

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

**“We are the daughters of the witches you
weren’t able to burn”: A Gender-based
Approach to the Figure of the Witch in
Contemporary Reassessments of the Fairy
Tale**

Autora: Lara Macías Alonso

Titora: Laura María Lojo Rodríguez

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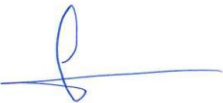
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Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

The figure of the witch has traditionally stood for the negative moral type in fairy tales, whose purpose was to teach readers (children in particular) what they should not do, what they should avoid and fear. However, feminist women have long identified with witches, as did the radical feminists from the late 1960s who first grouped in the streets of New York in order to “hex” Wall Street bankers, organised under the name W.I.T.C.H. It is undeniable that the image of the witch is a central one in present-day feminisms, and that is because to identify with the witch is not to identify with the dangerous and socially feared, as presented in traditional fairy tales, but rather to identify with a long history of gendered repression, with the silenced women who were persecuted for resisting to conform to patriarchal standards in one way or the other. Thus, the connotations of the witch have changed from being a (gendered) symbol of evil to an icon of female empowerment and resilience – as claimed by Maitland, “Witches are neither good nor bad. They are powerful” (*On Becoming a Fairy Godmother*, 2003). It is on the basis of this symbolic identification so evident in our contemporary world that this project aims to explore the significance of the image of the witch by offering an analysis of such a figure in contemporary re-writings of the fairy-tale genre; particularly, in Emma Donoghue’s collection of short stories entitled *Kissing The Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997).

Santiago de Compostela, 5 de novembro de 2019.

SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	6
1. The Fairy Tale Imagination	10
1.1. Fairy Tale Relevance: What, How and Why.....	11
1.2. Women and Representation in Fairy Tales.....	14
2. From Imagination to Reality: The Witch as a Feminist Symbol	20
2.1. The Burning Fires of Patriarchy: A Historical Overview of the Witch.....	21
2.2. Feminist Vindication of the Figure of the Witch.....	25
3. Redefining the Archetype: Contemporary Reassessments of the Fairy Tale Genre	30
3.1. Into the Screen: Contemporary Mass-Media Renditions of the Fairy Tale Witch.....	31
3.2. Magic Against Magic: Feminist Rewritings of the Fairy Tale Norm.....	36
3.3. Emma Donoghue's <i>Kissing the Witch</i>	41
Conclusions	48
Works Cited	52

INTRODUCTION

“We are the daughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn”. Regardless the country, time or place, quotes such as this one are found in any feminist demonstration or public protest in current times, always proudly displayed in banners carried by women of varied ages, backgrounds and gender expressions. Undoubtedly, the figure of the witch is one that appears to resonate with particular strength in contemporary audiences, particularly female ones, both in artistic and political terms. During childhood, the witch constantly manifests herself as a fairy tale character through bed-time stories, books, television shows and films, significantly shaping the process of socialisation. Owing to such an intrinsic connection with childhood memories and imagination, the figure of the witch remains attached to the adult’s unconscious, being commonly revisited by mass media products of fantastic fiction and the occasional Halloween costume or by the nostalgia-induced viewing of Disney’s fairy-tale animation pictures. Nevertheless, in the wake of the generalised increase in public awareness of the influence of cultural narratives on the construction of both collective and individual identities, called forth by the easement of access to critical discourses in the current digital age, the traditional image of the witch has been revised and significantly endowed with power beyond fairy-tale fantasy.

In the twenty-first century, Western societies no longer (officially) believe in magic —let alone black magic— and communities would not even consider publicly executing a woman after being held responsible for the sudden death of cattle or the spread of an illness. However, present-day societies still demonise and publicly condemn women who overtly search for power, both in personal and political terms. In the era of slut-shaming, rape culture, abortion bans and the “Me Too” movement, women who reclaim agency over their bodies, sexuality and reproductive health or demand real equality in corporations and institutions are often labelled as “feminazis”: the female candidate running for to US presidency in the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton, was referred to by a

male conservative political commentator as “a *witch* with a capital B”. Consequently, in the current context it is unsurprising that the witch and her power appeal to contemporary audiences — and most specifically to those gendered female and characterised by resilience to oppressive norms. As such, the configuration of the witch’s power notably suits the contemporary feminist socio-political agenda. In view of this, and because of the witch’s potential to mirror the growing public concern with gender identity in the framework of current feminist discourses, the transforming symbolic value of the figure of the witch emerges as an especially relevant topic of study.

A thorough understanding of the scope of the witch’s potential power as a feminist symbol, nonetheless, necessarily involves detailed examination of the medium initially responsible for the survival and rootedness of such an image in the contemporary imagination — the fairy tale genre. Easily recognised by its stylistic clearness and its satisfying invocation of successfully ended fantastic adventures, taking place “once upon a time” in “far away lands” to princesses and princes living in shining castles, the fairy tale imagination is still undeniably alive in the twenty-first century in spite of its evident disconnection with contemporary reality. In fact, not even present-day settings and aesthetics have managed to resist the structures and compositions of the classical genre, as is the case of romantic comedy television shows and films, commonly consumed by adults, likely unaware of their keenness in narratives generally conceived as children’s literature. The seemingly timeless relevance of fairy tales has been an object of extensive critical discussion, with theorisation on the reasons behind such a status essentially addressing the psychological and ideological nature of these time-resisting and highly influencing magical stories.

The institutionalised use of cultural products is a central tool in the process of dissemination, preservation and legitimisation of ideologies, either as a reaffirmation of hegemonic discourses or as a materialisation of contesting ones. As such, the strategic historical disposition of the classical literary tradition of fairy tales has particularly influenced the socialisation of successive generations by providing symbolic models of behaviour —both positive and negative— on the basis of its

underlying ideological values. The internalisation of such values inscribed in traditional fairy tale tropes and archetypes has greatly affected the often unconscious social construction of gender identity, exceptionally so in the case of women through the naturalisation of a set of gender roles and expectations that methodically constrain female individuality. Critical acknowledgment of this reality over time has resulted in the emergence of what may be considered a contemporary fairy tale rewriting project, substantially concerned with the reshaping of fairy tale narratives in consonance with the ideological developments and advancements of society. Against this background, with focus on its many radical transformations over the centuries on the account of rewritings, this dissertation aims to explore the configurations and meanings of one of the most enduring and symbolically charged fairy-tale female images — the witch.

In such an endeavour to reveal the gendering function of classical literary fairy tales by means of an inspection of contemporary reassessments of the genre and their particular depictions of the figure of the witch, this dissertation engages with existing critical discourses on the matter of fairy tales from a variety of areas of expertise, all complementary to the field of gender studies which ultimately defines the approach of this project. Hence, psychoanalytical interpretations of the genre are contrasted and contested by a socio-historical approach, while simultaneously complemented by a narratological perspective, fundamental for text analysis, and essentially connected to feminist theories. Accordingly, this exploration of the fairy tale witch and its changing nature as a gendered symbol is articulated by means of an analysis of classical literary fairy tales and significant contemporary rewritings —as is the case of Angela Carter’s and, in particular, Emma Donoghue’s collections— combining the inspiration derived from theories elaborated by consensually recognised experts such as Bruno Bettelheim, Jack Zipes, Cristina Bacchilega or Judith Butler.

The organisation of the chapters in this dissertation follows a deductive approach. Thus, the first chapter, entitled “The Fairy Tale Imagination”, explores the theoretical basis necessary for the understanding of classical literary fairy tales as the origin of the image of the witch, introducing an

elementary socio-cultural background to the genre and questioning the gender configurations inscribed in its model through an analysis of female representation across examples of classical tales. The second chapter, entitled “From Imagination to Reality: the Witch as a Feminist Symbol”, establishes the connection between the witch as a product of fairy tale imagination and the witch as a historical figure, presenting a critical overview of the witch’s historical representations and subsequently studying its political implications through an exploration of its interpretation by the contemporary feminist movement. Lastly, the third and final chapter, entitled “Redefining the Archetype: Contemporary Reassessments of the Fairy Tale Genre”, offers an exploration of contemporary revisions of the fairy tale genre and the figure of the witch by means of an initial examination of rewritings of the classical archetypical character present in contemporary popular culture, followed by an inquiry on how such rewritings have been affected by the feminist discourse of the second half of the twentieth century. This chapter eventually addresses a representative example of the feminist rewriting of the classical fairy tale witch as entailed in Emma Donoghue’s short story collection *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997), whose liminality as a genre best encapsulates the subversive potential of the witch.

1. THE FAIRY TALE IMAGINATION



Fig. 1. Charlot Kristensen, "Dreamscape", 2019.

For those who immerse themselves in what the fairy tale has to communicate, it becomes a deep, quiet pool which at first seems to reflect only our own image; but behind it we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul – its depth, and ways to gain peace within ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles.

- Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment

“A traditional story written for children that usually involves imaginary creatures and magic”. Only twelve words, and a typifying mention to children and magic, is what takes the *Cambridge Dictionary* to define the term “fairy tale”. Nevertheless, this is not a definition that in its brief simplicity offers a completely misleading idea of the object it aims to explain; in fact, such simplicity and briefness perfectly mirror the way the general reading public nowadays perceives the fairy tale genre. In our contemporary era, characterised by the fast-paced nature of cultural production and consumption, the widespread conception of the fairy tale is that of a fantastic story which is plain and happy enough to be easily consumed by children before they can move on to more mature cultural products. As such, fairy tales are essential to any children’s section of bookshops and libraries, and also central to most educational curricula. Likewise, the general market is full with fairy tale imagery in the form of toys, clothes, TV shows and films — a market dominated by the great contemporary fairy tale capitaliser, the Disney Factory. In spite of this initial simplistic conception of the fairy tale genre, undeniably

inscribed into the generalised contemporary mindset, the vast existing amount of literature written on the subject by experts of multiple disciplines —folklorists, literary critics, psychoanalysts, educators, sociologists— renders the fairy tale as a phenomenon of which the meanings and uses ultimately surpass the limits of children’s imagination.

