The Modern Fairy Tale: The Origin of a Genre

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Abstract

The literary genres of folktales and fairy tales have been closely intertwined. This paper focuses on the origin of the genre of the 'modern fairy tale' or the point of its departure from the parent genre of 'folktale'. I argue that sixteenth century Venice (more specifically the composition of Giovanni Francesco Straparola), provided the historical conditions necessary for the development of the new genre in the form of a compact narrative, vernacular language, with magic as a central feature.

Keywords: Fairytales; Folk; Genre; Magic; Straparola.

Amidst the contesting views and numerous theories of folklorists regarding the definite origin of folktales and fairytales, a fact remains almost universally accepted that stories have existed in the world for thousands of years. The art of storytelling has been cultivated for centuries by tellers of all age groups, male and female, across all continents and civilizations. Classification of folktales into various tale types have been attempted by numerous folklorists, notably by Antii Aarne, Stith Thompson and Hans-Jorg Uther[*] assigning them sub genres such as 'Realistic Tales', 'Animal Tales' and 'Tales of Magic' apart from others. This approach, though popular, has been challenged like various others, for being limited in dealing with the vast number of tales as clear distinctions are not always possible where the categories overlap (several tales feature animals with magical powers and so on).

The genre of 'folktale' defies a simplistic categorization specifically on account of being a 'folk' genre. Folktales are commonly understood as tales that cannot be attributed to any single teller and have been in existence since the earliest traceable time period, as oral narratives transmitted from storyteller to storyteller and generation to generation. For many years in

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[*]   Referred to as the ATU classification of folktales, it was developed in 2004.

the early nineteenth century, since folkloristics developed as a specialised field of study, 'literacy' was seen to follow directly from 'orality'. The tales were supposed to exist only in an oral form before the same tales were written down; leading to them losing a part of their 'originality', no matter how faithfully they were recorded in the written version. If oral and literal are seen as two separate, easily distinguishable mediums, it entails problematic assumptions. Oral narratives were till recently considered more 'authentic' as far as the preservation of folktales of the past were concerned. These narratives were supposed to be relatively uncontaminated from the influence of the ruling classes. This distrust stems from the fact that literacy or written records have been seen as the tool of the dominant class which is used to ideologically control the 'folk' or the common people. While the ideological superiority associated with written versions cannot be denied, the theory supporting the purely oral existence and transmission of tales cannot be accepted as provable either. It has been discarded by many folklorists including Elizabeth Harries who calls it "…a fairy tale about fairy tales"[**], that is, an attempt by theorists to deliberately mystify the origin of fairytales to add to the sense of wonder.

If oral narratives are the sole point of origin as well as dissemination of tales, are the written versions then only to be understood as a mere ploy of the ruling classes to ideologically control the very art of storytelling and hegemonise the masses? In that sense, the act of preservation of folk and fairy tales by scholars writing them down becomes just that – an act or pretence. Even mass distribution of narratives enabled by the print culture (discussed later) then indicates a shift towards 'impurity' and appropriation rather than preservation. This understanding of orality and literacy as binary oppositions is therefore a very reductive one, dependent on the past, one which denies any positive potential to cultural artefacts beyond their supposed oral existence.

Satu Apo and David Hackston in their essay also question the assumption of seeing the two forms of communication as "mutually exclusive"[***]. It has now been accepted by folklorists like Ruth Finnegan: "…based on empirical observations oral and literal modes of communication have indeed lived in constant dialogue with each other in many cultures for hundreds of years"[****]. The two modes of transmission not only exist side by side but are also closely bound to each other, sharing a dialectical relationship, rather than a linear mutually exclusive one.

[**]   Harries, 13.

[***]   Satu Apo and David Hackston, 6.

[****]   Finnegan, xvii.

It is also imperative to note that the collection of oral fairy tales supposed to have existed in the ancient and the medieval ages began very late, that is in the early nineteenth century. There is no direct access, in the present, to the tales which are believed by some folklorists (those who believe in the oral origins of the tale) to have existed by being told and retold by people in a fairly unchanged form before being written down. Since our access to the tales is mediated***** intrinsically by the earliest available and subsequent written sources, the 'orality' of the tales cannot be verified. It is also quite likely, given the large time frame and the number of social formations that the tales have spanned, that with every new narrator and multiple retellings (each time in a different context), the so called original tales have been altered by certain thematic, structural and ideological changes. The charges of modifications in the tales applicable to written versions cannot be overlooked in case of oral transmission.

