bad press given their collection was particularly disparaging. However, the brothers met the joint criticism of the collection by having a disclaimer, in subsequent editions, regarding parental discretion in selecting appropriate stories for their children. They also Germanised their tales to the extent that “every fairy (*Fee*), prince (*Prinz*), and princess (*Prinzessin*) was transformed into a more Teutonic-sounding enchantress (*Zauberin*) or wise woman (*weise frau*), king’s son (*Königsson*), and king’s daughter (*Königstochter*)”, while also adding proverbs “to give the collection a more folksy texture, and the proper moral sentiments were woven into the text, for this collection was to be in many ways a showcase for German folk culture” (Tatar 2003, 31-32). Furthermore, in successive editions of the collection, Wilhelm Grimm “fleshed out the texts to the point where they were often double their original length, and he so polished the prose that no one could complain of its rough-hewn qualities”, in addition to working hard “to clean up the content of the stories” along lines that would satisfy the reviewers, by deleting or revising tales “deemed unsuitable for children”, hence “eliminating anything that might offend the sensibilities of the reading public” (Tatar 2003, 17-18).

Zipes corroborates this view by arguing that “the Grimms made major changes while editing the tales”, as patently visible in their elimination of “erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality”, their addition of “numerous Christian expressions and references”, and their emphasis upon “specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time” (Zipes 1999, 74). That is why sexual references or explicit violence would ultimately be sanitised into more appropriate content – even if it meant the deliberate alteration of “the folkloric material they claimed to have tried so hard to preserve in its pristine state” (Tatar 2003, 30) – targeted at a “virtuous middle-class audience”, whose morals were “in keeping with the Protestant ethic and a patriarchal notion of sex roles” (Zipes 1999, 74-75).

In her introduction to *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (1996) – a collection of tales by Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier de Villandon, Henriette-Julie de Murat, and Charles Perrault – Marina Warner has likewise commented on the absence of fairies in fairy tales. Like Carter, she has also remarked that “indeed, fairies don’t even put in an appearance sometimes” (Warner 1996, 4). Therefore, and bearing in mind that “[m]ore than the deeds of the fairies, wonders characterise fairy tales” (Warner 1996, 4), Warner proposes the term “wonder tale” as an alternative to the more widely known, yet less descriptive term “fairy tale”.

Arguing that “[w]onder has no opposite” since “it springs up already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoil, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear”, Warner envisages wonder as naming “the marvel, the prodigy, the surprise as well as the responses they excite, of fascination and inquiry, it conveys the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement”. Warner uses this framework to explain the reason why “[t]he French *conte de fées* is usually translated as fairy tale, but the word *Wundermärchen*” – which was “adopted by the Romantics in Germany and the Russian folklorists to characterise the folk tale or fairy tale” – is “a useful term”, since “it frees this kind of story from the miniaturised whimsy of fairyland to breathe the wilder air of the marvellous” (Warner 1996, 3). Informed by a due emphasis on the wondrous element, which is always present in this type of tales as opposed to the actual absence of fairy entities in many of them, the term “wonder tale” has been likewise argued by other critics to be more conducive “to the feel of the marvellous, and is indeed in every way less constricting, in conveying the sense of what are more usually referred to in English as ‘fairy tales’ or ‘fairy stories’” (Todd 1997, 39).

Therefore, “what’s in a name”? Appropriating Shakespeare’s words into this different context, it could be said that the histories of the stories behind the terms “fairy tale”, “folk tale”, and “wonder tale” do attest that that which we call a “fairy tale” by any other name would be as magical. In fact, whether they are called “fairy tale”, “folk tale”, or “wonder tale”, these tales seem to offer “the possibility of change, far beyond the boundaries of their improbable plots or fantastically illustrated pages”, since they can “remake the world in the image of desire” (Warner 1995, xii).

Interdisciplinary Dialogues: Psychoanalytic, Anthropological, and Feminist Theories of Myth and Fairy Tale

“Today mythical thinking”, Karen Armstrong writes in her essay on the subject which serves as an introduction to the Canongate Myth Series, “has fallen into disrepute; we often dismiss it as irrational and self-indulgent.” However, Armstrong also adds, “mythology and science both extended the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology (...) is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it” (Armstrong 2005, 2-3). Likewise, Marina Warner has described fairy tales as “stories that try to find the truth and give us glimpses of the greater things – this is the principle that underlies their growing presence in

writing, art, cinema, dance, song”, adding that these tales “used to be light in the midst of darkness” (Warner 2014, 178).