1.1. Fairy Tale Relevance: What, How and Why

The numerous theories concerning the nature of fairy tales have offered several different approaches to the study of the genre. Among these, however, Jack Zipes’ reflections upon the history of fairy tales within the frame of oral folk narratives are essential to the understanding of their relevance and impact in socio-cultural terms over the centuries. Thus, in a historically grounded attempt to overcome the “generally confused”, mixed conception of folk and fairy tales as “make-believe stories with no direct reference to a particular community or historical tradition” (Zipes 2002, 6), Zipes locates the origin of what is nowadays conceived as a fairy tale in the diachronic alteration of oral folk tales which culminated in the genre’s appropriation by aristocratic and bourgeois writers, supported by the proliferation of the publishing industry, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (2002, 9-10). In line with August Nitschke’s thesis (2002, 7), Zipes highlights the integral historical and social component of all folk tales (and, by extension, of fairy tales): they originally came into existence as a shared product of the people living in community so as to give expression to their frustrations, aspirations and needs — either agreeing with the dominant order or reacting against it. By inscribing such issues and values in a narrative, folk tales not only made their discussion accessible to any member of the population, regardless their level of literacy, but also facilitated the creation of a sense of unity among the community resulting from the interactions surrounding the public oral story-telling practice and its effects on collective identity, while the magical element illuminated the “wish-fulfillment and utopian projections of the people” (2002, 8). Therefore, folk tales functioned as

“socially symbolical acts”, as Fredric Jameson would put it (2002, 6) — a label that could thereby also be applied to fairy tales, albeit in slightly different terms, since:

As a hybrid or transitional genre, the fairy tale also magically grants writers/tellers and readers/listeners access to the collective, if fictionalized past of social communing, an access that allows for an apparently limitless, highly idiosyncratic re-creation of that “once there was.” Though it calls up old-time wisdom, the fairy tale grants individuals the freedom to play with this gift, to dismiss it as children’s fantasy (Bacchilega 1997, 5).

As Bacchilega’s observation suggests, such a reiterated link between fairy tales and children’s literature (despite critical evidence against such an automatic connection) is in fact key to the survival and development of the genre towards the dominant, ever-present collective imaginary that it is still today. In line with this, Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian study on the uses of fairy tales with children — though critically revised and fairly questioned due to its “largely male-oriented”, “authoritarian”, mystifying and misinterpreted psychoanalytic premises (Zipes 2002, 181, 189)— contains some incontestable remarks about the nature of fairy tales. Bettelheim defines fairy tales as stories that are essentially polarised, doing away with any ambivalence found in real life, where rather than on opposition, human identity and behaviour are based on complementation — and even on contradiction. For the author, this dominant polarisation of the fairy tale imagination arises as a reflection of the workings of the child’s own mind, while also entailing the reduction of the anxieties and moral dilemmas that unconsciously concern all children as they become acquainted with their emotions and drives —as well as with others’— towards a simplified solution “in ways that the child can grasp on his level of understanding” (Bettelheim 1991, 10). This fairy-tale-induced easement of children’s processes of coping with their inner conflicts would be further supported by the fact that most fairy tale characters are unnamed (1991, 10) — a feature that, as Bettelheim notes, enables children to project their experiences onto those lived by the characters in the stories (1991, 40). As a result, this essential sense of magical anonymity enhances the potential for identification between the child and the fairy tale hero, ridding the former of the overpowering pressure to live up to the image

of “the real heroes of history” that —unlike the heroes of myths who, as obviously superhuman and unique, imply no real expectations— “having been people like the rest of us, impress the child with his own insignificance when compared with them” (1991, 41). Likewise, such a direct identification takes place as well between the child’s wishes, worries and fears, and the general events and characters in the fairy tale by means of externalisation:

When all the child’s wishful thinking gets embodied in a good fairy; all his destructive wishes in an evil witch; all his fears in a voracious wolf; all the demands of his conscience in a wise man encountered on an adventure; all his jealous anger in some animal that pecks out the eyes of his archrivals — then the child can finally begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies (Bettelheim 1991, 66).

As Bettelheim claims, the workings of these inherent elements of fairy tales respond to their ultimate base on an essentially optimistic nature. Thus, regardless of “how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be”, fairy tales eventually convey a characteristic “feeling of consolation” (1991, 37) which then lights the spark of the child’s peaceful emancipation from their chaotic unconscious, easing their comprehension of themselves and the world around them.

As true as these conclusions have proved to be, such a “magic spell” must be critically revised in order to avoid elevating and limiting the fairy tale genre to an all-inclusive, liberating tool for children’s education. In the line of Zipes’ focus on the sociocultural basis of folk and fairy tales, Bettelheim also remarks that fairy tales are “the result of common conscious and unconscious content [...] the consensus of many in regard to what they view as universal human problems, and what they accept as desirable solutions” (1991, 36). For that matter, fairy tales ultimately operate as emancipatory and naturalising narratives that, according to Zipes’ application of Roland Barthes’s conception of the myth, transform “what is cultural and contingent into what appears to be natural and inevitable” (Sellers 2001, 9). The problematic aspect of this nature of the fairy tale genre is that, despite how liberating (because of their universalising nature) these stories may be —both since its origins in the oral folk narrative tradition, when they embodied the voices of ordinary people, and as

a stimulating and comforting guide for children’s personal development— the emancipatory effects of “classic” fairy tales created in a particular community “would also, to some degree, rely on and reinforce social norms” (Bacchilega 1997, 7). Consequently, the naturalising effect of magic in fairy tales is in fact double-edged, since it naturalises the latent ideology of any given historical context, further legitimising hidden oppressions behind the illusion of collective consensus. Therefore, the uses of the fairy tale imagination in the contemporary era ought to be necessarily driven by a revision of the meanings inscribed into traditional stories, paying especial attention to the ways in which their fundamental archetypes have influenced the socialisation of many generations to this day.

1.2. Women and Representation in Fairy Tales

The classical fairy tale world, which stands as a referent even for twenty-first century readers, is one inhabited by kings and queens, princesses and princes, knights and maidens, whose experiences are untouched by industrialisation, elaborate commerce and labour relations, or urbanisation of any sort — a “highly structured world”, “solid and imperishable”, which depicts the “notions of medieval patriarchy, monarchy, and absolutism in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Zipes 1991, 7). Such a sociopolitical configuration derived from the tales circulating in Europe during the Middle Ages eventually solidified into the public mindset as their discourse became institutionalised when appropriated by the upper classes as a civilising tool for children in the form of literary tales (1991, 7). As a result, by the seventeenth century the tales which had emerged as oral pagan expressions of an originally matriarchal mythology had succumbed to the shifting effects of the “patriarchal cycling” (1991, 34) according to which

the goddess became a witch, an evil fairy, or a stepmother; the active, young princess was changed into an active hero; matrilineal marriage and family ties became patrilineal; the essence of the symbols, based on matriarchal rites, was depleted and made benign; and the pattern of action that concerned maturation and integration was gradually recast to stress domination and wealth. (Zipes 1991, 7)

The survival and projection of such values was initially supported by the interests of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie—who found in them a safe conduct to “indoctrinate children so that they will conform to the dominant social standards” (1991, 18)— and legitimised by the male dominated literary field within which fairy tales were to be reproduced all over Europe, and later collected, distributed and retold. Consequently, as products of a context in which “social non-conformism and deviation had to be punished brutally in the name of civility and Christianity” (1991, 22), fairy tales became the reflection of the standards of acceptability regarding the process of maturation for boys and girls separately, redesigned “to convey prescriptions and prohibitions” (1991, 28), and, therefore, deeply fixing patriarchal delimitations of gender roles at the core of the genre. As a result of this process of courtly, socialising transmutation, classical fairy tales which are known to contemporary readers and celebrated as a valuable cultural legacy—so much so that they can be directly linked to the cinematic representations of the Walt Disney fairy tale (1991, 17)— are in their vast majority (if not in its entirety) “decidedly biased against females who must either be put in their places or have their identity defined by males” (Zipes 2002, 154).

The depiction of gender roles in traditional fairy tales is based on the characteristic polarisation of the genre, a premise upon which they establish crucial differences between what is expected and exemplary of a man (or boy) and of a woman (or girl). The ways in which this configuration of gender as a set of fundamental binary oppositions is not only problematic but also detrimental for female readers—especially when reconsidering the manner in which these fairy tale narratives, as a literary “social codex” (1991, 28), has informed the process of education of Western children over the centuries— can be clearly seen by briefly analysing the disposition of the hero figure in those tales presenting a male character. As Zipes argues upon close readings of classical literary fairy tales such as *Puss in Boots*, *Ricky of the Turf* and *Little Tom Thumb*, unlike female heroines, who stand out primarily because of their overwhelming and graceful beauty, male heroes are never particularly good looking, but their success is always the result of their “remarkable minds, courage,

and deft manners” (1991, 26). Likewise, while the end of the heroine’s journey is deemed a happy one when it results in marriage to a man, the hero’s goal is to achieve social success in the form of prestige, respect or richness — thus, marriage and women being merely “incidental to the fates of male characters whereas males endow the lives of females with purpose” (1991, 26).