'Fairy Tales', as a genre which is the subject of this study is believed by leading fairy tale scholars Jack Zipes and Bruno Bettleheim to be a sub-genre or a form of folktales******. There are no definite characteristics which separate 'fairy' tales from 'folk' tales. Fairy tales evolved according to them from the same narratives, plots and settings and therefore also have the same oral origins like the folk tales. Ruth Bottigheimer, in her book, provides empirical evidence which proves otherwise. According to her, fairy tales and folktales are essentially different in their structure and content*******. However, as the orality of folktales has been contested in the previous discussion, similarly a relationship of binary opposites between folktales and fairy tales is also not to be easily accepted. The two contesting claims have their respective merits and drawbacks and neither can be considered as the universally accepted approach for defining and distinguishing the genres of folktales and fairy tales. Although, it is possible to elaborate on the key features which differentiate between the two, albeit with exceptions.

 According to nineteenth century folklorists********, 'folk' or the people who

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***** The American theorist, Frederic Jameson says: "Mediation is the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base." (pg 39, The Political Unconscious). In other words, via mediation, the gaps owing to the separation of the ideological from the political, the religious from the economic, the daily life and the practice of the academic disciplines are at least locally overcome.

****** Zipes, 4.

******* Bottigheimer, 13.

******** The nineteenth century view of folklore is understood in this paper to be represented by one of its most eloquent and articulate spokesmen, Andrew Lang, most pertinently in his essay "The Method of Folklore," published in *Custom and Myth*, 1884.

are attributed with being the primary tellers and characters of folktales, were the people considered as occupying the middle ground between the 'civilized' and the 'savage'. The folk were believed to possess "mean term" between the two or were "the illiterate in a literate society." Alan Dundes rejects the limited definition and clarifies that – "the term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever, who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals." *********

The folktales have as their subject the everyday reality of the folk. These are, according to Bottigheimer, 'realistic tales' which do not necessarily have a happy ending. The setting is familiar to the people with relatable and ordinary characters of a husband, wife, peasants, thieves etc. The resolution of a conflict if any is brought about by the protagonist's cunning, skill, presence of mind or good luck rather than through magic. *********

In fairy tales, however, magic and the marvellous is central to the plot and brings about a 'transformation' in the social status of the protagonist which essentially differentiates them from folktales. Bottigheimer, in addition to differentiating between folktales and fairytales divides fairytales into two categories - Rise Fairy Tales and Restoration Fairy Tales, depending on the nature of the transformation.********* Restoration fairy tales begin with a royal protagonist - a king, queen, prince or princess who is deprived of the royal status due to the malicious nature of some human or magical being. They have to then undergo a period of trials and hardships to regain the lost status, for which they find magical assistance. The tales end with the protagonist being restored to his/her 'just' social political status and the resolution often comes through marriage with another royal personage, for instance, in Straparola's tale *Constanza*, the youngest daughter of the king is left without a fortune and in search of a match that justifies her social status, she leaves the city. In her period of trial, she gets magical assistance from a satyr,********* which enables her to marry the king, thus restoring her to her earlier social status.

Rise fairy tales differ in the initial status of the protagonist who is extreme-

*********   Dundes, 6.
*********   Bottigheimer, 18.
*********   Ibid, 26.
*********   Satyrs are magical creatures in Greek mythology, depicted as half man and half goat.

ly poor and relies solely on magic for the transformation. Through magic and marriage to royalty he achieves the desired wealth and social status in the end. Straparola's tale titled *Constantino Fortunato* serves as an example of a rise fairy tale. The narrator of the tale introduces the protagonist as one "who from being little better than a beggar attained the full dignity of a king." The tale describes a series of events which enable the protagonist Constantino to marry the princess and heiress Elisetta, solely through the help and manoeuvres of his cat, which in the tale is, "a fairy in disguise".******** The marriage to the royal personage ensures Constantino's transformation, the effects of which are everlasting as he "leaves children by her (Elisetta) to be the heirs of his kingdom."