Both myth and fairy tale have been extensively examined through a variety of theoretical lenses whose main arguments prove the difficulty of defining such apparently familiar, unproblematic concepts on any definitive terms. In fact, a short investigation into some of the most important discussions in the fields of psychoanalysis, anthropology and literary feminism easily substantiates this argument, which Marina Warner pertinently comments by arguing that “[b]oth Freud and Jung adapted the long classical tradition of allegorical interpretations, reading the mythical corpus of narratives, learned and popular, in order to unlock symbolic, psychic explanations of human consciousness and behaviour”. Hence, Warner contends, “[t]he paradoxical rationality of myth, the potential of figments to disclose the truth about ourselves has become the fruitful premise of much contemporary thinking about the mind and the personality; the enlightenment distinction between logic and fantasy has given way in the growing realisation that the structures of the imagination, often highly ordered and internally consistent, themselves form understanding”. Therefore, in such a framework, Warner concludes that “[p]leas for a return to reason, for simply stripping away illusion, ignore the necessity and the vitality of mythic material in consciousness as well as unconsciousness” (Warner 1994, 14).

In this light, the history of the origins, structure and functions of myth is riddled by fascinatingly contradictory disagreements, even within the same scholarly field. In fact, one of the most emblematic disputes was arguably in the field of psychoanalysis – whose dialogue with mythology was established very early on, together with the cultural fields of literature and art – and would drive apart Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

Beatrice M. Hinkler provides a very helpful summary of Freud’s main points regarding mythology in her introduction to Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1915):

This discovery of the symbolic nature of the dream and the phantasy was brought about entirely through the associative method and developed empirically through investigations of the dreams of many people. In this manner it became evident that certain ideas and objects which recurred again and again in the dreams and phantasies of different people were definitely associated with certain unconscious or unrecognized wishes and desires, and were repeatedly used by the mind to express these meanings where a direct form was repressed and unallowed. Thus certain dream expressions and figures were in a general way considered to be rather definite symbols of these repressed ideas and feelings found in the unconscious. Through a comparative and parallel study it soon appeared that there was a similar

mechanism at work in myths and fairy tales and that the relationship between the dreams and phantasies of an individual and the myths and folk tales of a people was so close that Abraham could say that the myth is a fragment of the infantile soul life of the race and the dream is the myth of the individual. (Hinkler 2021, xix-xx)

It is a well-established fact that Freud, who argued that “[t]he theory of the instincts is so to say our [psychoanalysis] mythology” since “[i]nstances are mythical entities magnificent in their indefiniteness” (Freud 1953, 95), used myths to support his theories of psychosexual development. In *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* (1907), he described myths as “the distorted vestiges of the wish fantasies of whole nations – the age-long dreams of young humanity” (Freud 1925, 182). In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913), Freud contended in his famous analysis of the Greek myth of King Oedipus that the socially repressed longings and fears of humankind are expressed through myth, arguing that Oedipus’s fate “moves us only for the reason that it might have been ours, for the oracle has put the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him”. Likewise, he added that “[w]e recoil from the person for whom this primitive wish has been fulfilled with all the force of the repression which these wishes have suffered within us”, since by showing us “the guilt of Oedipus, the poet urges us to recognise our own inner self, in which these impulses, even if suppressed, are still present” (Freud 2021, 223).

In *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1914), Freud would further express his belief that “a large portion of the mythological conception of the world which reaches far into the most modern religions is *nothing but psychology projected into the outer world*”, adding that “[t]he dim perception (...) of psychic factors and relations of the unconscious was taken as a model in the construction of a *transcendental reality*, which is destined to be changed again by science into *psychology of the unconscious*” (Freud 2022, 309, original emphases). However, as Nadia Sels rightly notes, “it was not Freud’s main intention to develop a psychoanalytic theory of mythology”, since “on the few occasions he really gives an elaborate interpretation of myth [Oedipus, Perseus and Medusa, and Prometheus], he is chiefly concerned with illustrating his theories” (Sels 2011, 58).