However central the issues of beauty and marriage may be to the naturalisation of female-oppressive gender roles, close attention to some of these traditional tales starred by and aimed at females reveal that the problem surrounding womanhood in fairy tales is, in fact, a greater one. Critical readings of classical literary fairy tales such as *The Sleeping Beauty* disclose that the prescribed exemplary womanhood is based upon the defining transversal matters of sexuality, motherhood, and agency — apart from the already exposed and continuously underlying questions of beauty and marriage. The importance of female sexuality in fairy tales is usually manifested through instances of symbolic imagery which link the issue to the core of the plot, as is the case, for example, of *The Sleeping Beauty*. The most widespread versions of this tale all share the same basic storyline: a young girl is *curled* and so at age *fifteen* she *bleeds* after being pricked by the *spindle of a spinning-wheel*, falling into a hundred-year sleep. This initial outline reveals a set of symbolic associations that present sexuality as the origin of the main conflict — when she reaches puberty, the heroine experiences menstruation for the first time and bleeds as she comes into direct contact with femininity (represented by the spinning wheel, an image which displays the link with women and female-exclusive activity in the polysemy of its synonym — *distaff*). As a consequence of this, the protagonist falls victim to the effects of the long-foretold “fatal curse” of menstruation (Bettelheim 1991, 232), which is the “visible warning sign of adolescent female sexuality” (Marshall 2004, 415).

Nevertheless, not only the awakening of female sexuality is demonised, but in *The Sleeping Beauty* the breaking of such a “curse” is only achieved by external male action, which ultimately raises the issues pertaining to motherhood and female agency. In one of the tale’s most famous versions, the one written by Giambattista Basile, the male act which breaks the heroine’s curse is

rather indirect and connects inarguably with the idea of motherhood as defining of womanhood: while asleep, the heroine is found by a king and gets pregnant, and she is only awakened when, after giving birth, her baby sucks the splinter out of her finger — afterwards, she will eventually live “happily ever after” with the king and their children. This version —while offering a clearly problematic romanticised depiction of rape— situates the protagonist’s re-birth into her mature self as an exclusive result of having become a mother, suggesting that “the summit of femininity” and “complete selfhood” come only “with having given life, and with nurturing the one whom one has brought into being” (Bettelheim 1991, 235). On the other hand, in other literary versions of the tale such as the ones by Charles Perrault and the brothers Grimm (as well as in Walt Disney’s cinematic version from 1959), the male act responsible for the re-birth of the heroine is the prince’s kiss, which —while, once again, problematically romanticising and naturalising the fact that a man kisses an unknown woman while she is asleep— “breaks the spell” and “awakens a womanhood which up to then has remained undeveloped” (1991, 234). By presenting this situation, the female protagonist is deprived of any agency — her coming back to life is enacted by someone else, who is also credited for the fulfilment of her personal and sexual development, and her newly-found personal harmony is defined by her successful romantic relationship with the prince-saviour figure.

While the erasure of female agency is evident in *The Sleeping Beauty*, considering this issue in other classical literary tales such as *Cinderella* or *Blue Beard* further clarifies the extent to which what is inscribed into the fairy tale imagination reinforces the patriarchal gender roles that have long defined the construction of female identity and oppressed women. These two stories present inaction as the basis for female survival and success — by which is meant a happy marriage to a man. *Cinderella* portrays the positive example: she is obedient and knows how to control her feelings, which she shows by being polite even to her mean sisters. Instead of rebelling against the humiliation and misfortunes she is put through, attempting to regain her rightful place in the world (which is, in fact, what takes place in the different oral folk matriarchal versions that derived into literary fairy

tales such as Perrault's), she constantly complies to her disadvantages in a passive and submissive manner, awaiting for an external force —the fairy godmother— to rescue her, change her in order to fit external expectations —rather than to assert her independence and freedom— and thus marry the prince (Zipes 1991, 26-27). Conversely, *Blue Beard* provides the negative example by showing the devastating consequences the lack of self-control, curiosity and fanciful nature can have on women. The female protagonist of the tale fails to obey her husband's conditions of self-discipline, and as a result she faces death — of which she is saved by other male characters, her brothers (1991, 24).

All combined, the heroines starring these fairy tales illuminate the patriarchal notion of exemplary womanhood as one defined by female dependence on men in the form of passiveness and submission, as well as essential beauty, politeness, patience and self-control. As such, the ideal woman legitimised and naturalised by fairy tales is that who, while the male acts, just waits — she waits for a man to appear and “recognize her virtues and marry her” (1991, 25), since that is, within the limits of classical fairy tale imagination, the only possible happy ending for any heroine's journey. Hence, in these narratives

The moral of the story should, one would think, preclude a happy ending. It does not. The moral of the story is the happy ending. It tells us that happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep. It tells us that happiness is for the woman who is good — inert, passive, victimized— and that a good woman is a happy woman. It tells us that the happy ending is when we are ended, when we live without our lives or not at all. (Dworkin 1974, 49)

Beyond this, in line with the way in which the disposition of male and female features and roles in fairy tales rise on basic oppositions, polarisation is also the underlying force defining the alternative configurations of womanhood portrayed in these narratives, which effectively praise a specific ideal of femininity while demonising the opposite. Female characters who comply with the prescribed, acceptable ideas of womanhood exist in the tales as the happily married, beautiful princesses and queens. On the contrary, female characters who dare to defy such prescriptions and conventional ideas of womanhood —like those who do not suppress their feelings— and reclaim their

agency by acting upon male-monopolised premises —such as intellectual curiosity or independence— are demonised and depicted as either the evil stepmother or the wicked witch. As a consequence of the forced fundamental antagonism of these contrary archetypes of womanhood in narratives used to civilise (female) children, competition is established as the natural form of interaction between women — the ultimate “magical spell” of the patriarchal illusion inscribed into fairy tales, turning women against women on the basis of a male-created ideology.

On the basis of the critical acknowledgment of these highly problematic representations of gender division and femininity, which have been the object of study for many experts over the years, the fairy tale imagination has become a proliferate space regarding contemporary rewritings. Such reassessments arise as an attempt to subject the fairy tale genre, generally perceived as harmless magical literature, to “the radical changes that we have witnessed in the social and political systems in all countries over the past four centuries” (Zipes 1991, 212). In this light, feminist rewritings of classical literary fairy tales have been a fundamental element in the historical feminist struggle to demolish the foundations of patriarchy that spread also through literary and fairy tale imagination, while contemporary authors search for a fair vindication of both the not-so-happy princess and the not-so-evil witch.

2. FROM IMAGINATION TO REALITY: THE WITCH AS A FEMINIST SYMBOL



Fig. 2. Mia Coleman, "Two Bodies", 2017.

For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.

- 1 Samuel 15:23 (KJV)

Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, curious, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary.

- W.I.T.C.H

Dealing with stories, as those pertaining to the fairy tale imagination, implies also dealing with history, for not only the latter is inevitably inscribed in the former by influence of contextual conditions, but history itself has always been preserved and transmitted as a narrative — a story starred by humankind and shaped in terms of power, either of dominance or resistance. Since the beginning of historical times, womanhood has been defined on the basis of dominant patriarchal narratives, which, ever since, have been continuously legitimised by one of the most powerful civilising and socialising tools of the entire history of Western culture — Christian religion. Being Christianity a monotheistic, androcentric religious doctrine which locates the eternal damnation of “mankind” on the lack of self-discipline of Eve, the first woman —who was also just a product of the first man, having come to life from his own rib— it is unsurprising that societies from all periods of history have systematically rendered women as inferior to men, being defined according to male premises through different narratives — albeit all equally oppressive— over the centuries. Such patriarchal configurations of gender and womanhood have historically been questioned by movements of resistance, ranging from individual

actions of anonymous women who rejected oppressive conventions to pieces of literature which defied them on intellectual terms, culminating in the nineteenth century with the materialisation of contemporary western feminism — a comprehensive socio-political movement under which women (together with non-female allies) of various ideologies and motivations have, since then, united with the purpose of defeating patriarchal narratives and pursuing the achievement of real, systemic equality between the genders.

Over the course of history, such patriarchal dispositions of womanhood which feminism aims to defeat have been deeply fixed into the Western mindset not only through the norms of socio-political and religious institutions, but also fundamentally through cultural and artistic production. Depictions of patriarchal femininity in painting, sculpture, music and literature have essentially contributed, whether deliberately or not, to the legitimisation and naturalisation of such ideals by inscribing them into pieces of art to be consumed by the wider public. In this light, it is precisely art the means by which one of the most diverse and powerful patriarchal images of womanhood has been preserved in the imaginations of contemporary audiences — the figure of the witch, whose survival up to current times has been supported by the literary genre of fairy tales. The witch is, in fact, a central figure to be considered when dealing with patriarchy and feminisms, since, despite being for the contemporary collective a mere object of the imagination from children's literature, it was once in history an image strong enough to cast death upon whoever identified with her.

2.1. The Burning Fires of Patriarchy: A Historical Overview of the Witch

Attempting to universally define the figure of the witch is an extremely challenging endeavour, since it not only involves dealing with great variation depending on the implications of the dominant tradition from every specific historical moment and place on Earth, but it also entails dealing with the abstract issue of belief — have witches ever really existed? Can magic be possibly real? In spite of the difficulties of providing plausible explanations to questions related to belief, all mythological and

religious traditions have, indeed, offered detailed answers that were to be assumed as founding truths. However, in the case of a figure as controversial as the witch —due to its miscellaneous and subversive nature, whose origins are grounded outside dominant narratives— the most reliable and unarguable form of definition starts by displacing the abstract issue of belief so as to focus on the recorded history behind it.

The especial link between women and the supernatural can be traced back to the pagan divinities of antiquity, with the limits between goddess, priestess and witch being initially vague and fusing (Madox Hueffer 2019, 24). Against this background, women —being those who, in a “primitive” world, would have had the superior power not only to give and nurture life, but to heal and improve the well-being of the community— would have stood as the naturally respectable figures of physical and, by inference, spiritual conciliation: “For who so apt at propitiation as she who can cajole that most domesticated of demons, the ever-present Pain. So, later, when the propitiation of Evil gives place to the invocation of good, who so worthy of honour, which is to say of worship, as she who, in the dawning of the race, first relieved poor humanity of its bodily ills?” (2019, 25). Nevertheless, as civilisation began to be founded upon monotheistic, androcentric beliefs such as Christianity, old pagan rites became unofficial and reactionary (not worshipping God soon meant worshipping the Devil), while the priestess of the previous era emerged as the witches of the following one (2019, 28-29). As a result, “these generative, destructive mother goddesses who symbolized both birth and death, light and dark” disappeared in favour of increasingly polarised archetypes of womanhood as either “virgin, obedient wife or deviant whore”, as prescribed in the Holy Bible (Sollée 2017, 21).

