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### **Fairy Tales Rewritten: The Reconfiguration of Female Identity in Emma Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Voice' and A.S. Byatt's 'Cold'**

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The aim of this essay is to provide an analysis of Emma Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Voice' (1997) and A. S. Byatt's 'Cold' (1998) by paying special attention to the way in which they rewrite their main intertexts: Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' in the case of Donoghue's story, and the Grimm Brothers' 'Snow White' and Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' in the case of Byatt's tale. In order frame my analysis, I will begin with an introduction where I will deal with the fairy tale genre, its survival through rewriting and the way in which gender issues and feminist concerns have figured among the main points in focus of contemporary rewritings. In line with this, it must be said that my choice of Donoghue's and Byatt's tales has to do with the way in which they illustrate many contemporary writers' attempt to rethink femininity otherwise and to show how the way in which women have been portrayed in literature –in this particular case, in traditional fairy tales– has contributed to the narrow or negative attitudes towards women in society. Donoghue and Byatt succeed, in this sense, in retelling popular tales from a perspective that challenges patriarchy. By presenting new stories, plots and characters through a rewriting of their main intertexts, 'The Tale of the Voice' and 'Cold' construct alternative worlds in which the female characters are portrayed from a perspective that differs from that in the tales they are based on, thus making the reader reflect on what a woman is able to do, on what she needs or not to sacrifice for a man, etc. In order to better understand these retellings, they will be compared with the classic fairy tales they rewrite. Thus, following the introduction, there will be another section structured into two parts, each devoted to one of these tales. I will begin by briefly placing them in the context of their respective authors' literary production in order to proceed then to a more in-depth analysis. The last section of the essay will be devoted to the conclusions, where the two tales will be related and the most important aspects of the previous analysis will be summarised and commented on.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Inherited from the oral tradition and passed by word of mouth from generation to generation, fairy tales have been conceived as ‘disintegrations of ancient myth’, ‘remains of Palaeolithic beliefs’ or ‘fictionalized remnants of elementary planetary observations’ (Bottigheimer 1). As Swann claims, without the aid of books, the folklore tradition that this literary genre forms part of poses a certain difficulty when it comes to establishing origins, authors and the tales’ primary versions (3). However, what can be told for sure is that this kind of literature existed in all countries before the tales began to be written down. As Zipes puts it, fairy tales were originally not only told by, but also addressed to adults, and they gave narrative form to the human struggle with immortality, desires, enchantments and resurrections. And yet, Zipes adds, it was not until the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that these original folktales came to be regarded as a proper literary genre –first known as the ‘wonder folk tale’ or the ‘*conte merveilleux*’– with its own motifs, plots and conventions (Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* 3).

In *A Companion to the Fairy Tale* (2006), Davidson and Chaudhri point out that fairy tales’ survival is the result of ‘the very structure of some tales and the vivid power of some of their characters’ (2). The evolution of the genre in Europe has gone in parallel with the cultural transformations that have taken place with the passing of time. Thus, the tales’ survival is related not only to their structure and characters, but also to the fact that adaptations and retellings have infused new life in the fairy tale tradition, adapting it to present-day concerns (Eisfield 9). As Zipes explains, ‘ever since 1980 there has been an inextricable, dialectical development of mutual influence among all writers of fairy tales and fairy tale criticism that has led to innovative fairy tale experiments in all cultural fields’ (*Relentless Progress* 122). This is reflected in the great success of the literary journal *Fairy Tale Review*, founded by Kate Bernheimer in 2005 and devoted to the study of

‘contemporary expressions of fairy tale motifs in fiction and poetry’, which constitutes clear proof that these tales continue to provide ‘inspiration’ to contemporary writers in many and various ways (Orme 149). Authors like Robert Coover (1932- ), A.S. Byatt (1936- ), Margaret Atwood (1939- ), Angela Carter (1940-1992) and Emma Donoghue (1969- ) figure prominently among the contemporary writers that have produced an astounding variety of fairy tale revisions and rewritings in the fields of both fiction and poetry (Benson 2). By resorting to parody, role reversals and other strategies, contemporary retellings and adaptations of fairy tales exist as part of the heritage of the traditional tale and have contributed to the development of fairy tale criticism.