Fellow psychoanalyst and Freud’s would-be heir Carl Jung thought otherwise, as his influential study *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1959) makes clear. Although he drew on Freud’s concept of the unconscious and acknowledged Freud’s awareness “of its archaic and mythological thought-forms”, Jung rejected Freud’s use of the unconscious as “nothing but the gathering place of forgotten and repressed contents, [which] has a functional significance thanks only to these”. In this light,

Jung perceived Freud's conception of the unconscious taking the stage as "the acting subject" as of "an exclusively personal nature", which he termed "the personal unconscious". However, Jung argued, "this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer" – which he called "the collective unconscious" – "which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn". In this light, the collective unconscious "is not individual, but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more less the same everywhere and in all individuals". In other words, "it is identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us" (Jung 2014, 3-4).

Hence, whereas the contents of the personal unconscious are "chiefly the feeling-toned complexes" which constitute "the personal and private side of psychic life", the contents of the collective unconscious are known as "archetypes", "archaic or ... primordial types, that is, ... universal images that have existed since the remotest times" (Jung 2014, 4) such as the Child or the Mother. Therefore, Jung defended that the main difference between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious is that the former is made up "essentially of contents which have at one time been conscious but which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed" – in other words, owing its existence to "personal experience" – the contents of the latter "have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity" (Jung 2014, 42). In this light, myths are regarded as expressions of the collective unconscious, in that they communicate central ideas that are part of humankind as a whole. Hence, Jung defended the presence of archetypes in myth, which he theorised as "the unconscious images" of instincts that are "not vague and indefinite by nature, but are specifically formed motive forces which, long before there is any consciousness ... pursue their inherent goals" (Jung 2014, 43).

The main bone of contention between Freud and Jung, however, was the fact that Freud believed that psychoanalysis could provide "a metalanguage for mythology in that "the archetypal metaphors could be reduced to one true referent", whereas Jung "explicitly distanced himself from [that] idea" (Sels 2011, 59), as expressed in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*:

[T]here is no longer any question whether a myth refers to the sun or the moon, the father or the mother, sexuality or fire or water. All it does is to circumscribe and give an approximate description of an *unconscious core of meaning*. (...) Not for a moment dare we to succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of. Even the best attempts

at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language (Indeed, language itself is only an image). The most we can do is to *dream the myth onwards* and to give it a modern dress. (Jung 2014, 156, original emphases)

In this light, Freud seemingly used “psychoanalytic theory as an allegorical interpretation of myth, functioning as a master discourse”, as opposed to Jung’s use of “psychoanalysis as a discourse analogical to mythology, operating on the same level” (Sels 2011, 57). In *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Jung negatively compares the modern search for objective experience to antiquity’s interest in the subjectivity that is the immaterial reality of myth, tracing the route between mythology and science in Western thought fundamentally as a trajectory of loss:

Should we go further back into history, we shall find that which to-day we call science, dissolved into an indistinct cloud. The modern culture-creating mind is incessantly occupied in stripping off all subjectivity from experience, and in finding those formulas which bring Nature and her forces to the best and most fitting expression. It would be an absurd and entirely unjustified self-glorification if we were to assume that we are more energetic or more intelligent than the ancients – our materials for knowledge have increased, but not our intellectual capacity. For this reason, we become immediately as obstinate and insusceptible in regard to new ideas as people in the darkest times of antiquity. Our knowledge has increased but not our wisdom. The main point of our interest is displaced wholly into material reality; antiquity preferred a mode of thought which was more closely related to a phantastic type. Except for a sensitive perspicuity towards works of art, not attained since then, we seek in vain in antiquity for that precise and concrete manner of thinking characteristic of modern science. We see the antique spirit create not science but mythology. Unfortunately, we acquire in school only a very paltry conception of the richness and immense power of life of Grecian mythology. Therefore, at first glance, it does not seem possible for us to assume that that energy and interest which to-day we put into science and technic [sic], the man of antiquity gave in great part to his mythology. That, nevertheless, gives the explanation for the bewildering changes, the kaleidoscopic transformations and new syncretistic groupings, and the continued rejuvenation of the myths in the Grecian sphere of culture. (Jung 2021, 24)

In his anthropological study *Myth and Meaning*, Claude Lévi-Strauss was adamant that myth does not originate in a “primitive” mind (as nineteenth-century mythographers such as J. G. Frazer maintained), since he argued that “these people whom we usually consider as completely subservient to the need of not starving ... are moved by a need or a desire to understand

the world around them, its nature and their society". To do that, Lévi-Strauss further argued, "they proceed by intellectual means, exactly as a philosopher, or even to some extent a scientist, can and would do" (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 16). In this light, he suggested that, with regards to their very nature, the structural approach and mental processes in the analysis of myth are analogous to the ones used in science.