Despite the demonisation of paganism and the parallel demonisation of women which arose from the establishment of the Christian narrative as socially normative from the early days of Western societies, until the Late Middle Ages witches were deemed, indeed, suspect, but not condemned (Madox Hueffer 2019, 28). On the one hand, this initial attitude was supported by the general

underestimation of pagan practices and the so-called witches as being mere tradition with no real-world importance. Interestingly, the fairy tale underwent a similar underestimation, being traditionally misjudged as mere fantastic fiction for children. Such similarity may also explain why witch imagery and fairy tale imagery have survived up to contemporary times. On the other hand, the living, tangible witch embodied the negative model for all Christians, thus easing their struggle to live a virtuous life by means of the satisfaction provided through the comparison to such an “inferior” figure (2019, 30). In this regard, by the twelfth century the popular image of the witch grew “older and uglier, poorer and meaner, showing none of the advantages her compact with the Evil One might have been expected to bring in its train” (2019, 30), and thus becoming the image of the witch that has persisted in the public imagination for centuries.

The generalised social, political and religious turmoil which characterised the Late Middle Ages provided the grounds for one of the darkest episodes of human history: the massive witch-hunts of the early modern world. The dawn of the Protestant Reformation, soon to be followed by the Counter-Reformation, witnessed the literal extermination of “social deviates who were associated with the devil such as female witches” which extended from the 1480s to the 1650s (Zipes 1991, 22). The two main imminent triggers of this widespread witch persecution were Pope Innocent VIII’s official identification of witchcraft with heresy in 1484 and Heinrich Kramer’s publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486. While the first one legitimised the already harsh actions of the Inquisition upon witches, the second one provided the inquisitors, as well as the general public—the book rapidly became exceptionally popular, to the point that the Church could not stop its fatal influence despite questioning the book’s validity after its publication—with a precise image of the object of persecution, justifying torture and execution. Such purifying measures included being publicly burned alive in ways that no Christian would be able to disagree and remain free from similar accusations and from a potentially lethal fate. This volume, usually translated as the *Hammer of Witches*, ultimately renders the history of the witch as the history of all women, since it not only

identified witchcraft with womanhood almost exclusively, but also did so in outrageously misogynistic terms:

What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours! Therefore if it be a sin to divorce her when she ought to be kept, it is indeed a necessary torture; for either we commit adultery by divorcing her, or we must endure daily strife. (Kramer 1928, 87)

As a consequence of the fact that witch-hunts were performed according to the ideas transmitted in Kramer's manifesto, initially supported by ecclesiastical authorities, the estimated number of people accused of witchcraft rises to somewhere between forty thousand and sixty thousand, about eighty percent of whom were women (Burns 2003, 220-221). Albeit figures alone could be considered enough evidence to prove the direct link between witch persecution and systemic anti-female historical narratives, closer attention to the kind of women who most suffered from witch-hunts reveals a gender bias fundamentally based on patriarchal male insecurity. As detailed as the descriptions in the *Malleus Maleficarum* are, they essentially portray an image of the witch easily identified with configurations of womanhood which were unconventional and defiant of the dominant patriarchal worldview — so much so that “to be condemned as a witch was but to have an official seal set upon the highest compliment payable to a woman in more than one period of the earth's history, seeing that it marked her out from the dead level of mediocrity to which her sex was legally and socially condemned” (Madox Hueffer 2019, 50).

In view of this, the great occurrence of accusations of witchcraft upon older women, generally widowed or single, with virtually no support network —the archetypical “hag”— responded to the image of women who did not comply with the demands of patriarchal male desire. As such, older women would no longer be fertile —and, thus, not useful for the reproductive task of motherhood that patriarchy has systematically confined women to (Sollée 2017, 21)— and their bodies and sexual dispositions would no longer correspond to those prescribed by the male gaze. Likewise, most women accused of being witches held some sort of power which, consciously or not, threatened the

universally established power of men. Female power in the form of knowledge of “herbology, biology, and, in particular, reproductive health”, which men systematically and wilfully ignored on the basis of the patriarchal and religious demonisation of (female) sexuality, established midwives and female healers as “easy targets for accusations of sorcery” (2017, 39). Therefore, as the profiles of those accused following the indications of the *Malleus Maleficare* demonstrate, the early modern witch-hunts exemplified a period of fatal patriarchal persecution of female individuality, serving “in part to discipline and punish female bodies” on the basis of institutionalised misinformation and demonisation (2017, 43), and historically (rein)forcing upon every woman “the choice of effacing her individuality or of being regarded as an agent of the devil” (Madox Hueffer 2019, 50).

2.2. Feminist Vindication of the Figure of the Witch

The recorded (gendered) history of the witch shows that women are capable of holding and using power to such an extent that patriarchal comfort may be shaken — and thousands of real women being executed as a consequence is but proof of how revolutionary and threatening female power really is. Nevertheless, the “witches” from the early modern period were ultimately rendered as powerless, for the foundations of patriarchy were still too unconsciously ingrained into the increasingly orthodox religious Western mindset of the time. As centuries passed and the different movements of resistance against the systemic oppression of women eventually organised under the contemporary feminist project, venturing to reclaim the figure of the witch from a contemporary standpoint entailed not only vindicating the violently erased voices of our female ancestors by calling attention to the atrocious historical treatment of women, but also seeking to match feminists’ yearned power to that attributed to the witch by both history and popular imagination — the power to “break rules” and “threaten change” (Wells 2007, 9). From a feminist perspective, the fact that the witch has always been significantly presented as a woman “with a *different* power than the average woman” (2007, 3) provides her with a highly subversive potential power. In light of this, the widespread,

contemporary feminist identification with the witch rises from the examination of the symbolic spaces in which the witch's disposition diverges from the conventional woman's disposition, thus enlightening the essential differences between defiant, feminist womanhood and socially established, patriarchal womanhood as key to initiate radical change and re-write gender roles.

The witch, as a feminist symbol, is daringly different because she is both independent and outspoken. As for the issue of independence, for the early modern woman being accused of witchcraft meant occupying, for the first time, a space in the legal system that had so far paid scarce attention to her individuality. Being "first accorded independent legal status in order to be prosecuted for witchcraft", thus, "European women first emerged into full legal adulthood *as witches*" (Barstow qtd. in Sollée 2017, 26). Along with the historical transformation of women simultaneously into "legal entity and witch" (Wells 2007, 7), those women accused of witchcraft during the witch-hunts were characterised by their independent claim on the agency over their own bodies. As a consequence of the naturalised demonisation of female biology and sexuality beyond the limits of the patriarchal narrative of women as exclusively mothers, traditional practices regarding sexual and reproductive health were considered Devil-related rituals. As such, women discovered attending all-female gatherings in order to share and perform birth control methods or provide abortifacients or abortions were usually directly accused of being witches meeting on a coven or Sabbath (Sollée 2017, 40). Likewise, as revealed by the heavily sexual framework of the witch-hunting manifesto, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and the subsequent reports of trials, female explorations of sexuality and pleasure independently from the norms of patriarchal male desire were also held as instances of Devil worshipping. In this line, studies on traditional witch imagery uncover the fascinating possible connotations of the basic association of witches with broomsticks — a link so recurrent through visual art and literature of all kinds that it has survived into the contemporary image of the "classical witch". Apart from evident connotations of domesticity and, by extension, patriarchal normative womanhood, research on the "Satanic ointment" witches supposedly smeared their broomsticks with so as to

transform them into magical flying objects they could ride (Madox Hueffer 2019, 48) and its “hallucinatory qualities” (Sollée 2017, 88) disclose the potential sexual meaning behind broomstick-riding witches. The diabolical, flying ointment was in reality a combination of “psychoactive agents” that “witches would then administer vaginally using a special dildo [...] the ‘broomstick’ by which these women were said to travel” (Pollan qtd. in Sollée 2017, 88). To what extent theories such as this may be correct, and whether such actions belonged to women’s experimentation of individual sexual pleasure or to sexual health practices (since during such procedures, being secretly performed, women would have likely needed to use psychoactive drugs in order to help ease any possible emerging pain), such strongly fixed imagery inarguably presents witchcraft and sexual agency as inseparable issues.

With regards to the witch’s defiant diversity arising from her nature as an outspoken woman, the problem of silenced female voices is invoked. While women have been historically pressured by moralistic policies and constraints that prescribe the speech of a “proper”, respectable woman as one characterised by softness, extreme politeness, contention and conformity, the loud, irreverent voice of the witch turned female speech into a “space of resistance” (2017, 80). Language is one of the most powerful tools at humankind’s disposal — it enables humans to interact, explain and understand the world, and even create reality by simply naming it (like the indeed very real situation derived from declaring a woman to be a witch during the early modern era). Considering this, it is no wonder that the witch’s independent access to her own voice, which allows her to explicitly influence the world, would be “one of her most powerful features, and thus, one that patriarchy fears most” (Wells 2007, 12). Accordingly, it is known that, in many trials, evidence provided against a woman accused of witchcraft would include assumed curses or spells identified as “muttering something under her breath, saying something strangely, or speaking with erudition beyond her station” (Sollée 2017, 79). As a result, such self-incriminating speech acts “revealed the full destructive potential of the female voice” (2017, 79), invalidating and mocking patriarchy’s rules by attempting to reappropriate yet

another male dominated area of human existence, language, by means of the witch's blatantly rebellious cursing, laughing, and shrieking.