Susan Redington Bobby refers to some of the writers mentioned above –Sexton, Carter and Atwood– as ‘the pioneers of feminist postmodern fairy tale revisions’ (7). They merged, in works produced from the 1970s onwards, the changing attitudes to gender that came with the rise of Second-wave feminism and the frequent recourse to rewriting as a recurrent feature of postmodernist literature. It cannot be denied that many of those pioneers of fairy tale literary revisionism focused primarily on feminist concerns and that, even if the genre has become quite diversified, the passing of time has not diminished the potential of fairy tale rewritings to address and rethink gender roles and other related issues, such as the recurrent anti-feminist messages in classic fairy tales. For this reason, feminist criticism has confronted this problematic aspect of fairy tales, disclosing and challenging the gender patterns at the core of this kind of literature.

Classic fairy tales reinforce a division and difference between male and female traits which project a view of women affected by a lack of a ‘theory of female poetics or aesthetics’, thus reinforcing the patriarchal system which has traditionally demeaned women through history (Joosen 85). The heroines –the princesses, the good women– can only be saved by the handsome prince or courageous hero of the story. Male characters are active

and powerful, they are masters of their own destiny, and so, very different from the weak and submissive women whose beauty defines the ‘condition of female desire’ (Duncker 152) and constitutes the main source of female power. In sum, the gender role models offered in traditional fairy tales endorse the stereotypical inferiority of women by portraying them as dependent, passive and weak: whereas boys go out to the world, fight enemies, gain power and conquer women, girls’ development lies in their transformation from childhood to adulthood, thus reaching sexual maturity, from a Freudian perspective –to do so, all they have to do is sit and wait (Haase 778). In addition, through their portraits of the ‘bad woman’–the witch, the stepmother, the stepsisters– as the antagonist of the ‘good woman’ – the princess, the fairy tale protagonist– fairy tales usually convey a view of women’s relations with one another as based on hatred and cruelty, competition and rivalry. This is the case, for instance, with Cinderella and the Ugly Sisters or Snow White and the Queen: in these tales, as in many others, the heroines’ rivals are not only envious of her beauty but are also evil women determined to destroy her. The archetypal figure of the witch is the main antagonist in classic fairy tales, together with the wicked stepmother, recurrently depicted as an ambitious woman whose multiple ruses represent acts of empowerment to achieve her own desires over the rest of the characters (Fisher and Silber 76). Weak and submissive, evil or ambitious, women in fairy tales represent extreme polarisations that perpetuate sexist stereotypes thoroughly criticised in contemporary society, and literature.

In the two tales analysed in this essay, ‘The Tale of the Voice’ and ‘Cold’, Emma Donoghue and A. S. Byatt resort to rewriting in an attempt to transform and deconstruct the traditional female roles described above by giving the tales’ female protagonists voice, power and the capacity to create their destiny by themselves. By simultaneously using and subverting elements of the classic fairy tale, these retellings are in tune with the feminist critique of the genre and the contemporary questioning of those conventions that make for a

representation of women now seen as determined by the ‘constrictions of a fixed and stereotypical female identity’ (Pereira 75).

