Introduction: Norms and Limits of Fairy-Tale Transgression

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Transgression of socio-cultural norms has defined the literary fairy tale since its inception and, in many stories, is at the very center of the plot. If Bluebeard's last wife did not transgress the prohibition of her murderous husband, opening the door of the forbidden chamber, there would be no discovery of the corpses of the previous wives, and consequently no suspenseful ending of the story. Bluebeard's spouse, however, *does* open the prohibited chamber and, in Charles Perrault's tale, just barely manages to escape the fate of the previous wives in a dramatic finale, while Bluebeard is ultimately killed by her brothers. The little girl in the Grimms' version of "Little Red Riding Hood" takes a similar risk. She must first disregard her mother's interdiction not to wander into the forest for things to go awry—and for the almost fatal meeting with the wolf dressed up as her grandmother to occur. In these tales, the act of transgression possesses an entertainment value aimed at building or maintaining narrative tension. At the same time, it carries an educational message which seeks to punish the transgressor and reward "good" behavior that is compliant with societal norms and expectations. We know that the Grimms' Little Red Riding Hood will no longer disobey: the little girl vows never to stray again from the path, and the next time she encounters a wolf she shows she has understood the perils of transgression, going straight to her grandmother's. In the case of Bluebeard's wife, however, we can only infer about her future ("good"?) behavior. Bluebeard's wife nearly gets killed for her curiosity about the chamber, and yet her transgression allows her to escape. Especially when considering its numerous rewritings from Perrault to the present day, "Bluebeard" can be read not only as a transgression-leads to-punishment tale, but also as a transgression-leads to-reward tale given

that the protagonist retains her life. The "Bluebeard" tale demonstrates that, in fairy tales, the act of transgression can be interpreted and re-interpreted in countless different ways.

Many are the cautionary fairy tales that implement what Maria Tatar has called a "reward/punishment system" (67): reward for compliance, punishment for transgression. Indeed, the centrality of acts of transgression—and of transgressive themes such as incest, cannibalism, or being betrothed to an animal—in the fairy-tale tradition has long been highlighted by scholarship. In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1927), as part of his formalist discourse on the "functions" of characters, Vladimir Propp underlines the important role of transgression in advancing folk- and fairy-tale narrative, where the "violation" of a prohibition, usually committed by the hero, drives the plot of the story (functions #2 and 3) (26-28). But further transgression is introduced by the presentation of the villain as a destabilizing force that threatens the social order and traditional values of the fairy-tale world (function #3), which are eventually re-established when the villain is defeated and punished while the hero gets married and is awarded a kingdom (functions #30 and 31) (63-65).

While Propp focuses on the narrative functions of transgression in oral folktales, Jack Zipes considers the subversive aspects of folk and fairy tales from a viewpoint that is not only literary, but socio-historical and political as well. In particular, Zipes points out the opposition between the utopian role of magic in pre-modern oral folktales, which served to symbolically express the transgressive desire for social transformation of the lower classes in a feudal world, and the use of the literary fairy tale in the context of children's education from the sixteenth century onwards, when many fairy tales came to mirror the conservative mores and morals of the dominant classes (7-11). Zipes's opposition between a "transgressive" popular culture and a "conservative" upper-class culture, however, is based on a socio-political interpretation of transgression as class conflict that does not take into account the transgression of conservative values in literary fairy tales such as those written by the

conteuses, which questioned traditional gender roles and sexual norms of early modern France.