The great potential of language to become a tool of resistance is, in fact, at the core of the feminist identification with the witch figure. While “darketypes” such as “witch” condense stereotypes that restrain women's identity and individuality on the basis of male premises, “by simultaneously accepting and refuting patriarchal perspectives”, the latent subversive power of language, as a human-dependent instrument, can also render “witch” as a signifier of female —and feminist— empowerment (2017, 80). In this line, the first known feminist to reclaim the word “witch” was one of the nineteenth-century suffragists, Matilda Joslyn Gage (2017, 51). Decades before the reclaim of stigmatised words and images was considered a valid and successful political device (as it would happen throughout the twentieth century, when the LGBT+ community reclaimed the previously pejorative label “queer” as a neutral and even positive self-identifier), Gage revisited the historical disposition of the witch in an attempt to denounce the institutionalised Christian misogyny on the basis of which women were condemned of witchcraft. She did so in an “anti-clerical” volume entitled *Woman, Church and State* which, despite its publication over a century ago, “barely seems dated, and stands as a witch-infused rallying cry for gender justice” (2017, 51). This vindicated legacy of the witch was later renewed and amplified as a political symbol during the feminist outburst of the 1960s, when women organised into action groups named W.I.T.C.H. —an acronym repurposed for any issue a collective would undertake, thus reinforcing Gage's universalising notion of the witch being the reflection of every woman as a “political dissident”— spread across the United States “taking guerilla theatre to the next level” by fully embracing witch iconography with the purpose of creating such scenes that they could not possibly be ignored by the public eye, and, in that way, turning attention to their feminist indictment of the patriarchal forces maintaining the systemic sexism of society — such as capitalist institutions and corporations, which were W.I.T.C.H.'s main focus at the time (2017, 52-53).

As independent, outspoken women, grounded on the empowerment provided by embracing and defining womanhood on their own terms, both witches and feminists have historically been “scapegoated as evil, with evil meaning those who endanger society’s family values and therefore who must be punished for exercising powers that patriarchy defines as more rightly belonging to men” (Wells 2007, 7). With a truly devastating historical past and a distinctive collective representation, the witch epitomises the adversities inherent to womanhood in a patriarchal world, while simultaneously rising as a distinct symbol of the subversive potential natural to every woman’s power. As such, it is through this essential intersection between feminism and witches that “the witch, in the broader sense of the word, may be said to have existed ever since mankind first evolved an imagination, and may be expected to expire only with the death of the last woman” (Madox Hueffer 2019, 24).

3. REDEFINING THE ARCHETYPE: CONTEMPORARY

REASSESSMENTS OF THE FAIRY TALE GENRE



Fig. 3. ttorubie, "DEVIL/ANGEL", 2019.

I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode.

- Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line"

Will I tell you my own story? It is a tale of a voice.

- Emma Donoghue, Kissing the Witch

Both historical narratives and classical literary fairy tales have methodically conveyed gender identity within the straightjacket of the dominant patriarchal ideology, confining womanhood to a set of stereotypes that occupy the lowest position of such a male-defined hierarchy upon which Western societies have been built. The stereotypical identification of women with the figure of the evil witch resulted from the historical attempt to control unconventional —and potentially destabilising— representations of womanhood, thus embodying the latent patriarchal fear “of being devoured” by “destructive wishes” (Bettelheim 1991, 120, 66). Such a fear of “women, sexuality, and equality” that forced self-denial upon every woman in the name of civility (Zipes 1991, 37), was rationalised by the patriarchal discourses embedded in both history and literature by turning it into “the tangible form of a witch, [so that] it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven!” (Bettelheim 1991, 120) — or, as was preferred during the early modern period, by burning her at the stake.

Transmitted over the centuries through literature and other forms of art, and inevitably mediated by their exceptional legitimatising and naturalising power, the reality of the witch as the

persecuted woman of the early modern era has been historically disguised as a mere archetypal character of the literary fairy tale imagination — significantly, the one standing for utmost evil among humans, who can be easily destroyed, both literally and symbolically. This subtly performed attempt to hide the sociopolitical implications of the witch figure behind products of fantastic fiction, generally aimed at children, has ultimately proved considerably effective — so much so that the image invoked in the minds of the general contemporary audiences when confronted with a witch is no other than the one directly inherited from classical literary fairy tales (and, by extension, one informed by patriarchal values).

Nevertheless, as vindications of the legacy of the witch began to achieve intellectual and political relevance with the consolidation of the contemporary feminist movement, the traditional literary witch began to be contested, also in terms of her symbolic configuration. Accordingly, since the twentieth century, and particularly during its second half, the genre of classical fairy tales has been subjected to countless rewritings in a persistent endeavour to deconstruct the anti-female bias of traditional fairy tales and to redefine their gendered archetypes, which still to this day are essential in the socialisation of children, and, therefore, expose the true multilayered nature and suppressed subversive power of the “irremediably wicked” witch.

3.1. Into the Screen: Contemporary Mass-Media Renditions of the Fairy Tale Witch

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the early days of a technology that was to revolutionise art and become central to contemporary Western culture: cinema. The link between the onset of cinema and the fairy tale genre is an evident one since, due to their simple structure and their widely known, cherished stories, fairy tales were among the first greatly successful products of the film industry — which, in return, provided the traditional literary tales with an extremely productive preservative and popularising media (Zola 2016, 28). In this light, Walt Disney’s creations, undoubtedly the most famous and universally influential fairy-tale films, initially reproduced the

aesthetics and ideology directly received from the classical literary genre which had been institutionalised as far back as the seventeenth century (Zipes 1991, 17). As a matter of fact, Disney's strong visual imagination even expanded the impact of some of the classical archetypes like the evil witch, fixating the image of the witch as "a beautiful grotesque, marked by extreme thinness, pasty skin, and stark make-up" (Breuer 2009, 150) resulting from the combination of the patriarchal anxieties over female beauty and age. However, the enormous success of film adaptations of more contemporary fairy-tale narratives such as L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* enabled alternative ideological values to pierce through the deeply fixed, traditional imagery of the genre, thus paving the way for the eventual materialisation of the more radically transgressive rewritings that would appear later in the twentieth century.

Baum was part of a group of authors, together with Oscar Wilde and George MacDonald, who, in the final years of the nineteenth century, "used the fairy tale as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores, and norms in society, and they commented on this by altering the specific discourse on civilization in the fairy-tale genre" (Zipes 1991, 99). When the 1939 filmic version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, initially published in 1900, achieved international fame —later to become a must-watch of the global history of cinema— its utopian narrative of "disenchantment with America, if not with the course of western civilization in general" (1991, 121) entered the fairy-tale canon in a significantly subversive manner. Certainly, Baum presented a *female* heroine who brings "loners and outcasts together" in a generally "non-competitive and non-exploitative" narrative, thus effectively contradicting the standard civilising discourse of classical literary fairy tales (1991, 127). In spite of this positive shift, however, the villains in Dorothy's adventure are, still, witches. The Wicked Witch of the West is, in fact, a perfect reflection of the classical archetype of the witch as a hag, an "antihousewife or antimother" (Purkiss qtd. in Lawless 1999). Not only is she "physically marked as post-reproductive" (Breuer 2009, 145), but is explicitly contrasted with Glinda — the *Good* Witch of the South, who represents "idealized

femininity” in the form of a “mother-figure” (2009, 146). As the story places the young female protagonist in the midst of a battle between an anti-mother and an ideal mother, Dorothy, who is on the verge of adulthood and is constantly reminded that there is “no place like home”, eventually stands with the latter. As a result, amidst positive reinforcements of motherhood, the story essentially validates “that the domestic world is the only proper place for a young woman to be” and the “happy ending” she must pursue, whereas male characters search for personal development in the form of intellect, faith or courage (2009, 147). Nevertheless, while, in the fashion of the patriarchal discourse of classical literary fairy tales, the Wicked Witch of the West “represents a choice we should not make”, telling “both adults and children [that] for women, there’s no place BUT home” (2009, 148), the celebrated option is *also* a witch, albeit a *good* one. As a result, Baum’s fairy-tale actually transforms the traditional unilateral rendering of the witch as purely evil, making it possible for multiple types of witches, even good ones —feminine, beautiful and motherly— to exist and, most importantly, to succeed.

In the line of Baum’s Good Witch, contemporary cultural products have, since then, increasingly portrayed positive images of witches across the media, regardless the underlying lack of a genuine feminist discourse behind them. Perhaps one of the most relevant examples, on account of the cross-generational, global success of both its literary and cinematic versions, is J.R.R. Tolkien’s fairy-tale romance trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, published between 1954 and 1955. In this work, nonetheless inscribed in a narrative dominated by male characters and featuring rather limited instances of female empowerment, the use of magic for evil purposes is not an exclusively female act (in fact, all magical antagonists are men) and the combination of magic and womanhood does not necessarily result in negative, undesirable characters. This is perfectly reflected in Galadriel, who, still to this day, is widely celebrated as one of the most emblematic characters of the trilogy. She is the co-ruler of the elvish realm of Lothlórien and, as such, she is depicted as extremely powerful — both politically and magically. She is a beautiful, wise and a mostly benevolent ruler, but her

involvement in rebellions and invasions, as well as her own desire for political power —as revealed by the fact that she bears one of the rings of power— ultimately renders her as an ambivalent character. As a result, Tolkien’s Galadriel, as the great “Witch-Queen” of the Elves (Tally 2015), embodied and advanced the crucially redeeming notion that “Witches are neither good nor bad. They are powerful” (Maitland qtd. in March-Russell 2018, 75).