Bottigheimer's categorization also draws attention to the difference in the social status of the characters in folktales and fairy tales. Whereas the realistic folktales draw their characters from a vast spectrum of social statuses - from peasants to merchants to royalty, the fairytales focus mainly on those at the extreme ends of the social ladder - the poor or the royalty. The two extremes for whom the 'transformation' acquires greater significance. Moreover, in folktales even if the transformation of the protagonist takes place, it took several generations for a skilled and hard working protagonist to move up in the social ladder. The instantaneous acquisition of wealth and a royal title characterises fairytales.

Magic, according to the differences listed above, is central to fairy tales but is not the only factor separating them from folktales. 'Magic Tales' is also a broad sub-category subsumed under folktales. However, all magic tales are not fairy tales. Bottigheimer explicates this by further separating fairy tales from tales about fairyland********. Tales about fairyland depict two clearly divided worlds - human world and fairy world. Fairy world therein depicted has its own set of rules and characters and is a world where human beings do not find a place. Fairytales in contrast are tales where the two worlds merge. The setting is usually the human world with occasional presence of fairies or magical objects.

This distinction is important to understand that while narratives in prose or verse about fairyland were available since as early as fourteenth century, it is only during the middle of the sixteenth century that fairy tales in their present form emerged for the first time. According to Bottigheimer, the tales later (in the seventeenth century) termed as fairy tales did not exist in the oral form as is commonly accepted, but gained its most recog-

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******** Straparola, 369.
******** Bottigheimer,23.

nizable features only when they emerged in print in the collection titled *The Pleasant Nights* (1552), created by the Italian writer Giovan Francesco Straparola. The tales may have been inspired to a greater or lesser degree by stories already in existence, but the genre took shape because sixteenth century Venice provided the socio-political and cultural conditions necessary for its perpetuation. The emergence of Venice as a dominating publishing town, the rising levels of literacy and the inspiration for literary styles provided by precursors, primarily Boccaccio, all contributed towards the emergence of the written fairytale as a genre.[********]

Bottigheimer explicates, "It is not motifs, structures or happy endings that alone define fairy tales, but the overall plot trajectory of individual tales in conjunction with those fairy tale elements all brought together in a 'compact' narrative."[********] Elizabeth Harries in her study also stresses on the compactness of a tale[********] as a defining feature of fairy tales in their popular form. Magic or the interest in marvellous was not new to the audience and readers of folktales. Talking animals, magical objects and beings were present in tales existing in the ancient Europe, for instance Aesop's Fables which is perhaps the oldest known collection.[********] Medieval romantic ballads also often featured tales of faeries and fairyland. However, it was specifically with a consideration of print that the tales were shortened and published in the form of 'chapbooks' in easy vernacular language for the new readership. [********]

Venice in the sixteenth century was an important trade centre and was well known for the publishing of books and performance arts. It connected Europe with the Eastern and the Western world, becoming a centre of exchange for not just goods but also tales. Publishing of translations of tales from the east like *The Panchtantra* was a lucrative enterprise in the mid sixteenth century. According to Suzzane Magnanini : "Unlike Florence or nearby Ferrara, Venice lacked a single, centralized court to dictate a cultural agenda."[********] Instead, storytelling flourished in Venetian

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[********]   Zipes, 14.
[********]   Ibid, 19.
[********]   Harries, 16-17.
[********]   The existence and influence of oral fairy tales is not negated (as Bottigheimer's claim has been contested by several critics notably by Ziolkowski 2007), however since the presence of oral tales cannot be proved, the focus of my thesis is the earliest available written fairytales in Europe.
[********]   Restoration fairy tales grew out of medieval romances without major alterations in courtly settings, characters and plots. It was only in the 1500s that the traditional plots (of royal personages acquiring their rightful positions) became abbreviated and brief and magic was introduced as a primary agency.
[********]   Magnanini, 10.

salons. Outside the salons as well "itinerant storytellers were performing and hawking cheap imprints of *cantari*, or short tales in verse that often recounted the exploits of the knights and ladies of the chivalric tradition, and included those marvels typical of fairy tales."[********] This social setup of sixteenth century Venice depicts the co-existence and the inseparability of the oral and the written versions of the tales.