## **II. REWRITING FAIRY TALES: ‘THE TALE OF THE VOICE’ AND ‘COLD’**

### **II.1. ‘THE TALE OF THE VOICE’**

Modern writers’ interest in the reinvention of traditional fairy tale plots, motifs and images is an expression of their need to create possibilities of living and being in the world different from those in the classic stories (Bobby 13). Emma Donoghue’s *Kissing the Witch* (1997) illustrates this need through thirteen re-imagined fairy tales, based on traditional European sources by writers such as Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, and Hans Christian Andersen. Born in Dublin in 1969, Donoghue is best known for her fiction, and several awarded works by her have been translated into over forty languages. Author of novels such as *Slammerkin* (2000) and *Room* (2010), she is also known for her drama productions for stage, radio and screen and for her interest in literary history. Besides, she has edited anthologies such as *Romantic Friendship and Desire* (1997), *Poems Between Women: Four Centuries of Love* (1999), and *The Mammoth Book of Lesbian Short Stories* (1999). *Kissing the Witch* brought her success with both readers and critics, and it has made for Donoghue being considered as ‘one of the most innovative fairy tale voices of the post-Angela Carter generation’ (Bacchilega 50). The thirteen tales that make up the book display the struggles of an innocent heroine figure based upon well-known fairy tale characters like Snow White, Cinderella or, in the case of ‘The Tale of the Voice’, the Little Mermaid. These heroines are often portrayed in the process of discovering their own identities, awakening to new desires and experiences which lead to their ‘personal transformation’ (Orme 116), usually with the help of an older woman figure (a fairy, a witch or a stepmother). In this work, stories are linked to one another in a way that gives prominence to the roles of teller and listener. Each

tale is narrated by a teller/heroine who, at the end of her account, asks another character to tell her story in turn. Forming a succession of ‘fictional story-tellers’, each narrator becomes then the listener of another story, which is embedded in the previous one (Joosen 116). The ways in which Donoghue alters her sources regarding both content and form, as well as the wide variety of female desires (often non-heterosexual) dealt with in the tales, account for the work’s criticism of the established norms of femininity and its redefinition of the traditional power structures at the core of classic fairy tales.

In the tale that Donoghue rewrites in ‘The Tale of the Voice’, Andersen sets the action in the depths of the ocean, where a widower Sea King lives with his six beautiful daughters, mermaids, and his elderly wise mother, who takes care of them. ‘The Little Mermaid’ focuses on the youngest and prettiest of them, a ‘strange child, quiet and pensive’ who cared for nothing but her ‘rosy-red flowers that looked like the sun’ and a ‘beautiful marble statue’ representing a handsome boy and which had fallen to the bottom of the sea after a wreck.<sup>1</sup> When she is allowed to rise to the surface for the first time, she falls in love at first sight with a young man –a prince– and decides to change her world with the help of a witch, sacrificing her life to be loved in return. ‘The Tale of the Voice’ manages to keep the essence of the original tale, but rewriting certain aspects of it with a view to challenging and subverting the gender patterns present in Andersen’s story. Set in a village, Donoghue’s tale sets aside the most fantastic elements –the undersea world, the mermaids, the princes and princesses– and brings the action and characters closer to the reader’s (real) world: the protagonist is the hard-working daughter of a fisherman and the young man is a merchant’s son. The storyline does not depart much from Andersen’s, and is similarly structured into: 1) a beginning, in which an inexperienced girl falls in love at first sight with a young boy; 2) a middle, when she renounces everything –her voice, her body, her family– and sacrifices

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen* (USA: University of Washington Press, 2002), 35. Hereafter quotations from ‘The Little Mermaid’ will be identified as LM, followed by page number.

herself (unsuccessfully) to be loved in return; and 3) an end, which does differ from Andersen's: while in the original story the protagonist dies, Donoghue's young girl learns from her mistakes and ends happily married to a man who loves her as she is. Though altered to fit the setting and the critical intention of the tale, the main characters –the young girl, the boy she loves and the witch– are a clear echo of those in Andersen's tale. Which are, then, the reasons that account for 'The Tale of the Voice' being regarded as an illustration of feminist fairy tale revisionism?