Contemporary transformations of the witch archetype also reached the small screen, with fairy tale imagination being the basis for many television shows broadcasted during the later decades of the twentieth century. The earliest significant example was *Bewitched*, which aired between 1964 and 1972, to be followed by the remarkably popular *Charmed*, between 1998 and 2006 — two shows that “provide excellent examples of positive, yet ultimately hegemonic witch-figures” (Breuer 2009, 151). In the case of *Bewitched*, Samantha is kindly depicted as a good witch who, at the same time, happens to be a beautiful housewife and mother. However, the show’s attempt to transform the fairy-tale archetype through a witch figure who is totally compatible with domestic life takes place against a rather problematic background. Samantha’s cheerfully told adventures, motivated by her promise to her husband not to use witchcraft, ultimately communicate “a darker message: women should hide what makes them unique from the mainstream idea of a ‘proper woman’” (Harris 2020, 40). Thus, the initially positive premise of domesticity becomes a male-imposed circumscription and Samantha’s witchcraft, as emphasised by her relationships with her mother, daughter and husband, is established within the limits of the domestic space (Breuer 2009, 151). As a result, the essential connection between witchcraft and domesticity links *Bewitched* to the most conservative families appearing in television, ultimately privileging “heterosexual marriage, the primacy of children, and above all, the importance of the mother as primary care giver and unpaid domestic worker” (2009, 152) and, therefore, reinscribing the “transformed” witch figure into patriarchal traditionalism. Similarly, the witch sisters from *Charmed* are, indeed, portrayed in markedly positive terms — they are strong, compassionate, intelligent and attractive young women who use their magical powers for

“the greater good”. Nevertheless, despite such an apparent display of female agency, the show “produces an essentialized female domestic identity” (2009, 152) as the lives of the often overtly sexualised witch sisters fundamentally revolve on either motherhood or hetero-normative dating scenarios (2009, 152-153).

Moving into the twenty-first century, cultural renditions of the classical fairy tale-witch seem to endeavour to move further away from oppressing, patriarchal values. When dealing with the present-day witch, it is inevitably necessary to comment on J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* — a series of fantastic novels first published between 1997 and 2007, soon adapted into film with great success between 2001 and 2011. It cannot be denied that, as rightfully noted by Zipes along the expectations of political correctness, while the *Harry Potter* books “are cleverly written and provide a sense of hope and empowerment for young readers, they are also very conventional, predictable, and ideologically conservative with a strong investment in the restitution of male hegemony” (Zipes 2002, 215). Nonetheless, the de-stigmatising effects of the series upon the classical fairy-tale witch are inarguable: witchcraft is an issue of all — young and old, male and female, beautiful and ugly, good and evil. Furthermore, the fear inducing and post-reproductive attires of the classical witch become the trivial school uniform, and her traditionally demonic animal guides —also known as the witch’s “familiars”— become simply pets. As for female witch empowerment, whereas the series is, indeed, focused on the male title character and his battle against a male villain, aided by mostly male characters, the role of Hermione Granger is much more than that of “a smart girl”, as Zipes has considered her (2002, 216). While the narrative may initially displace her into a secondary position with regards to the male protagonist —albeit only apparently, since she explicitly saves him and other male characters in multiple crucial occasions, thus enabling the story to continue— the fan phenomenon resulting from the series has not ignored or underestimated her power. Hence, Hermione’s impact on young (and adult) female readers and viewers of the *Harry Potter* series has been such that she is widely considered a fictional feminist icon, as supported by the fact that her face,

quotes and achievements are always present among the banners of any present-day feminist demonstration, independently of the issue or place.

Along the same redeeming lines of J. K. Rowling's witches, even more recent reassessments of the fairy tale genre have overtly attempted to incorporate a "feminist twist" (Zola 2016, 59), as is the case of Disney's film *Maleficent*, released in 2014. *Maleficent* revisits the past life of *The Sleeping Beauty*'s classical witch-villain, offering a redemptive explanation for her terrible actions upon the princess: Maleficent had once been a powerful and good fairy, but she was radically transformed by the shock and grief caused by her human (male) lover's betrayal, who severed her wings in an attempt to kill her. However, while the significantly careful treatment of such a "traumatic event as a metaphorical rape" (2016, 59) renders the film as one that "has to be taken seriously" (Zipes qtd. in Zola 2016, 59), it also rises another issue rarely seen in Disney's fairy-tale films — the question of male hegemonic power. Accordingly, the classical kiss of the prince is not the definite act of true love which withdraws the princesses' fatal curse, but Maleficent's own kiss marked by motherly affection (Venkat 2015, 37). As a result, Disney's most contemporary rendition of the fairy tale witch simultaneously humanises her and provides her with a power that had classically been kept out of her reach by men — the power to do good, instead of evil, and save the innocent, instead of tormenting them.

3.2. Magic Against Magic: Feminist Rewritings of the Fairy Tale Norm

While radical changes in political, economic and cultural aspects shaped the first half of the twentieth century, the hegemonic values and customs rooted in classical literary fairy tales suffered an alteration. As the numerous contemporary reassessments of the fairy tale genre reveal, the traditional socialisation process preserved in such narratives began to be questioned in an endeavour to update and repurpose their supposed emancipatory power so as it would reflect and respond to the anxieties and requirements of the new contemporary social system. Products of Western popular culture, with

the aid of mass media, contributed from the very beginning of the century to the initiation of said process of transformative experimentation of the fairy tale genre, providing the contemporary public imagination with new stories that, albeit with limitations, projected “possibilities for non-alienating living conditions” (Zipes 1991, 172). However, this subversive rewriting project would not achieve its full (de)constructive potential until the 1960s, as a consequence of the rise of civil rights movements, anti-war protests and, notably, second-wave feminism (1991, 172).

The significant decision to reuse classical fairy tales in an attempt to transform their inherently oppressive, latent traditionalist values —instead of directly discarding the genre in its entirety— emerges from the critical understanding of their extreme influence over the socialisation of both children and adults, as well as their key role in the legitimisation and internalisation of ideology. The reason why fairy tales are so powerful as “sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires” (Bacchilega 1997, 10) is that, in the light of Bettelheim’s psychoanalytic conception of the genre, they submerge the reader into the liberating effects of a narrative that essentially returns them to the “familiar primal moments in their lives” (Zipes 1991, 178), that is, “to the point of separation between our unsocialised, drive-governed selves and our constitution within a ‘symbolic’ order of precepts” (Kristeva qtd. in Sellers 2001, 26). On this basis, these classical magical narratives have historically conveyed —by means of style, themes and, particularly, archetypes— that consenting to social rules is the natural and preferred course of life, thus disguising “its artifice and its social project” (Bacchilega 1997, 9). This disguise is, as Zipes would put it, the fairy tale’s most powerful “magic spell” which, in order to be broken and nullified, requires, first, the acknowledgment and confrontation of the privileged role these tales continue to play in the construction and preservation of hegemonic social order and, especially, of gender identity (1997, 10). On such grounds, contemporary feminist reassessments of fairy tales not only entailed learning to “to recognize [the disguise] as a spell that can be unmade” (1997, 8) by making visible the genre’s “complicity with

‘exhausted’ narrative and gender ideologies”, but they also expose “what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexploited” (1997, 50).

Critical awareness of the ideological uses of fairy tales, amplified by the growing presence of fairy-tale imagery in popular culture from the early decades of the twentieth century, provided the contemporary feminist project with an extremely influential and productive field of action. Decades after the feminists of the so-called first wave had focused their efforts on debunking legal and political gender inequality, demanding the right for women to vote, the explicit discussion of principles such as equality and justice under the civil rights movements of the post-war world inspired and guided the course of the feminist movements of the 1960s (Burkett and Brunell 2020). During what is known as second-wave feminism, attention surpassed mere legal inequality in order to focus on issues such as the nature of gender, patriarchal institutions, family, motherhood, domestic violence, rape, sexuality and female sexual liberation. In doing so, second-wave feminist production of “extensive theoretical discussion” (2020) upon such matters “helped women increase their presence in the ‘cultural sphere’” (Eagleton qtd. in Ryan-Sautour 2018, 53) — including the remarkably powerful cultural space of the literary fairy-tale imagination.

Against this background, the contemporary feminist rewriting project became, essentially, a process of seizing discursive power in an attempt to transgress what Judith Butler would formulate as the “literalizing fantasy” that defines womanhood within the limits of heterosexual male desire (Sempruch 2008, 15). Consequently, such rewritings materialise what H el ene Cixous famously described as “writing with the body”, indicating that “women must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word silence” (Cixous qtd. in Breuer 2009, 159). In this light, female rewriters of fairy tales become “Thieves of Language” who reclaim and re-appropriate a language that “has been an encoding of male privilege”, never really owned by women (Ostriker qtd. in Joosen 2011, 167).

Hence, by displacing the hegemonic male voice, rather than opposing it, through the inscription of the feminist discourse of vindication of historically silenced female voices —those of both writers and characters— directly into a form of storytelling that has significantly contributed to the crushing of those voices in the first place, feminist rewritings of the fairy tale become an exceptionally subversive and transgressive tool.

With regards to narratological aspects, feminist rewritings are formulated on mimicking techniques intrinsically informed by the concept of performativity. As Bacchilega remarks, the role of the “performative” is essential to the social use of a given narrative (1997, 18), that is, to the realisation of a discourse into perceptible social norms. Likewise, the issue of performance is at the very core of the feminist discussion on the construction of gender, as presented by Judith Butler’s widely accepted theory that gender identity is a “performative accomplishment” instituted by “the tacit collective agreement to perform” a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler qtd. in Morrisey 2011, 49). The underlying connection between performativity, ideology and gender ultimately relates to the status of the fairy tale genre as a historically institutionalised civilising tool. As the socialisation process of children insists on the performance of social norms and expectations reflected and naturalised in fairy tales, the traditionalist ideological discourse embedded into the narratives has inevitably defined the construction of (female) gender identity within the limits of the tales’ archetypes. In view of this, however, Butler also crucially argues that precisely due to its performative nature, regardless how internalised, gender can also be transformed through performance, indicating that “our telling of alternatives is a viable force for change” (Sellers 2001, 131). Consequently, the radically transformative power of alternative performance is what feminist rewritings of fairy tales have creatively exploited by means of the basic ironic mimicry of the well-known fairy tale format (2001, 28-29). Thus, altering expected patterns and elevating unusual voices, even while still working within the limits a heavily ideologically institutionalised genre, causes crucial disruptions that prevent the homogeneous hegemonic order to be re-established. Simultaneously, as noted by Bacchilega, such

a critical, subversive approach to the subjectivity of the original tales overtly exposes the manner in which they initially articulate a “strategic proposition of meaning”, therefore revealing the fairy tale “unconscious” and “its relationship with the social” (1997, 17-18). As a consequence of such an explicit boycott of the reader’s expectations of the familiar, internalised fairy tale narrative, rewritings create a discomfort too troubling to be ignored and force conscious re-evaluations.