Even after a century of introduction of printing, even in a wealthy city like Venice, the literacy rates were quite low. It is estimated that only around thirty – three percent of the boys and around twelve to thirteen percent of girls were eligible to be called fully literate. However, historians have stressed the many levels of literacy between complete illiteracy and the confident ability to read and write. Undoubtedly, many common people occupied the middle position between the two extremes of 'literate' and 'illiterate'. In the sixteenth century with the spread of vernacular print matter, crude literacy rose in Europe and particularly in Venice. It is estimated; in 1600s around fifty percent of town dwellers could read, though in rural areas where most people lived, less than half were literate[********]. The common people became aware of the popular sacred texts, ballads and folktales as they were read out to them in public places. As Robert Darnton remarks, "…for most people throughout most of history, books had audiences rather than readers. They were better heard than seen".[********]

The easy availability of literature with the advent of printing encouraged the common people to read for themselves and brought about an increase in desire for literacy. Folktales and ballads in abridged versions became especially popular at this time because of their simple and relatable stories. Grendler suggested that a key indicator of "popularity" was the physical form (i.e. small format, few pages, certain styles of type) chosen by printers, which communicated to customers that this was a book that was accessible, fairly cheap, and likely to be entertaining or useful. The content of a popular book had universal appeal and was not limited to a semi-literate readership, in Grendler's words, "…it exerts a very broad, nearly universal appeal ... it might attract the interest and delight of those with more refined taste and greater intellectual capacity, as well as those of limited abilities and tastes".[********]

[********]   Salzberg, 737-40.
[********]   Kintgen, Eugene R., Barry M. Kroll and Mike Rose, 104. Before the easy availability of printed material, books were laboriously copied by hand by scribes, in a meticulous process which required spending a lot of time. The circulation of manuscripts was limited and became the sole privilege of clerics who became the custodians of the book culture.
[********]   Darnton, 28. With the advent of print, there was a drastic reduction of labour and cost associated with the production of books.
[********]   Grendler, 12.

The success of Boccacio's collection of 'novellas' or realistic tales titled *Decameron* (1353) bound together in a frame narrative paved the way for and was the source of inspiration for a number of subsequent folktale collections. While realistic tales were fairly common and even stories of magic were being circulated, it was Straparola's collection that combined all the elements which we associate with the modern fairytale. His ingenuity lies in his inclusion of a large number of tales centred exclusively around magic and providing a happy ending. Ruth Bottigheimer in her study differentiates Straparola's use of magic from tales of magic existing earlier. According to her, while in the earlier tales magic only provided a form of comic-relief and acted as a diversion from the central plot of the tales, in Straparola's tales, magic was central in carrying the plot forward. Magic in his fairytales is according to her, "this-worldly"[********]. For example, talking animals with magical powers who help the protagonists to return a favour for an act of kindness as in Straparola's *Constantino Fortunato*, his version of the tale better known as *Puss in Boots*. Magical beings occupy the human world and even if called at will, the magical beings appear in the human world. Any parallel world which might exist is not of any relevance for the tale. For instance, in Straparola's *The Pig Prince* three fairies fly into Queen Ersilia's garden, where she's having an afternoon nap. The frame narrative and the realistic tales which are interspersed with Straparola's newly created fairy tales also draw on the example set by Boccacio for tales that became popular amongst the reading public. By composing his tales in prose and making them compact, he follows another precedent set by Boccacio. Straparola's collection was printed twenty five times from 1535-1613 and translated into French in 1560.

A number of diverse sources and influences culminated in the middle of the sixteenth century and became associated with a single writer-composer to become concretized as the genre of the written fairy tale because with the onslaught of the print culture, the feudal age of anonymity was passing away. The age of print coincides with and supports the transition to capitalism. It is evident from the study of collections of writers like Straparola who published with knowledge of the popular literary traditions and an eye for the targeted readership for the sake of profit.