By contrast with Andersen's traditional opening and impersonal narration in 'The Little Mermaid', Donoghue leaves out his version of the typical 'Once upon a time there was...' –'Far out at sea...' –<sup>2</sup> and replaces it with an opening that brings to the fore an internal narrator's voice: 'In the days when wishing was having, I got what I wished and then I wished I hadn't' (TV 186). Thus, Donoghue endows the female protagonist with a voice, as it is the fisherman's daughter who narrates the events in the retrospect. The silence of female protagonists in traditional tales (narrated by an external/heterodiegetic narrator) is related to their passiveness and dependent character, and so, giving them a voice of their own is a way of empowering them. Moreover, through her female protagonist-narrator Donoghue is able to emphasise the 'anti-woman ideology coded in traditional fairy tales' (Cranny-Francis 89), which presents the man as superior and worthy of any sacrifice: 'If I couldn't have him, I'd have nothing' (TV 187); 'He's worth any price [...]. I'd jump in the sea to save him. I'd forget father and mother and sisters for his sake' (TV 190). The girl's voice contributes to portraying a character who already knows the consequences of her acts, and who regrets, from the first lines of the tale, her behaviour without downplaying her responsibility: 'I'll make no excuses; I was a grown woman when it happened to me' (TV 185). This unmediated portrait of female subjectivity also displays more powerfully the

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Donoghue, *Kissing the Witch* (New York: Joanna Cotler Books, 1997), 74. Hereafter quotations from 'The Tale of the Voice' will be identified as TV, followed by page number.



passion felt by and the extreme suffering of the main character – ‘Make me better. Make me right. Make me like a woman he could love’ (TV 192)– in a way that also makes clear to the reader the female idealisation of the male, since the protagonist (inaccurately) sees her beloved as ‘an angel come down to earth’ (TV 186), a man that ‘was everything I wasn’t, hadn’t, couldn’t’ (TV 187). Significantly, the ‘voice’ constitutes, as the title advances, a major element in Donoghue’s tale: it is the instrument through which she criticises the way in which men are recurrently looked up to by women in fairy tales –and more specifically in ‘The Little Mermaid’– as better, more capable, more powerful. ‘Power was ringing through my lovely body: what need had I of words?’ (TV 196), the protagonist states, but she will learn how wrong she was to think so.

The portrait of the protagonist constitutes another important aspect of this feminist rewriting. In Andersen’s tale, the little mermaid is described as the most beautiful of all the mermaids under the sea: ‘her skin was as clear and delicate as a rose petal, and her eyes were as blue as the deepest sea’ (LM 35), while her voice was the ‘most beautiful voice of all down here at the bottom of the sea’ (LM 48). In fairy tales the importance of feminine ‘beauty’ (physical beauty), especially in young women, is a recurrent motif. As Spade and Valentine remark, fairy tales ‘convey messages about the importance of feminine beauty not only by making “beauties” prominent in stories but also by demonstrating how beauty gets its rewards’ (190). Thus, even if in this case the little mermaid eventually fails to get the love she desires, Andersen complies with the convention of making the protagonist of his tale extremely beautiful. In Donoghue’s tale, by contrast, the protagonist finds herself lacking in beauty, especially when compared with the man she loves: ‘His hands were pale, gripping purse and quill; mine were scored red with fish scales. His boots looks like they never touched the ground; my toes were caulked with mud’ (TV 186). She seems to think that, as she is not beautiful, she does not deserve him. The pressure to change into someone beautiful

