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Elizabeth Wanning Harries: Twice upon a Time

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Once, Not Long Ago

A little formalism turns one away from History,
but . . . a lot brings one back to it.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

WHY DO we still read fairy tales? And why, at the turn of the millennium, are they so popular? The blurbs on the back of the many paperback collections of tales reveal some recurring justifications for printing yet another fat book. The tales are said to be “timeless” or “ageless” or “dateless”; they seem removed from history and change. They “offer insights into the oral traditions of different cultures” or have “the unadorned direct rhythm of the oral form in which they were first recorded” or “retain the feeling of oral literature”; they seem to give us access to a more primitive and more authentic oral culture. “Universal” and “classless,” they “offer insight into universal human dilemmas that span differences of age, culture, and geography,” and are told by “titled ladies in the salons of the aristocrats, by governesses in the nursery, and by peasant farmers around the hearth.” In spite of their varied national origins and the varied ways in which they have been written and published, they seem to be evidence for common human experiences, hopes, and fears that transcend nation and class. At a time when the world is splintering into many ethnic factions, fairy tales seem to provide some binding force.

If we read the history of fairy tales thoughtfully, however, we see that these conventional notions are completely mistaken, part of the nostalgia and traditionalizing that have accompanied our construction of our own modernity. We need to begin by acknowledging that all fairy tales *have* a history, that they are anything but ageless or timeless. Though they may have roots in oral narratives, all the stories we now call fairy tales have been written and rewritten, printed and reprinted over centuries. Some versions of the tales are simpler and more familiar to us than others, and therefore may seem

more authentic, but we have no access to any original versions or urtexts. Rather, all we have are versions of versions, narratives spun and respun for hundreds of years. Though the early writers of fairy tales in Italy and France in the seventeenth century often claimed that they were reproducing stories they had been told (by their nurses or grandmothers, from peasant sources), they were usually following written models. The history of fairy tales is not primarily a history of oral transmission but rather a history of print.

Folklorists have recently become acutely aware of the “politics of folklore,” articulating “the conceptual problems inherent in our representations of authentic, traditional, folk culture.”¹ But, though many people doing research on fairy tales are conscious of what has been happening in folklore, they do not consistently reflect on their own traditionalizing practices. We need to reread the history of fairy tales—and to watch ourselves rereading it. Not that this is easy: the pieties inscribed on the back pages of our fairy-tale collections are hard to shake, even as we are criticizing them. But we should think of the tales we know as belonging to a “distressed genre,” as “new antiques,” to borrow Susan Stewart’s terms.² They are often *imitations* of what various literary cultures have posited as the traditional, the authentic, or the nonliterary. They have been “distressed” like a supposedly antique pine chest, given the patina of age, surrounded by signs that suggest simultaneously their great age and their agelessness.

What we now know as fairy tales have always been deeply affected by the practices of writing—and never existed in anything like their present form until long after the invention of print. (People rarely comment on the ironies of the multiplication of printed versions of supposedly oral texts.) In fact, the tales we now call fairy tales were created primarily by highly educated and literate people, sometimes imitating what they claimed were the tales of less-educated or illiterate people. To be quite honest, I sometimes wish I did not believe these things. The nostalgic dream of a simple, coherent oral culture, so different from our complicated and fragmented one, still haunts me. There is something comforting about knowing stories that seem somehow to connect you to a past before writing, before printing, before “Art” with a capital A. But in fact fairy tales rarely do.

As we reread the history of fairy tales, we also need to pay attention to those tales that have been almost forgotten. When we speak of fairy tales, the names that tend to come immediately to mind are Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, perhaps John Ruskin, or Oscar

Wilde, or Andrew Lang's late-nineteenth-century rainbow fairy-tale collections. But there is also a long tradition of tales written by women, beginning in France in the 1690s and continuing for over three hundred years. This book highlights this neglected tradition, to show how one-sided and narrow our conception of the fairy tale has become and to link twentieth-century revisions of classic fairy tales with earlier models.³ The first two chapters focus on the *conteuses* (female tale-tellers) who wrote and published fairy tales in France in the 1690s, to show why they have been overlooked and what their literary strategies actually were. The last two chapters focus on the similar strategies of late-twentieth-century women writers who retell and revise fairy tales: the narrative voices they construct, their framing techniques, their reinterpretations of details from well-known tales. Like the versions of tales by the *conteuses*, recent tales by Angela Carter and Anne Sexton also play on our readerly delight in repetition and in difference. My rereading of the history of fairy tales is an act of inclusion, an attempt to make readers understand the genre as wider and more capacious than they have supposed, more open to a variety of forms and themes.