Where Zipes sees opposition, Cristina Bacchilega sees interaction. Mediating between narratological and literary-historical approaches, Bacchilega describes the interaction between norm and transgression as constituting the essence of the tale of magic, and, consequently, of both folk and fairy tales *as* tales of magic. In other words, folk and fairy tales would exist in a space of tension between norm and transgression, between what is familiar and authoritative and the magic that subverts it, creating wonder:

> Though we may not think of them as folkloric "preliminary censorship," tradition and consensus go together, and it is their dynamic interaction with an "innovative" or subversive impulse that constitutes folk narratives. As folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comfort of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation. (Bacchilega 7)

In fairy tales, transgression can also take other forms and significations that go well beyond acts of disobedience or the infringement of society's traditional rules and morals. It could be argued that the birth of the literary fairy tale was in itself a transgressive act: an (inter)medial and narrative subversion that, in the passage from the oral to the written medium and from the word of mouth to the word on the page, transgressed the folktale's open form/norm and its essence as a changeable, adaptable, unsettled means of narration. Out of numerous variants of a story, one or a few at most were set down in writing, only selecting certain narrative, ideological, or moral features that conformed to the author's worldview and aims, discarding others. Zipes calls this process, by which a fluid and subversive oral tradition is given a fixed and normative form, a "violation," which makes the literary fairy

tale a de facto transgression of the oral folktale , but ignores the opposite process of "folklorization" of literary fairy tales, when oral versions found in different regions of the world can be traced back to a single literary tale. On the contrary, Bacchilega's understanding of the folk- and fairy tale as a form characterized by a "dynamic interaction" between consensus/tradition and innovation/subversion invites us to consider the interplay of transgression and norms as the textual and historical fabric of the genre, be it in its oral or literary manifestations.

Versions of "Sleeping Beauty," a tale likely derived from a literary tradition, illustrate this ongoing interaction between consensus and subversion, norm and transgression. From Basile to Perrault to the Brothers Grimm, the tale witnesses a progressive editing out of transgressive content. Adapting Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia," Perrault changes the story to avoid adultery and rape, but retains cannibalism, or at least the suggestion of cannibalism (the Prince's mother is an ogress with a penchant for the flesh of young children, although she never actually eats any in the tale). The Brothers Grimm ("Briar Rose") further edit the story by eliminating the second part of Perrault's version with the ogress and ending the tale with the marriage of the prince and the princess (although only *after* the prince awakens the princess with a kiss that does not appear in Perrault's version). Many subsequent retellings of "Sleeping Beauty" reverse the trend toward relatively sanitized versions and (re)introduce transgressive elements. In late nineteenth-century France, Catulle Mendès, claiming to tell the tale as it really happened in "fairy land," has the princess reject the prince in order to return to her sleep with pleasure-filled dreams, under the protection of the fairies ("La Belle au bois rêvant"). A number of twentieth-century retellings similarly revel in upending the predictable happy ending, with more extreme instances of transgression—among other things, transforming the prince into an incestuous father (Anne Sexton), the princess's pleasant dreams into nightmares (Robert Coover, *Briar Rose*), or the princess herself into a vampire

(Angela Carter, "The Lady of the House of Love"). Historically speaking, then, making the fairy tale align with consensus seems to invite subversion of that very consensus, perhaps because of the genre's broad familiarity. In other words, socially normative uses of the genre, beginning especially in the nineteenth century and continuing throughout the twentieth century with Disney's morally conservative films, arguably give transgressive adaptations a resonance that is frequently found in fairy tales. With social and cultural changes over time, the "dynamic interplay" that Bacchilega describes can be seen as an ongoing, cyclical process. The staying power of the fairy tale as a genre is precisely this ability to lend itself to transgression over and over again, which, paradoxically, involves iterating new norms, in turn inviting new transgressions.

But what, precisely, do we mean when we speak of "transgression" and "norm" in a fairy tale? What exactly gets transgressed and how? And to what extent are transgression and norm in and through the fairy tale specific to the genre? These are admittedly complex questions the answers to which vary by historical and cultural context. Etymologically, "transgression" is derived from the Latin *transgressio,* the act of passing or crossing over. In short, moving beyond accepted boundaries or norms, literally and figuratively; crossing a red line we might say in contemporary parlance. In many fairy tales, transgression often involves a physical act of movement in space (entering the forbidden chamber, leaving the path through the forest, climbing to the attic to see the old woman spinning, etc.), but the metaphorical understanding of non-consensual or illicit boundary crossing takes many forms, of course. Alongside diegesis, storytellers, writers, and filmmakers willfully cross boundaries in the expectations—the narrative and cultural norms—held by their listeners, readers, and viewers. These boundary crossings can be inoffensive, or relatively so, but they can also be quite the opposite—surprising, shocking, arresting. They can concern style or narrative structure, but they can also involve cultural taboos. Transgression is culturally variable, and