As feminist rewritings of fairy tales “constitute an ideological test for previous interpretations” (1997, 22) by expanding and exploiting alternative readings, the gender-biased archetypal characters and situations of the classical tales undergo a shift towards the “‘alterity’ accomplished in the ‘feminine’” (Sempruch 2008, 15). Described by psychoanalyst Carl Jung, archetypes are tangible manifestations of the collective unconscious in the conscious mind, functioning as “deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity” (Jung qtd. in Sellers 2001, 5). While providing “an ‘empty’ structure the content of which is filled with the material of conscious experience” (2001, 5), the inherently symbolic nature of archetypes renders them susceptible of being re-shaped by means of alternative performance. Accordingly, the archetypal characterisation of female fairy-tale heroines as solely beautiful princesses whose happiness depends on their adherence to male characters on the basis of their naivety, submissiveness and passiveness —both intellectually and sexually— were revised and transformed under the ideological premises of second-wave feminism. The radical vindication of an alternative heroine motivated by sexual liberation and blatant agency is, in fact, the basis of one of the most critically celebrated examples of feminist rewritings of fairy tales — Angela Carter’s collection entitled *The Bloody Chamber*, published in 1979. As part of Carter’s self-proclaimed “demythologising business” (Carter qtd. in March-Russell 2018, 64), her tales feature women who not only subvert but *invert* the fairy-tale archetype (2018, 65) by reclaiming traditionally exclusive male traits. Therefore, Carter’s heroines, while still inscribed in the classical magical imagination, perform their own active “post-patriarchal” erotic liberation by shifting from objects into subjects of desire (as is the case of protagonist of the title story), exercising superiority by means

of economic power (as in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”), being capable of violence and transgressing bodily limitations (as is the case of the heroine in “The Tiger’s Bride”, whose conversion into a beast reflects her ultimate ownership over repressed animal-like desires).

Many relevant contemporary female (re)writers of fairy tales have overtly recognised Carter’s influence, such as Marina Warner, A.S Byatt or Sara Maitland and, more recently, Sarah Hall or Emma Donoghue. Acknowledged or not, however, Carter’s radical effort to liberate women from patriarchal fairy-tale expectations through parodical mimicry of the genre has significantly inspired successive generations of authors to “engage in a political act of re-imagination and dissidence” (2018, 67) — an act constituted by alternative rewritings of the fairy-tale norm which, through the exploration of the limits of gender roles, endeavour to liberate the genre from the confines of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse and effectively repurpose its “magic” socialising powers into the creation of new, non-alienating narratives.

3.3. Emma Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch*

For decades, and initially motivated by the ideals and cultural achievements of second-wave feminism, (re)writers of the fairy tale genre have strived for the deconstruction of alienating fictions on the basis of a critical “reshaping of patriarchal narratives, foregrounding of female sexual desire and recalibration of the power dynamic of heterosexual relationships” (Hanson qtd. in Ryan-Sautour 2018, 43). Such a transformative experimentation with fairy tales exploits the already subversive particularities of the short story genre, of which literary fairy tales are an exceptionally influential and institutionalised form. As Paul March-Russell and Maggie Awadalla suggest, the short story’s potential capacity for dissidence is enhanced by its “ambiguous cultural position”: on the one hand, the short story’s flexibility has ostentatiously made the form a “commercial product residing in popular magazines and sub-literary genres”; on the other, the genre is also perceived as an “artistic medium praised by writers for its technical difficulty and associated with small-press, avant-garde or

counter-cultural titles”, being simultaneously a product of mass and minority culture (2013, 4). As a borderline, ambiguous creation, the articulation of the short story genre through formal “disjunction, inconclusiveness and obliquity” provides a critical space for the materialisation of diversity and dissidence, encouraging “an engagement with norms of experience which may be at odds with dominant cultural narratives” (Hanson qtd. in Ryan-Sautour 2018, 42). As a result, the contemporary short story emerges as the liminal genre per excellence (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 27) and, as such, it represents a powerful site to problematise the “representation of liminal identities” and conflictive subject positions, therefore speaking “directly to and about those whose sense of self, region, state or nation is insecure” (Hunter 2007, 138).

In view of this, as configurations of female alterity within the fairy tale imagination became a strategic symbolic space for the performance of subversive alternatives of the norm, the archetypal character of the witch emerged as a particularly powerful one. While the evil witch of classical literary fairy tales embodies the fears and anxieties of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse, her essentially liminal position turns her into a deposit of female transgressive agency which suits both the feminist search for female empowerment within the limits of the traditional narratives and the creation of “a common identification with the historical oppression of women [...] that inserts the history of her invisibility into contemporary ideological and political spaces” (Sempruch 2008, 53). As a result, many feminist rewritings of fairy tales have endeavoured to “reformulate the ‘witch’ as a trace of cultural un/belonging, of bodily margins ‘invested with power and danger’” (Douglas qtd. in Sempruch 2008, 16) by vindicating her autonomy and rendering her a protagonist.

Among such cases, one of the most representative examples is Emma Donoghue’s critically acclaimed collection of rewritten fairy tales entitled *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, first published in 1997. Throughout the course of the thirteen tales constituting the collection, Donoghue constructs a crucial process of humanisation and diversification of the archetypal witch, simultaneously questioning and deconstructing the stigmatised classical figure and exposing her

historical demonisation as a consequence of ignorance — an instance of “defilement” stemming from “what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based” (Kristeva qtd. in Sempruch 2008, 56).

Donoghue’s feminist rendition of the fairy tale witch is thoroughly articulated in both the level of form and the level of content. With regards to formal aspects, the style and overall structure of the collection function doubly as a coextensive construction and *de*construction of fairy tale imagination. On the basis of simplicity and clarity of both language and argument development, the employed stylistic techniques create a “harmonious redistribution of fairy tale motifs throughout her tales” — a disposition pretendedly compliant with the classical narratives which effectively allows Donoghue to “work within the lie [...] so as to reveal the contours of a covert history” (March-Russell 2018, 77). Therefore, while such a reformulating use of imagery mimics traditional fairy tale imagination, providing an explicit reference standard to be disrupted by the rewritten stories, the narrative structure introduces new subjectivities: the silenced voices of the old tales.

The collection is structured as a succession of frame stories, narrated in the first person through the lens and voice of their female protagonists. At the end of the very first tale, “The Tale of a Shoe”, the starring re-written Cinderella asks the mysterious woman who has aided her and transformed her life — a woman who appeared suddenly, as if she had “come out of the fire”, and “claimed her little finger was a magic wand” (Donoghue 1999, 3, 6)— to tell her own story, and so she does. This dynamic is repeated across the collection and, as a result, each tale presents the first-person account of the personal history of the “magical” secondary character that motivates, in any way, the protagonist’s empowerment in the previous story. By assembling the tales so carefully, Donoghue wilfully “circumvents the phallogocentrism of a linear narrative” (Harries qtd. in March-Russell 2018, 76) and inscribes the history of fairy-tale women into a re-imagined genealogy which enables it to eventually survive without the mediation of the hegemonic male voice of the classical genre (Joosen 2011, 172). Likewise, the elevation of traditionally censored female voices to the

position of first-person narrator materialises a true alternative performance of the classical fairy tale norm, allowing repressed characters to emerge as *subjects*, rather than externally defined archetypes or objectified characters. Hence, the centrality of personal perspective provides *Kissing the Witch* with a latent sense of intimacy and honesty which prove essential to the successful fulfilment of the humanisation process of the fairy tale witch in the collection. Such a founding process is supplemented by the historical implications of the frame-tale structure, eventually reinforced by the ways in which the endings of Donoghue's tales markedly subvert "the superficial utopianism of simple 'happily ever afters'" (Jorgensen 2011, 285) through the recurrent use of "uncertainty" and "ambivalent close" (Sellers 2001, 102, 174). Thus, as if mirroring the manner in which history is never fully written, the ending of the "*herstory*" (Sempruch 2008) depicted in *Kissing the Witch* is also intentionally left open and, in significant resonance with the feminist defence of alternative performance as the potential "starting-point for a new programme" (Sellers 2001, 102), the empowered witch narrator of the very last tale finishes her intervention by saying "This is the story you asked for. I leave it in your mouth" (Donoghue 1999, 228).

With respect to content, Donoghue's humanising vindication of the fairy tale witch is developed through her explicit endeavour to inscribe "*old tales in new skins*", which is articulated by means of the subversion of archetypical characters and plot lines on the basis of a non-heteronormative, anti-homogenising discourse. Therefore, defiant of the hegemonic structures that traditionally defined fairy tale women on stereotypical premises arisen from patriarchal female sexualization, the tales in *Kissing the Witch* depict a lineage of women who exist—and, in view of fairy-tale optimism, eventually succeed—outside the prescribed gendered norm. As the retrospective narrative structure of the collection frames female growth into "new skins" by relating them to "old tales", Donoghue transgresses the limitations of the classical genre by rooting her characters and plot lines on "a rich and diverse spectrum of love and bonding among women, which also includes female

friendship, mother-daughter relationships, and women's social groups" (Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère qtd. in Jorgensen 2011, 286) operating across the thirteen tales, regardless their particularities.