—or, even, to have an ideal beauty beyond all that is possibly human— is another recurrent element in the treatment of female characters in classic fairy tales. What they desire is to fulfil men's dreams and satisfy their desires, and this is always related to the woman's physical appearance: Andersen's little mermaid wants to change her tails into legs and Donoghue's protagonist also changes, but both do so in vain. Moreover, this change points to the sacrifices that the female protagonists make for love. In order to get the beauty that she believes will make the man love her, Andersen's little mermaid has to lose her voice and her immortality, which causes her 'great pain, as if a sharp sword were cutting through you [her]' (LM 48). Donoghue's protagonist also sacrifices her voice and feels a pain 'like a sword cutting you in half' (TV 194). Both suffer silently and never get what they yearn for. By making the protagonist follow the steps of Andersen's little mermaid, Donoghue wants to make the reader reflect on whether a woman should sacrifice herself or not for a man. On the other hand, setting the story in a less 'unreal', less fairy tale setting (without princes or princesses) makes it easier to perceive the ideology that lies behind traditional fairy tales and its effects on the world beyond the realm of fantasy. Thus, Donoghue makes her female protagonist share the little mermaid's attitude and turns it into a vehicle for criticising the importance given to beauty, and the changes and sacrifices that women are expected to or think themselves they have to make for men. However, this critique would not be possible without another important figure in the classic fairy tale: the witch.

The witch is a recurrent character in folktales and fairy tales, where she is depicted as a powerful antagonist. In Andersen's tale, she works as both a villain and a donor figure. Portrayed as a frightening and dangerous character who takes advantage of the little mermaid's desire to become human, the witch helps her, but under her conditions: the prince has to love her with his whole soul, otherwise, she'll become 'foam on the water' (LM 48). Basically, the role of this character in Andersen's tale is to contribute to the little mermaid's

self-destruction. The feminist critique of the representation of women as either good-weak or evil-powerful takes shape in Donoghue's tale by turning the powerful and cruel witch into a powerful and reasonable adviser. As in other tales in the collection, the role of the witch is subverted as she is changed into a helper who 'looks like a witch but acts like a foster mother, a godmother' (Bobby 17). Described from the beginning as a fearsome character, about whom it was said that 'she fed sea snails from her own mouth, and was an octopus below the waist' (TV 188) –a clear allusion to the witch in Andersen's tale– and that 'she could turn men to limp fish with a single glance of her watery eye' (TV 189), the witch is the voice that rises to question traditional gender roles and motifs in fairy tales: 'There's always a him' (TV 190); 'No point my telling you he's not worth it, I suppose' (TV 190); 'This must be love indeed [...], if you know nothing about him. This must be a real thing, if there's not a pinch of truth in the brew' (TV 192). It is through this very same voice that Donoghue criticises certain aspects of female behaviour in the classic fairy tale (and beyond): 'Change for your own sake, if you must, not for what you imagine another will ask of you' (TV 192). After the protagonist's failed attempt to be loved in return, the witch-adviser reveals to her that her voice had never been taken from her and tells the girl that both her voice and her life are in *her* power –and not in any man's power.

According to Silvey, the popularity of Andersen's tales resides in his successful treatment of universal themes, such as love and humility (25). In this particular case, Donoghue chooses a tale of love and sacrifice, which has often been connected with suffering, marriage and wordless submission, and rewrites it in order to question the socially and culturally constructed norms of femininity, as well as to revise the way in which female characters are made to behave and relate to one another in traditional fairy tales. In the original story, love and sacrifice lead the little mermaid to her own destruction. Similarly, the narrator of 'The Tale of the Voice' sacrifices too much to gain the love of a man but, in

contrast with its main intertext, she survives to re-evaluate her actions and tell about them in her own voice, full of self-criticism. As Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère points out, she finally achieves a ‘positive and distinct sense of identity’ and discovers ‘her own voice’ (17). Having learnt from her mistakes with the help of the witch, having rediscovered herself and valued herself for what she is, the protagonist can find someone who does the same: “I married a fisherman with green eyes who liked to hear me sing, but preferred to hear me talk’ (TV 204). Her recovered voice stands for her change, which is here, above all, an inner transformation. The protagonist is thus given a second chance, just as the reader is given the opportunity to reflect on how fairy tales affect the construction of female identity as well as the way in which women understand, and sometimes misunderstand, themselves and what love means.