Unlike Jung, therefore, Lévi-Strauss did not envisage a real separation between science and mythical thought ever since the eighteenth century, when scientists like Bacon or Newton felt the need to build science up "against the old generations of mythical and mystical thought, and it was thought that science could only exist by turning its back upon the world of the senses". For these men, Lévi-Strauss further maintained, "the sensory was a delusive world, whereas the real world was a world of mathematical properties which could only be grasped by the intellect and which was entirely at odds with the false testimony of the senses". Although Lévi-Strauss considered this a necessary move since it was this separation which enabled scientific thought to constitute itself, he believed that in his contemporary times "science is tending to overcome this gap, and that more and more the sense data are being reintegrated into scientific explanation as something which has a meaning which has a truth, and which can be explained" (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 6). Lévi-Strauss similarly rejected the notion that myths can explain inexplicable phenomena in the same way science does by arguing that "[w]e are able, through scientific thinking, to achieve mastery over nature (...) while, of course, myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment" – although myth "gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he does understand the universe", which is "of course, only an illusion" (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 6, original emphasis).

Lévi-Strauss's connection between myth and science is further elaborated in his contention that the foundation of structuralism is based upon an innate understanding of the scientific process, which endeavours to disassemble intricate phenomena into its component parts and then investigates the relations between them. The structuralist approach to myth relies on the same methodology, and as a method it can be applied to literature as well (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 5-14). Hence, "the very core of Lévi-Strauss's approach was his refusal to 'interpret' myth in the traditional [allegorical] way: while the allegorical approach departed from the idea that an underlying meaning had shaped the form of myth, the structuralist approach asserted that it was the form, the structure that determined myth's signifying function" (Sels 2011, 65-66).

Conversely, Robert Graves – whose writings on myth are more or less the contemporaries of Lévi-Strauss’s – defended the idea that “in late prehistoric times, throughout Europe and the Middle East, matriarchal cultures, worshipping a supreme Goddess and recognising male gods only as her son, consort or sacrificial victim, were subordinated by aggressive proponents of patriarchy who deposed women from their positions of authority, elevated the Goddess’s male consorts into positions of divine supremacy and reconstructed myths and rituals to conceal what had taken place” (Lindop 2010, xiii-xiv). Furthermore credited with having originated the archetype of the Triple Goddess as embodying the three-fold figurations of Maiden, Mother and Crone in the same being via his reading of classical scholar and linguist Jane Ellen Harrison’s 1912 work *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, Graves regarded the Triple Moon Goddess as the enduring muse of true poetry, thereby imaginatively reconstructing her ancient worship by making use of his contemporary scholarship, fiction and mythology. In turn, Graves’s speculations on a mythical, pre-historic Matriarchal religion as discussed in his book *The White Goddess* (1948), were simultaneously taken up and disputed in the 1970s as historically untenable by second-wave American feminist scholars and anthropologists.

Despite this mixed academic reception, Graves seems to have inspired some women writers to use the motif of the Triple Goddess in their fiction. For instance, Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) can be said to illustrate – albeit in the reverse mode of subversion and parody – in its self-conscious manipulation and sabotage of the trope in the liberation of the female protagonist from the confines of Graves’s conceptualisation (see Bouson 1993, 63-86). Likewise an unwilling candidate to the label of feminist, and despite her less radical critique of sexual politics and gendered relationships in her fiction, I have argued elsewhere that A. S. Byatt’s deliberate thwarting of the Triple Goddess archetype can be observed as a pre-emptive strike against prescriptive female embodiments in *Possession* in line with Atwood’s subversive use of the trope (Cheira 2022, 292).

In this light, Marina Warner’s discussion of myth is helpful in the context of feminist rewriting of myth:

A myth is a kind of story told in public, which people tell one another, they wear an air of ancient wisdom, but that is part of their seductive charm. *Not all antiques are better than a modern design* – especially if they’re needed in ordinary, daily use. (...) [M]yths aren’t writ in stone, they’re not fixed, but often, telling the story of the same figures – of Medea or of dinosaurs – change dramatically both in content and in meaning. Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context –

they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but – and this is fortunate – never set so hard they cannot change again, and *newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones*. (Warner 1994, 13-14, added emphases)

In fact, feminist revisionist mythology – or feminist literature informed by feminist politics and/ or by feminist literary criticism which engages with mythology and fairy tales to revise the use of gender imagery in order to explore the self in a specific cultural context – has striven to prove that “newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones”. Feminist rewritings of well-known myths have included retelling them exclusively from the female protagonist’s point of view, who may or may not as well be a self-conscious feminist narrator who ironically comments on the gendered view of women in the “original” text, hence recreating the story in a way that challenges the construction of women as passive, submissive objects.