In the middle of the book, in chapter 3, I trace the invention of the fairy tale in England, from the first translations of Charles Perrault and the *conteuses* through the early nineteenth century. In order to see the ways our dominant Anglo-American ideas about fairy tales are mistaken, we need to understand how they were constructed, or where they came from. Most of the fairy tales we know and repeat were not originally British but rather pan-European. How they came to be thought of as an intrinsic part of our Anglo-American heritage, fully naturalized, is one of the questions that animates this book. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, many writers lamented the disappearance of the indigenous fairies. By the middle of the nineteenth, many fairy tales had entered the tradition, mainly from French and German sources. Notions about their necessary shape (short and simple) and their chief audience (children) had become widespread. The movement between these two points, influenced both by Enlightenment rationalism and by romantic nationalism, determined the later shape of our fairy-tale canon.

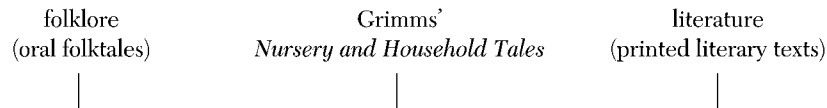
If we continue to read only a restricted list of fairy tales, limited by common assumptions about their requisite shape and concerns, we will miss some of the most interesting and challenging examples of the genre. If we think all fairy tales must be narrated by an invisible, third-person teller, we

will be unable to hear the play of voices in many tales. If we believe that some tales are much more “authentic” than others because they sound ageless, we will be falling into a carefully laid narrative trap. Studying the European literary fairy tale in its historical complexity also gives us a chance to explore some crucial theoretical problems in miniature: canon formation, the simulation of storytellers’ voices in print, the practices and politics of literary adaptation and revision. This minor genre, so often the center of arguments about its traditional authenticity and its modernity, can help us untangle some of the persistent problems of literary history. Though these may seem to be exclusively academic concerns, the way we approach these problems ultimately affects our access to a wide range of older texts and to various ways of interpreting them.

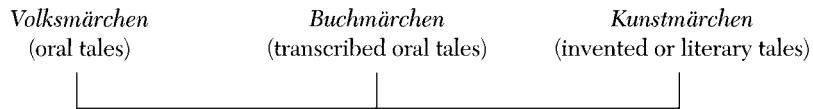
But what *are* fairy tales? Our term in English comes directly from the French, the “contes de fées” that became popular in France at the end of the seventeenth century. (As J.R.R. Tolkien pointed out long ago, the first citation for “fairy-tale” in the supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 1750, though there are many references to “fairies” from the fourteenth century on. There are actually a few scattered uses of the term before 1750—in Sarah Fielding’s 1749 novel *The Governess*, for example.) Nothing is more difficult than to try to define the fairy tale in twenty-five words or less, and all dictionaries fail miserably. The *OED* defines it as “a. A Tale about fairies. Also *gen.*, fairy legend, faerie. b. An unreal or incredible story. c. A falsehood.” Or another example, simpler but amazingly similar, particularly given the roughly hundred years’ distance between them: “1. A story about fairies. 2. A fictitious, fanciful story or explanation” (*The Concise Heritage Dictionary*). But many, even most, of the stories we call fairy tales do not have any fairies in them. (Think of “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Snow White,” for example. Wolves that speak, magic mirrors, yes. But no fairies.) And, though it is true that “fairy tale” has become a synonym for an ingenious lie and that fairy tales are of course fictions, I think we have clearer, though still somewhat inchoate, ideas about what makes a tale a fairy tale—ideas that need some examination.