As early as the sixteenth century, the art of storytelling was associated with women and particularly to those belonging to a lower class.[********] Fewer women were literate as compared to men and oral transmission of tales (which they might have learned from an oral or written source) for leisure

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[********]   Bottigheimer, 149, 2014.
[********]   Magnanini, 5.

was generally attributed to them. According to Jan Ziolkowski, "…when men like Apulius chose to write the sort of fantastic fiction associated with old women, these fairy tale fantasies can be expressed only because they are pronounced through the mouths of old women"[********]. The tales attributed to the old women was clearly accorded a lower merit in the literary hierarchy. However, as men were literate in greater numbers and professional storytellers in sixteenth century tended to be male, it necessarily meant that men produced most of the written tales of this period, even if women became the primary carriers. However, sixteenth century was also the time when "Italian women's writings were being published at unprecedented rates."[********] Straparola's choice of narrators as sophisticated young women, who form a part of the Italian intellectual circle, both follows and defies the existing stereotypes about the popular tales. He creates a connection between the 'old crones' belonging to a lower class and the urban narrators by using sophisticated Italian in the frame narrative and switching to earthy language for the stories. The literary device of being a mere scribe for tales he had heard provided him the desired insulation from public censure. It also enabled him to align his tales to the popular tradition of entertaining stories read out in public places. It also made his tales popular amongst the emerging middle class readership. In the process he creates a successful combination for the introduction of his fourteen new fairy tales which ensured immense popularity and multiple re-printings of his tales.

His narrators were not the folk, but urban youth who had gathered together for the sake of entertainment, singing songs, telling stories in a setting which can be called a Venetian salon. The frame narrative mentions an ongoing political unrest, to escape which, the protagonists Ottaviano Maria Sforza and his daughter Lucrezia Gonzaga take shelter on the Italian island of Murano. The political conspiracy against the noble family which serves as a background to the tales, places them firmly in the socio-political reality of the time. It is indicative of the rising discontent of the new middle class against the nobility and royalty. His tales critically comment on the courtly politics, arbitrary authority and prevalent gender norms of the period. Straparola's tales feature protagonists going on adventures, seeking wealth and fame in faraway lands. Leaving behind the claustrophobic setting of small Italian towns to seek a transformation depicts the spirit of the age. The notion of a 'happy ending' acquires significance during this period. The desire for a life of fulfilment is inseparable from a desire for transformation - transformation of social status and a transformation of

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[********]   Ziolkowski, 382.

[********]   Magnanini, 6.

the geographical location as the existing socio-political conditions failed to provide hope for improvement. Capitalism in this period of feudal crisis, promised a life of luxury, fulfilment and social mobility. In *Constanza*, the eponymous protagonist, though belongs to a royal family, is left without a fortune, as her parents exhaust all their wealth in arranging suitable matches for the three elder daughters. In such a scenario, she finds hope of improving her prospects by travelling to a distant land. Venice being the burgeoning trade centre, references to ships, merchants and travels to exotic lands abound in Straparola's tales. The merchants, though occupy a lower social status than the royalty, are often depicted in the tales as wealthier in comparison. They also symbolise the entry into a new world when the existing world fails to provide sustenance.

Straparola's tales represent a marked shift away from the collective consciousness of society towards an individual attainment of success. Later 'standard' versions of fairy tales by Perrault in France in seventeenth century and the brothers Grimm in Germany in the nineteenth century, build on the model set by Straparola. The tales eventually became more and more about individual attainment, moving away from a social transformation to a personal transformation while the far from perfect social setup remains intact. The critical commentary of Straparola's tales on power, wealth and gender norms gets diluted in the later versions, with magic becoming the sole defining feature of the genre.

The success of Straparola's magic tales appears in new light when it is viewed in the backdrop of the European witch hunts. The most violent witch hunts were recorded in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Witches were persecuted by the Holy Inquisition for their supposedly heretical practice of performing 'Black Magic'. Apart from an actual suppression of magic and witches, any discourse on magic was also vehemently persecuted. Straparola's collection of fairy tales, with its emphasis on a magic, which can only be classified as 'Black' magic, in spite of being immensely popular was put on the 'Index of Prohibited Books' in 1624 by the Catholic Church on account of being heretical and anti-clerical. The success and the subsequent ban on the book highlight a disjunction between the interests of the reading public and what was considered 'acceptable' by the state. It also raises questions regarding the function of the newly created genre of fairy tales at the time of its conception. The appearance of Straparola's collection at a crucial historical juncture can be seen as the birth of a counter genre – questioning the norms of the society by assigning active and important roles to women in the frame narrative and his insistence on the importance of magic in life. Alternatively, or in par-

allel, Straparola's collection can also be seen as a predominantly profitable project, introduced at a strategic period, ensuring a favourable reception.

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