The oldest of these tales —and, thus, the “original” one— is “The Tale of the Kiss”, narrated by a “witch” whose life experiences relate to many of the questions that have methodically defined womanhood through fairy tale narratives, such as motherhood, female (in)dependence and romantic love. The protagonist's identification with the fairy-tale trope of the witch emerges from her explicit lack of compliance with patriarchal norms — a non-conformity that is paradoxically forced upon her by said norms and expectations: in a society where motherhood defines womanhood, the protagonist's infertility renders her socially deviant and worthless. This is a reality of which the protagonist is acutely conscious, as she claims: “As far as my people were concerned, women like me had no future. I knew what they thought of women past bearing; unless they had sons and daughters to clean them, they were old rags tossed in the corner. A barren woman was hated even more; the way they saw it, she had never earned a bite of bread” (Donoghue 1999, 208). This painful self-awareness is, precisely, the motivation behind the initial step of the protagonist's transformation into a witch: in an attempt to escape such unavoidable social defilement, she wilfully leaves her community and isolates herself in “a cave on a headland [...] rock to my back and the sea to my face”, believing that thus “no one would ever bother me again” (1999, 209).

Incidentally, her new life, triggered by the negative pressure of patriarchal social expectations, drives the protagonist to the realisation that “What I found instead was power” (1999, 209) — albeit an essentially double-edged power, inherent to social liminality. Whereas the protagonist is, indeed, empowered and liberated by her newly found autonomy, derived from a successful inversion of her oppressive circumstances, soon villagers begin to be suspicious of her atypical, “unnatural” independence and, on account of ignorance and subsequent fear, they deem her a witch. Once again, the protagonist effectively subverts systemic social demonisation of unconventional women by actively embracing the externally imposed status of witch — “So it was a witch they were wanting

[...] soon enough I learned how to be what they needed” (1999, 211). As villagers grow to respect her, some even relying on her “magic” for advice and pleasing her with gifts, she reaffirms her autonomy and secures it into the social structure through the figure of the witch, yet again reclaiming her agency and independence via a “Power that [...] was invested in me by a village” (1999, 213).

Despite the apparent self-fulfilment articulated in her autonomy, in true fairy-tale style, the “witch” eventually falls in love. Nevertheless, the patriarchal configuration of romantic love naturalised and institutionalised through classical literary fairy tales is radically defied in this case — as well as in the rest of the collection. Rather than love at first sight between an active, brave prince and a beautiful, submissive princess, the love story that transforms the witch is that between her and another woman — significantly, a young woman who does not fit neither her mother’s nor her father’s expectations. The romantic plot is not resolved, but the suggestive open ending of “The Tale of the Kiss” is nonetheless an optimistic one due to its freeing lack of definition which decisively detaches fairy-tale love from its constraining, prescribed heteronormativity.

On the basis of such a fundamental depiction of patriarchal norms as susceptible to being transgressed by the female independent power, epitomised in the figure of the witch, Donoghue overtly “queers” the fairy tale —both literally and figuratively— contesting the naturalised reproduction of women as “the mirror image of masculine desire” (Bacchilega 1997, 28) and “deliberately deviating from the ‘straight’ plot, i.e. from the normative which of course includes the sexual norm” (Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère qtd. in Jorgensen 2011, 286). In light of this, “destroying [gendered] dichotomies” (Jorgensen 2011, 285) that dominate the institutionalisation of patriarchal womanhood through fairy tales necessarily involves, as well, the abolition of the traditional narrative of competition among women. This is a purpose *Kissing the Witch* also endeavours to accomplish, as is particularly the case of “The Tale of the Apple”, the rewritten story of Snow White. In this tale, social expectations of female competition over male attention drive the narrator to doubt her stepmother’s intentions, despite their initially loving personal relationship, just

to ultimately reveal that the latter was merely acting on her anxiety to become the ruler of the kingdom after the king's death — and not out of jealousy of the protagonist's beauty, as in classical accounts of the tale. Likewise, Donoghue's rendition of Hansel and Gretel's story, "The Tale of the Cottage", depicts a manifest demonstration of female sorority as Gretel decides to side with the witch —who is not the cannibalistic old hag of the classical fairy tale, but rather an independent, caring and wise young woman— when Hansel harasses her sexually. Thus, alongside anti-hegemonic dispositions of female agency, motherhood and love parallel to the ones presented in "The Tale of the Kiss", configurations of norm-resisting female relationships become the main focus of the collection. As a result, *Kissing the Witch* considerably fulfils its feminist creative journey to "valorize feminine relationships [...] without essentializing femininity" (2011, 286), while simultaneously diversifying and humanising the historically demonised witch — a character who, across Donoghue's tales, metamorphoses into the ultimate symbolic personification of subversive female power, successively breaking the various "magic spells" of patriarchal male hegemony.

CONCLUSIONS

As argued throughout this dissertation, aiming to understand the contemporary status of the traditional fairy tale witch as an exceptionally appealing symbol of female and feminist empowerment, despite the defining rationalisation of present-day societies, is an essentially transversal project, necessarily involving thorough exploration of questions related to literature, history, religion and politics. The old, ugly, lonely and child-hating hag of the classical literary fairy tale tradition has haunted the imaginations of children (and adults) for centuries, representing what individuals should avoid and reject from society. Historically disguised as an element of children's fantastic fiction, however, the image of the evil witch that survives in the unconsciousness of contemporary audiences is, in fact, a stereotypical embodiment of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse as articulated through social norms and conventions over the centuries.

The genre of fairy tales known and cherished today as important cultural heritage has its origins in community and social consensus. Classical literary fairy tales emerged as an alteration of traditional oral folk narratives—which expressed the shared opinions, anxieties and wishes of people with regards to their circumstances—as they were appropriated by upper class writers between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as a fundamental civilising tool. As such, the form became an institutionalised product designed for the dissemination of social norms compliant with the dominant aristocratic and bourgeois values. By providing readers with defining models of behaviour, literary fairy tales established a crucial distinction between genders with regards to the social standards of acceptability, informed by the hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Thus, by means of its archetypal characters and plot lines, the fairy tale genre has historically conveyed the idea that conforming to social norms is the natural and most rewarding form of life — particularly so for women, whose representation in fairy tales has methodically depicted female submissiveness to external expectations as the right path to ultimate happiness.

Against this background, the classical figure of the evil witch mirrored the dominant social opinion on those women who dared to resist the dictations of patriarchal norms — women who existed outside the limits of the hegemonic male desire, reaching for individual identity beyond the passive assumption of marriage and motherhood, as was socially prescribed. With historical roots in Christian religion, such dispositions of unconventional and independent women were deemed as socially dangerous: they originally banished humanity from Paradise, afterwards threatening social (patriarchal) harmony. As the history itself reveals, such a fear of female empowerment reached the point of absolute demonisation of women during the early modern period, when, supported by ecclesiastical authorities and public belief, thousands of women who did not conform to the patriarchal establishment were condemned as witches, tortured and publicly executed. Thus, with such a socio-historical foundation, the classical fairy tale witch used as a referent in the socialisation of children personified the utmost undesirable model of female behaviour — that which resists the norm.

The contemporary feminist movement, in its persistent attempt to expose and transgress patriarchal hegemony, has critically vindicated the fairy tale witch. Early reclaimed by first-wave feminists and later revived during the second-wave movement, feminism has harnessed the historically defining negative liminality of the archetypal witch and her power, one daringly different to that of any conventional woman, as a positive symbol of female dissidence and resistance. Such a political vindication of women's subversive power has been crucially articulated in the form of contemporary feminist rewritings of the fairy tale genre. Therefore, exploiting the performative nature of gender identities, fairy tale rewriters have endeavoured to offer alternative performances of traditionally gender-biased images such as the witch, simultaneously exposing and subverting the hegemonic discourse within the limits of its own institutionalised socialising narratives. Consequently, contemporary reassessments of the fairy tale genre have empowered the classical witch by reformulating her liminal alterity as a place of de-stigmatising diversity and humanity — as is the

case of Emma Donoghue's collection *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997), where the typically optimistic fairy tale narrative ultimately presents the witch as the natural source of female power to transform alienating conditions, significantly securing a happy ending by means of an active defiance of patriarchal heteronormativity.

It is on the basis of such considerations, raised from an extensive revision of the fairy tale genre and the image of the witch across complementary historical, literary and ideological narratives, that this dissertation provides an explanation to the extraordinary relevance of the witch in the context of present-day feminism. The witch resonates for contemporary female audiences with exceptional strength because not only she symbolises the historically legitimised oppression of women, but also her power, on account of strategic rewritings of the fairy tale genre, embodies the successful transgression of female-alienating norms within the rigid limits of a historically institutionalised cultural narrative, while effectively reclaiming the socialising influence of fairy tales for the materialisation of liberating alternatives to patriarchal hegemony. As a result, the radical change initiated in the fairy tale imagination against the constraints of heteronormativity upon the construction of gender by means of the subversive power of the witch symbolically mirrors the real transformative potential of all (feminist) women who actively resist misogyny and patriarchal hegemony in the twenty-first century.

The exploration of the nature of the fairy tale witch as a feminist symbol discussed in this dissertation, albeit considerably transversal and thorough, could be further studied in order to achieve greater understanding of the universally diverse meanings and uses of the fairy tale tradition and the figure of the witch. Neither magic, imagination and the patriarchal oppression of women nor feminism are exclusive to white European societies, as is the case of the context of the majority of the reference works employed for the discussion of the original fairy tales, rewritings and critical theories considered in this dissertation.

Due to the restricted scope of this dissertation, a number of arguments and possible lines of research are here unexplored, yet these may be open for future examination. Accordingly, operating, for instance, from the standpoint of the narratological study of fairy tales as products of the short story genre, and therefore particularly apt for the exploration of liminal subjectivities and ambiguous cultural spaces, research on the configurations and significance of the fairy tale witch in postcolonial contexts would be crucial to the exploration of one of the main concerns of third-wave and present-day feminisms: intersectionality. Hence, such a cross-cultural approach would effectively amplify and reinforce the currently established feminist identification with the subversive figure of the fairy tale witch as illustrated in this dissertation.

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