When we speak of fairy tales, we seem to mean several things at once: tales that include elements of folk tradition and magical or supernatural elements, tales that have a certain, predictable structure. Maria Tatar has suggested that the fairy tale “has been associated with both oral and literary traditions but is above all reserved for narratives set in a fictional world

where preternatural events and supernatural intervention are taken wholly for granted.” She distinguishes the fairy tale from the folk tale because, though it often has folk elements, it rarely has the “earthy realism” of the true folk tale. She places the Grimms’ fairy tales midway between folklore and literature in a helpful diagram:⁴



The common word in German for the Grimms’ and other similar collections is *Buchmärchen*, or traditional oral tales with folk elements that have been written down and printed. (One awkward term for these in English is “orature.”) They are always opposed to *Volksmärchen* (tales in an oral form), on the one side, and *Kunstmärchen* (invented, literary tales like Goethe’s *Märchen*) on the other:



Unlike Tatar, however, I would push the Grimms’ tales further to the right-hand side of the continuum, much closer to *Kunstmärchen* than to *Buchmärchen*. Most fairy tales, as we now know them, do have elements of folk tradition. But all of them, and particularly the Grimms’, have been extensively shaped and codified by successive literate tale-tellers. To give just one example, the Grimms’ tale “Rapunzel,” tale number twelve in the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*,⁵ comes from an eighteenth-century German version of the tale, published by Friedrich Schulz in his *Kleine Romane* in 1790; which was an adaptation of Charlotte Caumont de La Force’s story “Persinette,” first printed in 1697; which probably was taken from Giambattista Basile’s collection of fairy tales, *Lo cunto de li cunti* or *Pentamerone* (published after his death in 1634–1636). Elements of this “princess in the tower” story go back at least to medieval romance. What makes “Rapunzel” a fairy tale is not so much its more obvious folk elements (like the eating of the herb, parsley in the French, “Rapünzchen”—rampion, *mâche* or lamb’s lettuce—in the German) as the mysterious powers of the old woman (a fairy or “fée” in the French version), the magical isolation of the tower, the separa-

tion and final union of the princess and the prince who happens by. Each new written version is in effect a new “reading” of the basic configuration. (For example, as Tatar and others have pointed out, the Grimms—those nervous nineteenth-century Nellies—never mention the princess’s pregnancy in later editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* until her twins mysteriously appear, while Basile and La Force are quite matter-of-fact about it.) Though Max Lüthi praised the Grimms for their storytelling genius as they “translated the seventeenth-century fairy tale back into the style of the folk fairy tale,”⁶ they were really shaping it into a style that they themselves had invented as particularly appropriate for their *Märchen*. The writers of fairy tales rarely attempt to uncover or rediscover the folk elements in a tale. Rather, they build on, revise, and change the story as it has come down to them, rereading it in their own ways, pouring new wine into the old bottle that they know from the written tradition.

This old bottle often has a predictable shape. Generations of folklorists, structuralists, and formalist theorists of narrative have worked to show the basic plot elements that most fairy tales share.⁷ They identify character roles and basic plot motifs, showing that fairy tales all over the world tend to follow similar patterns. Recently, in a cartoon in the *New Yorker*, Roz Chast brilliantly condensed all these theories into one simple four-frame cartoon called “Story Template” (fig. 1). Like Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic*, she emphasizes the movement from stasis to conflict to stasis again; as he says, “All narrative is a movement between two equilibriums which are similar but not identical.”⁸ In Chast’s cartoon the beginning and ending are in fact nearly identical, “once upon a time” and “happily ever after” taking the same shape with the same cast of characters. In fairy tales, of course, at least one new character usually appears in the family circle by the end: a prince, a princess, some character from outside the family who transforms the original configuration. Or, in some cases, a character from the original family has disappeared—as do the wicked mothers/stepmothers in “Hänsel and Gretel” (*KHM* 15) and “The Juniper Tree” (*KHM* 47). But, as Chast’s diagram shows, we usually move from one family to another, new-created one, similar in their apparent stability.

Chast’s two-frame delineation of the progression of most stories is breathtaking in its accurate simplicity. The blocking figure, a fire-breathing dragon from another undefined world, “suddenly” erupts into the everyday family scene. The helping figure, a superman carefully placed in Central Park with



Fig. 1. Roz Chast, "Story Template."
© The New Yorker Collection 1998
Roz Chast from cartoonbank.com.
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the New York skyline behind him, “luckily” appears, clearly just in the nick of time, to restore the original order. With only four frames, four captions, and five characters as our guides, we easily construct a narrative plot movement, partly because we know the pattern so well.