Likewise, Julie Sanders elaborates on two theoretical concepts particularly relevant in the context of feminist mythological reworkings: literary adaptation and appropriation. Hence, Sanders summarises adaptation as the process of rewriting pre-existing narrative content which is aesthetically and structurally reshaped to offer some type of commentary on the source text in order to produce meaning in light of the particular authorial vision that shapes that rewriting. These stylistic modifications, whose aim is to create an explicit intertextual body of reference, may include explicit reference to the canonical precursor within the adaptive text by quoting and paraphrasing the “original” text. They may also engage in adding or trimming meaning by focussing on characters or narrative details that were silenced or marginalised in the source text, or by telling a story from a different point of view (see Sanders 2016, 23).

In fact, familiar paradigms illustrate Sanders’s emphasis on reader reception based on recognisable literary archetypes, since she argues that “[a]daptation and appropriation are dependent on the literary canon for the provision of shared repository of storylines, themes, characters and ideas upon which their creative variations can be made”. In this conceptual framework, Sanders explains, “[t]he spectator or reader must be able to participate in the play of similarity and difference between the original sources or inspiration to appreciate fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken by the adaptive text, though an experience in and of itself of the adaptation need not require this prior knowledge” (Sanders 2016, 57).

In other words, Sanders argues that adaptations modernise and rejuvenate “original” texts via the play between the reader’s recollection of the source

text and his/ her perception of the alterations in the new text. Within Sanders's theoretical framework, adaptation is distinguished from appropriation by holding one concept against the other and defining them in mutual respect to each other as two different intertextual strategies, like pastiche and parody (see Nicklas and Lindner 2012, 5), in which the differentiating aspect is the distance from the source text. Hence, Sanders argues, the deliberate moving away from the source text to be informed by a new cultural domain via the technique of interpolation and critique which characterises appropriation complicates the reader's response:

Indeed, appropriation may or may not involve a generic shift and it may certainly still require the kinds of 'reading alongside' or comparative approaches that juxtapose (at least) one text against another, which we have begun to delineate as central to the reception of adaptations. But certainly appropriations tend to have a more complicated, intricate and sometimes embedded relationship to their intertexts than a straightforward film version of a canonical or well-known text would suggest. The relationship can therefore seem more sideways or deflected further along the spectrum of distance than a straightforward generic transposition. (Sanders 2016, 35-36)

This seems to be the case of most feminist mythological retellings. In fact, and since revisionist mythmaking actively engages in demolishing gender stereotypes embedded in myth, its narrative politics is deeply concerned with consistent attacks on both familiar gendered images and on their supporting social and literary conventions. Hence, feminist rewritings typically expose the literary convention to investigate the social codes which inform it and subvert them by turning the marginalised female Other into the tale's primary subject. Appropriating Jack Zipes's words in the related context of fairy tales, feminist rewritings produce revised fairy tales whose purpose is "to create something new that incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer and corresponds to changed demands and tastes of audiences", hence seeking "to alter the reader's views of traditional patterns, images, and codes" (Zipes 1994, 8), as opposed to mere duplication, or the reproduction of "a set pattern of ideas and images that reinforce a traditional way of seeing, believing, and behaving" (Zipes 1994, 8).

Despite their significant differences, psychoanalytic, anthropological and feminist theories of myth share a unified perception of mythology as "designed to help us to cope with the problematic human predicament" by helping people "find their place in the world and their true orientation" (Campbell 2005, 6) – albeit in fundamentally different ways. The same can be said of fairy tales: according to Zipes, "[i]t is impossible to grasp the history of the fairy tale and the relationship of the fairy tale to myth without taking into consideration the manner in which tales have been revised and