as such takes many different forms, and yet is itself defined and constrained by social norms. That is to say, transgression always has limits, and those limits also are culturally variable. Given this, we might ask the following of any narrative tradition: What options are available for transgression at a particular moment and in a particular tradition? At the same time, can transgression become normative, can it establish its own norms that are assimilated by culture? What are the limits of transgression, that is, what are the boundaries that even transgression cannot cross in a specific time and place? And beyond this, what are the outcomes of transgression? Does it restructure a fundamental cultural premise, does it end up reaffirming the prevailing consensus, or does it do something of both?

From different cultural, linguistic, and historical examples, essays in this special issue probe these and other questions. This special issue of *Marvels & Tales* on *Norm and Transgression in the Fairy-Tale Tradition* includes a selection of essays developed from papers at a conference of the same name that took place at Brown University, Providence, RI, between June 7 and 9, 2023, which saw the participation of thirty-six speakers coming from eleven different countries and four different continents.[1] One has only to look at titles of the various panels of this conference to appreciate the breadth of connotations that can be found within the subject(s) of transgression and normativity in the fairy-tale world: from "(Non)Normative Forms and Writings" to "Queer(ing) Transgression"; from "Transgressions on the Screen" to "Colonial Norms, Postcolonial Transgressions." This special issue strives to reflect the diversity of the themes and topics discussed in the various panels and keynotes of the conference.

In her opening essay, "Fairy Tales Forever After: Expanding the Canon, Creative Disruption, and Unconscious Upcycling," Maria Tatar juxtaposes two types of practices in what she calls "the never-ending recycling project" (17) that continually expands the fairy-tale canon: creative disruption and unconscious upcycling. Tatar argues that in order to

generate new significations from old tales and transgress the conservative norms embedded in those tales, authors should self-consciously maintain links with the fairy-tale tradition so that their transgression is visible—and traceable—and therefore meaningful ("creative disruption"), instead of re- or even de-contextualizing fairy-tale material without preserving any apparent ties to the source tale, which runs the opposite risk of upholding traditional values ("unconscious upcycling"). The interaction between tradition and transgression in the context of fairy-tale retellings is also the focus of Christy Williams's essay "Breaking the Fairy Tale: Narrative Transgression in the Video Game *Cinders*." Williams explores how agency is represented both in variants of the Cinderella tale type (ATU 510A) and in the video game *Cinders*, arguing that fairy tales like all stories are an assemblage of pre-defined options opening up multiple pathways, which means that a narrative tradition is not singular but multiple. Similarly, transgression is not singular, so to speak, but also multiple.

From a certain type of transgressive visual adaptation of a fairy tale—"Cinderella" reworked into a video game—this special issue moves on to different kinds of transgressive visual adaptations of another fairy tale, "Bluebeard." In "The Translation of Transgressive Interiority: Rooting Catherine Breillat's *Barbe bleue* in a Consideration of Eighteenth-Century French Illustrations," Melissa King uses early French illustrations of Perrault's "La Barbe bleue," with their ambiguous representation of the violent yet seemingly intimate relationship between Bluebeard and his wife, to interpret the connections between Perrault's source text and what King calls the "transgressive interiority" of Breillat's film. The transgressive potentials of Bluebeard adaptations are also discussed by Abigail Heiniger in "The Magic of Patwa in *Bluebeard and Brer Anancy*: Colonial Oppression and the Transgressive Power of Language," from a perspective that is not so much visual as linguistic and postcolonial. Placing the first Caribbean pantomime, Bennett-Coverley's *Bluebeard and Brer Anancy*, in dialogue with previous nineteenth-century English "Bluebeard" pantomimes

and more broadly with the European fairy-tale tradition, Heiniger demonstrates the roles of Patwa and of Jamaican folklore—especially the transgressive figure of Anancy—in exposing and subverting the power dynamics of British cultural, linguistic, and legal imperialism.