The template Chast has constructed here is only a rough guide—and would never lead us to imagine the complexity and depth of many fairy tales, particularly those written at the end of the seventeenth century by the French *conteuses* and recently by many women writers like Angela Carter and A. S. Byatt. But I think she has caught, in an economical and amusing way, the paradigms that have informed the reading and rewriting of fairy tales for at least the last three hundred years. These paradigms are still there—in our narrative expectations, in our narrative desires (to use a peculiarly fashionable word in recent narrative theory that depends on the insights of psychoanalysis). When we say, “It’s just like a fairy tale,” or “It has a fairy-tale ending,” we mean that something has turned out mysteriously, even unnaturally, well; that an equilibrium has been reestablished when only catastrophe seemed possible. In fact, a number of fairy tales turn out badly—Perrault’s version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s “The Ram,” and many more, particularly some tales by the French *conteuses* that I will discuss in the first two chapters. These are all stories that deliberately violate our sense of the typical fairy-tale pattern. We expect the sequence Chast has outlined: stability, disruption, intervention, and stability regained, “once upon a time” to “happily ever after.”

These expectations have been reinforced by our reliance on an essay Walter Benjamin wrote in the 1930s: “The Storyteller” (“Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Leskov’s,” 1936).⁹ Writers about fairy tales, as well as theorists of narrative, often refer and defer to this essay. Benjamin praises Leskov as a great example of the kind of storytelling that he sees as doomed: “[T]he art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less often do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly” (83). He argues that the rapid changes in modern life, the multiplicity and fragmentation of twentieth-century experience, have made true storytelling almost impossible. And he singles out the fairy tale as the clearest and most powerful example of that true storytelling: “The fairy tale, which is to this day the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales” (102).¹⁰

Here Benjamin also makes the common assumption that the fairy tale is appropriate for children because it was the first “literary” form, that children need and crave the same experiences that people had somewhere in our misty cultural beginnings (“Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”). As many scholars have recently shown, fairy tales came to be thought of primarily as literature for children only in the course of the eighteenth century. The equation of fairy tales and childhood is not a sensible one, as J.R.R. Tolkien pointed out long ago (1938).¹¹ It depends on two related and mistaken romantic notions: that fairy tales are relics of a culture’s early beginnings, and that children are beings who trail “clouds of glory” from that ideal, mythic past to which only they have unmediated access. Benjamin associates children with simpler, clearer, more “natural” forms: “There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness [“keusche Gedrungenheit”] which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener” (91). His postromanticism here seems to blot out his usual ironic powers of analysis. The “chaste compactness” of the archetypal fairy tale, he claims, guarantees that it will be handed on and down.

Benjamin’s delineation of the fairy tale is telling. Like many other writers on the fairy tale, and more beautifully than most, he stresses its connections to a community of listeners and the oral tradition. Borrowing from Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* (1920), he insists on the difference between the audience of the storyteller and the reader of a novel: “A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader” (100). According to Benjamin, the story creates a particular bond between the listener (or even the reader) and its teller; it is peculiarly intimate, bound up with gesture and voice, even voice as transcribed onto the written page, or what he calls the interaction of “soul, eye, and hand” (108).

And the storyteller, unlike the novelist or the modern writer, is not an “artist” but rather a craftsman or artisan. Benjamin repeatedly returns to phrases and metaphors that place the storyteller in a tradition of manual labor: “Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the vessel” (92). The best storytellers were, on the one hand, seafarers and traveling journeymen; on the other, tillers of the soil

(“Ackerbauer”) and all those who worked with their hands in one place. Benjamin also mourns the disappearance of the weaving rooms where he thinks stories were told and retold (91). He is anxious to make the true story something that not only is rooted in cultural memory but also bears the traces of its supposed origins as a primitive artifact.

Benjamin’s vision of the story and the storyteller is profoundly appealing. It speaks to our sense that the human community is disintegrating and that we have no common wisdom (what Harry Zohn translates as “counsel,” German “Rat”) to draw on. A reflection of the dark European situation in the mid-1930s, the essay also offers a kind of messianic hope, the hope that we can draw on old customs and stories to create a sense of human community in a disenchanted world.¹² But Benjamin’s ideas about the story, and about the fairy tale in particular, are both deeply conventional and deeply misleading. We tend to believe that children have always been the primary audience for fairy tales and that fairy tales are particularly appropriate for them. We tend to believe that the fairy tales we know and love come from ancient oral sources, that their appearance in print is a late and somewhat disturbing development. And we tend to believe that they are an expression of the deep wisdom and knowledge of the “folk,” those artisans and spinners and travelers who shaped and crafted them in an unconscious but knowing way.