duplicated” (Zipes 1994, 10). Moreover, Zipes insists, “the evolution of the fairy tale as a literary genre is marked by a process of dialectical appropriation involving duplication and revision that set the cultural conditions for its mythicization, institutionalization, and expansion as a mass-mediated form through radio, film, and television” (Zipes 1994, 10). Therefore, Zipes seems to agree with Karen Armstrong with regards to a similar function of fairy tales by arguing that “[f]airy tales were first *told* by gifted tellers and were based on rituals intended to endow meaning to the daily lives of members of a tribe”. Since “[a]s *oral folk tales*” (Zipes 1994, 10, original emphases) fairy tales were intended “to explain natural occurrences such as the change of the seasons and shifts in the weather or to celebrate the rites of harvesting, hunting, marriage, and conquest”, Zipes therefore contends that “[t]he emphasis in most folk tales was on communal harmony”. Therefore, “[a] narrator or narrators told tales to bring members of a group or tribe closer together and to provide them with a sense of mission, a telos”, whereas the tales themselves “assumed a generic quality based on the function that they were to fulfill for the community or the incidents that they were to report, describe, and explain”. Consequently, Zipes regards them as “tales of initiation, worship, warning, and indoctrination”, adding that “[w]hatever the type may have been, the voice of the narrator was known” since “[t]he tale came directly from common experiences and beliefs”. In this light, and since these tales were “[t]old in person, directly, face to face”, they “were altered as the beliefs and behaviors of the members of a particular group changed” (Zipes 1994, 10).

In addition to studying the oral transmission of tales within separate communities, recent research has demonstrated that there are “strong continuities evident in the oral traditions associated with different cultures”, which can be studied “using phylogenetic methods that were originally developed to reconstruct evolutionary relationships among biological species, and which have been recently applied to a range of cultural phenomena” (Tehrani 2013, “abstract”). In other words, starting from the premise that “stories behave a lot like living organisms”, which “build up mutations in the genes that they pass to successive generations”, by likewise evolving when they accumulate “changes in plot, characters, and settings” (Yong 2016, para. 1) as they are told to new audiences, anthropologists can piece together the relationships between different versions of a tale using the same devices that evolutionary biologists use to study species (see Tehrani 2013b). Hence, anthropologists “can compare different versions of the same tale and draw family trees – phylogenies – that unite them” and can even “reconstruct the last common ancestor of a group of stories” (Yong 2016, para. 2), suggesting that folk tales are older than might be expected.

In “The Phylogeny of Little Red Riding Hood”, published in 2013, anthropologist Jamshid J. Tehrani (Durham University, UK) charted the relationships between fifty-eight different versions of the tale and traced them back to a single origin, two thousand years back and somewhere between Europe and the Middle East. Tehrani argues that “the faithful transmission of narratives over many generations and across cultural and linguistic barriers is a rich source of evidence about the kinds of information that we find memorable and motivated to pass on to others”, such as “minimally counterintuitive concepts” (e.g. talking animals) , “survival relevant information” (e.g. the danger presented by predators, both literal and metaphorical; the importance of following a parent’s instructions, etc.), and “social information bias” (e.g. trust, kinship relationships, deception and false belief, etc.). In addition, “phylogenetic inference and ancestral state reconstruction methods” can help understanding why some stories disappear over time in specific geographical locations by providing “valuable techniques for investigating the magnitude of these biases in preserving and/or distorting narratives over long periods of time using real-world data” (Tehrani 2013a, “discussion”).

In 2016, Tehrani teamed up with Sara Graça da Silva (who studies intersections between evolution and literature at Nova University, Portugal), and together they produced the study “Comparative Phylogenetic Analyses Uncover the Ancient Roots of Indo-European folktales”, whose results he summarised in the research section of his university’s webpage:

When looking at the strong similarities among traditional stories told by many different cultures, particularly those speaking Indo-European languages, we found that some shared folktales can be traced back to ancestral populations that lived thousands of years ago. These include several stories that remain popular to this day, like ‘Beauty and the Beast’, ‘Rumpelstiltskin’ and ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ (aka ‘The Boy Steals the Ogre’s Treasure’). We even managed to trace one tale, ‘The Smith and the Devil’, back to the Bronze Age. (Tehrani 2016, para. 2)

In addition to suggesting that these tales “were passed down from generation to generation long before they were first written down, showing the remarkable stability of oral transmission and enduring appeal of these stories” (Tehrani 2016, para. 3), Tehrani also defends that “the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary, putting humble farm boys and servant girls in the company of giants and fairy godmothers” is integral to the longevity of fairy tales, further arguing that “[a]lthough these stories are frequently updated to suit different times and places, many elements – both magical and mundane – can survive for generations”. Therefore, Tehrani

concludes, this makes fairy tales “a potentially useful source of information about not only our enduring fears and fantasies, but also the kinds of societies in which they originated” (Tehrani 2016, para. 8).