While Heiniger examines the hybrid roots of the Caribbean fairy-tale pantomime, in her essay "When the Shakespeare tale *almost* becomes a Fairy Tale: Norm and Transgression in the Shakespeare Canon for Children," Laura Tosi investigates the hybridity of what she deems the "Shakespeare tale." Focusing on narrative retellings of Shakespeare for children and young adults, Tosi shows the instability of boundaries separating Shakespeare's plays from fairy tales, high culture from popular culture, adult literature from children's literature. Introducing fairy-tale characters, structures, and formulas into Shakespeare plots, Shakespeare tales cross over the above dividing lines, which are not only narrative and stylistic but also entail the implementation of the binary moral system of classic fairy tales, thus transgressing the moral ambiguity typically found in Shakespearean plays. In "Paul Grimault, Jacques Prévert and *Engagée* Animation: The Case of *The King and the Bird*," Anne Duggan considers another category of transgressive adaptation, that of prose tale for children (specifically, "The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep" by Hans Christian Andersen) into politically engaged animated film. Duggan shows how Grimault and Prévert use their film, an allegorical representation of Maréchal Pétain and the Vichy Régime of WWII France, to critique the use of propaganda by autocratic regimes and societies of surveillance, bringing together questions of artistic freedom and social justice.

The last four essays highlight the interplay between transgression and norm in portrayals of gender and sexuality. Elena Emma Sottilotta and Pablo a Marca both examine instances of cross-dressing. In "*Fantaghirò* as an 'Artivist' Adaptation: Gender Subversions from Italo Calvino's Fairy Tale to Lamberto Bava's Cult TV series and Contemporary Fan Art," Sottilotta traces how the themes of feminine disobedience and illicit desire emerge in

successive adaptations of the Italian folktale hero(ine) Fanta-Ghirò, whose adventures parallel those of cross-dressing female warrior in other traditions. From folktale to literary fairy tale to television series and, finally, to fan art, this cross-dressing character has had an enduring appeal that more recently has inspired "artivist" adaptations. In "Cloaked in Queerness: Challenging Gender Identities in *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*," a Marca examines a seventeenth-century French fairy-tale-like novella with three cross-dressing characters who highlight gender fluidity and adaptability. A Marca reads this novella as a queer experiment, relevant for contemporary contexts, that offers the possibility of a happy ending outside of the heteronormative gender binary.

Luciana Cardi examines how shape-shifting narratives are used to explore struggles of sexual identity after the trauma of abuse. In "Reshaping Japanese Animal Tales and Transgressing Gender Paradigms in Alexander Chee's Novel *Edinburgh*," Cardi demonstrates that the East Asian fox trickster narrative, which crosses the boundaries between humans and animals, is adapted by Chee to transgress boundaries of ethnic, gendered, and heterosexual norms. Trauma and sexual abuse are also integral to the classic fairy tale studied by Katie Clausen in "From Grimm to Gone: Confronting *Allerleirauh*'s Absence in US Public Libraries." Clausen sets out to explain the curious absence from U.S. public libraries of the ATU 510B variant by the Brothers Grimm, featuring a father's incestuous desire for his daughter. Using quantitative methods, Clausen argues that the underrepresentation of the tale results from its transgressive theme which, she contends, should nonetheless be made available to young readers.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this special issue reflect just a few of the myriad ways that norm and transgression interact to shape and *re*shape fairy tales. Through a diversity of approaches, these essays invite us to consider other transgressive themes and other transgressive modes of writing and adaptation in fairy tales—worldwide and across media. At

the same time, they remind us that transgression in fairy tales not only depends on various cultural forms and norms, but also has culture-specific limits. Ultimately, this special issue prompts us to ask *how* our readings of fairy tales are informed by norms and their transgression, and, more specifically, to reflect on *which* norms and transgressions we privilege, and *why*.

Notes

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