We also mistakenly expect fairy tales to be short and simple. When Benjamin speaks of the “chaste compactness” of a fairy tale, he is probably referring to the model the Grimms established in their *Märchen*. They are “compact” or concise (“gedrungen”) because the Grimms thought they were re-creating the simplicity and directness of folk narrative, without digressions or secondary plots. They are “chaste” (“keusch”) because they do not indulge in psychological exploration; the narrator is laconic and nonjudgmental. But this paradigm is not typical of all fairy tales. The early French tales were often convoluted, complex, and full of sly psychological observations—as are many nineteenth- and twentieth-century fairy tales. Our unspoken understanding of the fairy tale is not expansive enough to include them—but, as I will argue in the first chapter, this means writing some of the most interesting tales out of the genre. It is not surprising that Perrault’s and the Grimms’ tales have been dominant in much fairy-tale research and theory, but I think we need to understand and reassess their influence on our thinking about the forms fairy tales take.

Feminists, of course, have been criticizing the Grimms' patriarchal assumptions and nineteenth-century bourgeois attitudes for nearly three decades. A brief and very selective list of titles shows the general trend: "Someday My Prince Will Come"; *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye; The Cinderella Complex*; "Tale-Spinners: Submerged Voices in Grimms' Fairy Tales"; *Don't Bet on the Prince*.¹³ As the second wave of feminist thinking got under way in the 1970s, many critics fixed on fairy tales as condensed expressions of social expectations for women and as dangerous myths that determined their lives and hopes. The "sleep" of Sleeping Beauty or of Snow White in her glass coffin, the uncomplaining self-abnegation of Cinderella, the patience and silence of the sisters who work to save their seven or twelve brothers, the princesses who must be rescued from towers or briar hedges or forests or servitude—all these seem to provide the patterns for feminine passivity and martyrdom. The wicked stepmothers, witches, and fairies have come to represent the dangers older, powerful women seem to pose in our culture. (Many of these patterns have been repeated ad nauseam in the Disney versions of the tales and have been duplicated in the expensive illustrated versions that fill bookstore shelves, as Jack Zipes and others have pointed out.) The "images of women" in the fairy tale have come in for extensive (and needed) critique; Marina Warner's recent *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995) is a late and particularly incisive example of this—and includes some interesting and necessary work on the woman as storyteller: Mother Goose, Mother Bunch, Scheherazade, and all their mythical avatars.

But we have been less conscious and less critical of the ways the Grimms have determined our conception of the structure of the fairy tale, of the shapes it is supposed to take. The "chaste compactness" of its best-known form, its predictable structure help make its gender inequalities and family structures also seem inevitable. But the literary fairy tale has taken a number of shapes in its history, shapes now often seen as aberrant or subversive. We need to look carefully at the structure of early tales written by women, often very different from the compact tales favored by Perrault and the Grimms. We need to pay attention to the way tales, both old and new, have been framed. We need to look much more closely at the narrative voices various fairy-tale writers have chosen for their tale-telling. The literary fairy tale is much more varied in shape—protean, in fact—than we have assumed, and has been for three hundred years.

Much feminist literary criticism operates on the premise that women writers modify and challenge patterns established by earlier male writers. As Nancy Walker says in her interesting book *The Disobedient Writer*,

Appropriating a literary genre in order to revise or even reverse its assumptions, ideologies, or paradigms is one of several ways in which a writer may alter an inherited tradition, and such a method is by no means the exclusive property of women. Indeed, literary history—particularly the history of fiction—is frequently constructed by successive writers turning to their own purposes the patterns and materials created by other writers. And yet it is also true that women’s relationship to such an inheritance has normally been fundamentally and dramatically different from that of men.¹⁴

“Re-vising” or revisiting the canon with a cold and critical eye has been part of many women writers’ projects.¹⁵ They reread and challenge the canon, and the modes of feeling and writing it embodies, as many feminist critics have shown. Often these critics have posited a difference between the agnostic, Freudian model of canonical revision that male writers subscribed to (as delineated by W. J. Bate and Harold Bloom)¹⁶ and the more muted, palimpsestic, “dis-eased” subversions that women writers invented.¹⁷ All writers write in dialogue with the traditions they have inherited, either openly or covertly; women writers, however, often understand and frame their revision of traditional models in sharply different ways. Our task as readers is to create for ourselves a more inclusive sense of those traditions and of the possible responses to them.