Fairy tales have also been regarded as a privileged means of human socialisation in contemporary studies informed by psychoanalytic approaches, such as Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), which analysed the emotional and symbolic importance of fairy tales for children in terms of Freudian psychology:

Folklorists approach fairy tales in ways germane to their discipline, linguists and literary critics examine their meaning for other reasons. It is interesting to observe that, for example, some see in the motif of Little Red Riding Hood’s being swallowed by the wolf the theme of night devouring the day, of the moon eclipsing the sun, of winter replacing the warm seasons, of the god swallowing the sacrificial victim and so on. Interesting as such interpretations are, they seem to offer little to the parent or educator who wants to know what meaning a fairy story may have to the child, whose experience is, after all, quite far removed from interpretations of the world on the basis of concerns with nature or celestial deities. (Bettelheim 1976, 13)

“As an educator and therapist of severely disturbed children”, he wrote in the introduction, his main task was “to restore meaning to their lives” (Bettelheim 1976, 4). He believed that fairy tales were the perfect means to convey to a child “the advantages of moral behavior, not through abstract ethical concepts but through that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful” (Bettelheim 1976, 5) to the child. He further defended that “[a]pplying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time”, since “by dealing with universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy the child’s mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures” (Bettelheim 1976, 6).

Unlike “safe” modern stories written for children which avoid existential problems such as ageing, the death of a parent, or the fear of abandonment or starvation, Bettelheim argued, the fairy tale “confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments” (Bettelheim 1976, 8). Since “real life is not all sunny” (Bettelheim 1976, 7), he suggested that children should be exposed to the Grimm side of stories, which would allow them to symbolically “come to grips with the problem in its most essential form” (Bettelheim 1976, 8). At the same time, by showing that “the dark side of man” denied by the dominant culture – and especially where children are

concerned – does indeed exist, darker stories validate children’s inherent belief that not all people are good, since they themselves “are not always good” (Bettelheim 1976, 7). In this light, Bettelheim defended that the clear-cut distinction between good and evil characters in fairy tales offers the child a framework through which “to comprehend easily the difference between the two, which he could not do as readily were the figures drawn more true to life, with all the complexities that characterize real people”, therefore helping the child “to make choices about who one wants to be” (Bettelheim 1976, 7).

Yet, as Susan Sellers pertinently recalls, “[t]here have been numerous critiques of Bettelheim’s position, ranging from the charge that his analyses derive from misreadings of Freud, to condemnation of his refusal to take into account the gender bias of the genre, the differences between children, or the historical origins and evolution of the tales” (Sellers 2001, 12). Appropriating Jack Zipes’s words in the different context of Disney’s films, “there is no character development because all characters must be recognizable as types that remain unchanged throughout the film”. The fact that “[g]ood cannot become evil, nor can evil become good” (Zipes 1997, 93), coupled with Bettelheim’s defense of the “happily ever after” ending as providing the ultimate emotional security of existence and permanence of relation available to man” embodied in “true adult love” (Bettelheim 1976, 11), is problematic for feminist writers and critics. In fact, a main axis of the contemporary debate on fairy tales is informed by the feminist concern over the tales’ representation of gender identities. As Maria da Conceição Tomé and Glória Bastos point out, “several scholars have analysed the role of fairy tale in a context of sociocultural discourse about gender, namely scholarly research explicitly devoted to feminist issues in fairy tales in the 1970s”, since “[f]rom a feminist approach, fairy tales have not only been considered to serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles, but also to form female attitudes towards the self, men, marriage and society” (Tomé and Bastos 2013, 2).

In his thorough examination of feminist fairy tale scholarship in the eponymous chapter, Donald Haase has traced the evolution of “a debate over the value of fairy tales based on their representation of females” in the early 1970s into “a more multifaceted discussion of the genre’s history and a more nuanced analysis of its production and reception” (Haase 2004, 2). In fact, in its inception the debate was notably started with the polemical discussion between Alison Lurie and Marcia R. Lieberman on whether folk tales and fairy tales could “advance the cause of women’s liberation, because they depict strong females” which could be found “not only among the classic fairy tales but also among the much larger and more representative

corpus of lesser-known tales”, as Lurie argued. Conversely, Lieberman maintained, the contemporary process of female acculturation through the fairy tale was compromised by the fact that it depended on well-known classic fairy tales such as Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty, or Snow White – furthermore popularised by Disney adaptations – rather than on a corpus of relatively obscure tales which only academics would know (Haase 2004, 1). More recently, in her 1999 essay “Fairy Stories”, A. S. Byatt has fleetingly commented on the Lurie/ Lieberman controversy by endorsing the former’s position, as expressed in her assertion that modern feminists have “rewritten narratives to provide powerful heroines, sometimes arguing that all women in the original fairy tales were meek victims, which is simply not true”, adding that “[t]here are plenty of resourceful princesses and peasants and goddesses – that is one of the pleasures of the other world” (Byatt 1999, para. 2).