Because the tales written by Perrault and by the Grimms had become the dominant, canonical fairy-tale mode, women writers of fairy tales in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often wrote against that canon, defining their work as subversive and oppositional. Certainly much of the recent fairy-tale revival has involved the comic or tragic inversion of traditional fairy-tale expectations. Jack Zipes speaks tellingly in the introduction to his *Fairy Tale as Myth / Myth as Fairy Tale* of two different contemporary modes of dealing with fairy tales, what he calls “duplicates” and “revisions.” Duplicates simply repeat the structures and norms of traditional tales, reinforcing “the deeply entrenched modes of thinking, conceiving, believing that provide our lives with structure.” (An example would be a new translation of one of the Grimms’ tales, with elaborate new illustrations, that does not question or

significantly change the “original” it is copying.) Revisions, on the other hand, try “to alter the reader’s views of traditional patterns, images, and codes.”¹⁸ (An example would be Angela Carter’s story “The Bloody Chamber,” which is based on earlier “Bluebeard” narratives but sees its patterns and meaning in a sharply different way.)¹⁹

Most retellings of traditional or classic fairy tales are duplicates; any “new” collection of well-known fairy tales will bear this out. They do not change or question their existing forms or cultural assumptions. Some retellings are revisions; most of the tales, novels, and poems I will be looking at in this book belong in this category. But we need to develop a new word for procedures in retellings that go beyond simple revision. Christina Bacchilega has recently called these techniques “postmodern,” a term she uses to include the “conflictual dialogue with a pervasive tradition” that many contemporary fairy tales engage in. Postmodern narrative transformations, she argues, “do not exploit the fairy tale’s magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings.” Postmodern suspicion of the authentic subject, of fixed gender positions, and of the primacy of the spoken word informs the tales written in the last twenty-five years or so. She emphasizes the role of mirrors, frames, and carefully constructed first-person narrative voices in the recent revisions of traditional tales: “Postmodern fictions, then, hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale, playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices.”²⁰

The term “postmodern,” however, is a period term, a term that refers only to (roughly) the last quarter century. (It is also a term that has been the subject of much argument and theoretical difficulty, though Bacchilega reduces it to a common denominator that most critics would accept.) But the “postmodern” narrative techniques Bacchilega so brilliantly explores are strikingly similar to the narrative preoccupations of Giambattista Basile and of the late-seventeenth-century *conteuses*. Their tales, too, are often carefully framed, usually within a telling dialogue or contrasting novella. Their tales, too, often feature distorting mirrors and curious *mises-en-abyme*, or reflections of themselves, that expose their own artificiality and fictionality. The narrative voices the *conteuses* construct, while usually in the third person, never try to be “universal” or reproductions of what Benjamin calls “the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (84). Rather, the *conteuses* often emphasize their own position as knowing, educated, worldly-wise, female

subjects, with a wry and sometimes sardonic view of the narrative constellations they are reusing and revising.

In other words, our pervasive and one-sided understanding of the fairy-tale tradition as conforming to the shapes and patterns that writers like Benjamin have described leads us to see the revisionary techniques of recent writers as “postmodern,” new, unprecedented. Because we have ignored or forgotten other moments in the history of fairy tales, we fail to see the continuities that run through it. Certainly recent writers go much further in their play with and critique of the forms of the fairy tale, but such play and critique have been part of the genre of the literary tale almost from the beginning. Nancy Canepa has recently and convincingly argued for the “modernity” of Basile’s tales, “the figural and ideological interpolations, the references to diverse social realities and narrative traditions, that crowd the *cunti* and disturb their illusory ‘happy-ever after’ linearity.”²¹ Lewis Seifert, Patricia Hannon, and others have shown us the complexity of the *conteuses*’ creations. Many fairy tales are not the compact monologues we tend to expect, but rather examples of what Bakhtin called “heteroglossia,” the point of intersection of conflicting and competing voices and levels of speech.²² Throughout the history of the written, literary fairy tale, from its very beginnings in Italy and France, insistent internal voices and narrative strategies have called the shapes and patterns we now see as “traditional” into question.