Throughout the 1970s, Haase explains, Lieberman’s ideas “were repeated in writings by American feminists, which did not always analyze fairy tales in depth but more frequently utilized them simply as evidence to demonstrate the sociocultural myths and mechanisms that oppress women”, notably in the construction of specific gender identities which opposed women as “wicked, beautiful, and passive” to a portrayal of men as “good, active, and heroic”; the argument that fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Cinderella”, “Sleeping Beauty”, and “Snow White” indoctrinate women into becoming rape victims; or the belief that the fairy tale was “a carrier of the toxic patriarchal myths that are used to deceive women” by comparing tales to Snow White’s poisonous apple, and construing mothers as unaware of their “venomous part in the patriarchal plot” since they were “drugged by the same deadly diet” throughout their lifetime (Haase 2004, 3).

Hence, fairy tale scholarship has “circle[d] in very different ways around questions concerning the form and function of storytelling, the role of stories in history, and the intimate relations of narrative and selfhood” (Benson 2008, 12) which revolve around the axis of feminism/postmodernism. In keeping with the title’s specific mention to either feminism or postmodernism, edited essay collections or single-author studies such as *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004), or *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (2008) provide, on the one hand, “approaches that can situate the fairy tale’s treatment of gender in relation to the dynamics of history and the shifting boundaries of society, culture, and nation” to illuminate “the concerns of contemporary women” by using feminism “to understand the genre’s sociocultural meanings” (Haase 2004,

xiii). In his detailed critical survey of previous work and presentation of contemporary research on the field of feminist fairy tale scholarship, Donald Haase draws a map of the field based on the premise that “one of the achievements of feminist fairy-tale scholarship has been to reveal how women have – for three hundred years at least – quite intentionally used the fairy tale to engage questions of gender and to create tales spoken or written differently from those told or penned by men” (Haase 2004, viii-ix).

On the other hand, fairy tale scholarship offers “a wide-ranging overview and review of the literary-theoretical issues that serve as a backdrop for the writing, in particular the identification of the late twentieth century as the era of postmodernity, and the categorization as quintessentially postmodern” (Benson 2008, 12) of many contemporary wonder writers. The editor of the latter volume, Stephen Benson, particularises the relevance of the conceptual framework of postmodernism in the wonder tale production of five late twentieth-century authors by arguing that “[t]he fairy tale is both deeply suspect and provocatively attractive, and therein resides its proximity to postmodernism” (Benson 2008, 13). Hence, Stephen Benson further argues, “the fairy tale generation, in the sense that their fictional projects are intimately and variously tied to tales and tale-telling”, is perhaps more accurately described as “the Angela Carter generation, in that Carter’s extensive work on the tradition of the fairy tale – as author, editor and critic – was pre-eminently influential in establishing a late-twentieth-century conception of the tales, the influence of which has continued into the new millennium” (Benson 2008, 2). In fact, Carter’s “modernized fairy tales”, which play with “the appropriation, recycling and combining of often antithetical literary forms” (Gamble 2008, 20), have paved the way for the contemporary, often feminist and/ or postmodern, revision of the genre.

In this light, Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm argue, the textual performance of “contamination” – a term folklorists use to explain foreign influence on pure narrative tradition – “can have an enriching process on the fairy tale” (Kuykendal and Sturm 2007, 39) via feminist revision, a possibility which Jack Zipes had already discussed in the context of children’s literature by considering that it “can lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right” (Zipes 2001, 102). That would be, according to Kuykendal and Sturm, a type of feminist wonder tale which promotes female agency rather than simple role reversal:

Many feminists consider it fitting that women are now reclaiming fairy tales, given fairy tales’ oral tradition and the historical connection between women and child rearing. However, it would be unfortunate for women to revise these fairy tales with the sole intention of disrupting the binary gender construction. The simple reversal of gender roles does not result in a feminist