Are there in fact *two* genres of fairy tales—one the compact model Perrault and the Grimms favored; one the longer, more complex, and more self-referential model?²³ I would rather say that our current understanding of what the fairy tale must be like is too narrow. Both models have existed since the genre began. But rather than call them the “traditional” and the “postmodern” or “performative” models, as Bacchilega does, I want to stress the long tradition behind both models by calling them simply “compact” and “complex.” This does not mean that all complex tales are long; some of Angela Carter’s most compelling (and chilling) revisions, like “The Snow Child” and “The Werewolf,” are very short indeed, as are some of Basile’s and the *conteuses*’. But they are complex in their reimaginings of well-known and more conventional fairy-tale patterns and motifs. They insist that their audiences constantly keep “compact” or “traditional” or “classic” versions in mind as they read or listen, reflecting on the differences between them.²⁴ Their doubleness, their insistence on representing “the other side of the story” (to borrow Molly Hite’s title), makes their complexity necessary:

The notion that stories inevitably both obscure and encode other stories has been axiomatic to our understanding of narrative since at least the eighteenth century; when construed as repressed or suppressed stories of *the Other*, these other stories become the enabling conditions for the writing and reading of . . . narrative.²⁵

“Compact” fairy tales are usually presented as foundational or original, literally as stories that tell us of origins, as stories that do not seem to depend on other stories but come to us as unmediated expressions of the folk and its desires. Their carefully constructed simplicity works as an implicit guarantee of their traditional and authentic status. “Complex” tales, on the other hand, work to reveal the stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell a different tale. They are determinedly and openly “intertextual” and “stereophonic,” Roland Barthes’s terms for the ways all writing is intertwined with other writing.²⁶

Neither model of the tale is new. In France, the literary fairy tale was a genre initially established by a group of women (and a few men, including Perrault, who frequented their circles and salons). Lewis Seifert has estimated that more than two-thirds of the tales that appeared during the first wave of fairy-tale production in France (between 1690 and 1715) were written by women.²⁷ For more than a century the tales of d’Aulnoy, Lhéritier, La Force, Bernard, and other women dominated the field of fairy tales and were the touchstones of the genre. They were often long, intricate, digressive, playful, self-referential, and self-conscious—far from the blunt terseness that Benjamin and many others associate with the form. (Their friend and competitor Charles Perrault was creating tales much closer to this model at the same time.) The *conteuses* played with earlier romance patterns and sometimes called them into question, but they were conscious that they were participating in the creation of a new genre.

What happens when a genre begins in two very different modes, the compact and the complex? What explains the gradual eclipse of these writers, their tales, and the kind of storytelling that they invented? Why did the simple Perrault model of the fairy tale win out? Why have we ignored, until very recently, the ways the *conteuses* challenged patterns of plot and feeling articulated in earlier written tales (by Straparola and Basile in Italy, in particular) and attempted to establish new ones? Why do we now tend to define the fairy tale in a way that excludes the tales the *conteuses* wrote? In the

chapters that follow, I will show how the two models have coexisted and competed at least since the late seventeenth century, or for slightly more than three hundred years.

No book on fairy tales can be comprehensive. I regret that I have been able to do so little with the relationship between folklore and fairy tales;²⁸ with the collections of tales produced by Straparola and Basile in Italy in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; with the many tales produced during the nineteenth century, in England,²⁹ in France, or in Germany, particularly tales written by women at about the same time as the Grimms were producing their tales;³⁰ with tales from outside Europe. But I have concentrated on the development of our current understanding of the fairy tale and on the ways rereading the complex tales of the *conteuses* and of our contemporaries can help us refine that understanding. As Salman Rushdie has said, “every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship. It prevents the telling of other tales.”³¹

The history of the written fairy tale is a history of pouring old wine into new bottles, forcing new wine into old bottles, and often “distressing” new bottles to make them look old. In my exploration of that history, I’ll be practicing a feminist formalism,³² trying to see how gender and this peculiar genre have interacted, or why it matters who is making or recycling the bottles and fermenting the wine. Marina Warner has spoken of fairy tales as “a language of the imagination, with a vocabulary of images and a syntax of plots.”³³ I will be exploring the ways that language has been inflected, the various idiolects or *paroles* that fairy-tale writers have chosen to use, the ways they have “negotiated”³⁴ their paths to new forms, transposed images, and replotted plots. In this book I reread the shifting history of that language and the different, gendered ways it has been spoken over the last three hundred years.