## II.2. ‘COLD’

Like ‘The Tale of the Voice’, the tale under analysis in this section is also part of a short-story collection: *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), by English writer A. S. Byatt. After gaining recognition as a novelist between the mid-sixties and the mid-eighties, Byatt, born in Sheffield in 1936, began publishing short fiction in collected volumes such as *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987). Her Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) brought her the fame and international recognition that she still enjoys nowadays as a writer, critic and editor of such anthologies as *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (1998). Byatt occupies a prominent place among contemporary short-story writers, and many of her collections illustrate the ‘postmodernist trend of parodying the fairy tale and rewriting the fairy tale tradition’, especially *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994), *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), and *The Little Black Book of Stories* (2003) (Pereira 64). Focusing on the work where ‘Cold’ is included, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and*

*Ice* plays, as its title suggests, with the opposition between fire (passion) and cold (rationality). In the six short stories in the collection, which feature female protagonists, the basic four elements of nature –fire, ice/water, earth and air– are connected to the characters’ inner states. These characters ‘exist in conditions of fundamental neediness and confront primal experiences of love, loss and betrayal’, the stories depicting the threat that being ‘out of one’s element’ means (Campbell 193). This can be clearly seen in ‘Cold’, where Byatt reworks two well-known fairy tales –the Grimms’ ‘Snow White’ and Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen’– into a complex story that rethinks typical aspects of the genre, like the polarisation of characters and traits. Thus, Byatt’s narrative creates a world, and especially a female protagonist, out of elements traditionally kept apart, to the point that the components of ‘feeling or reason, goodness or evil, fragility or strength, child or woman’ are integrated rather than presented as mutually exclusive (Cheira 258), as will be explained in what follows.

‘Cold’ tells the story of Princess Fiammarosa, the eagerly awaited daughter of the King and the Queen of a ‘temperate kingdom, in the midst of a landmass’.<sup>3</sup> The ‘vulnerable fragility’ (C 116) of the child leads those around her to be extra careful and protective with Fiammarosa, who becomes a docile educated girl, but also drowsy and lifeless, as if there was something missing in her life. Her lack of interest, somnolence, fragility and delicacy define her personality. One day, however, she discovers the revitalising effects that the cold and the snow have upon her body, which reveals to her her true identity. The ‘cold’ princess thus acquires the strength and vitality which she lacked on discovering that she is, in the narrator’s words, an ‘icewoman’ (C 131). The man she falls in love with, though, seems to be her polar opposite, as Prince Sasan is a man of heat just as she is a woman of ice: he comes from the distant lands of the great deserts, where she goes to live with him after their

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<sup>3</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 115. Hereafter quotations from ‘Cold’ will be identified as C, followed by page number.

marriage. There, she suffers the damaging effects of the heat, to the point of almost dying. Eventually, he builds a glass palace in the heart of a mountain, which shelters her from the suffering caused by living in his hot kingdom, but which preserves not only her health, but also her identity.

The relationship between ‘Cold’ and its main intertexts may not seem as clear as in ‘The Tale of the Voice’. If one digs further into the stories, though, it will be seen that Byatt has extracted some key elements from them in order to carry out her rewriting. In this sense, Fiammarosa can be analysed as the result of fusing the female protagonists of ‘Snow White’ and ‘The Snow Queen’. The Grimms’ Snow White is one of the best-known characters in the world of fairy tales. Characterised by the warmth and kindness of her heart, her greatest assets are her beauty, her purity and her innocence, which make her worthy of being saved by the prince. Andersen’s Snow Queen is, by contrast, a villain from the North Pole. Depicted as intelligent and beautiful, the coldness of this female character –related to snow and ice in literal and figurative ways– conveys rationality and power, the power she obtains as reason is effectively used by her to get what she desires. By blending these two different female universes, Byatt creates a complex character who possesses the whiteness and innocence of Snow White, and the coldness, rationality and independence of the Snow Queen. Through Fiammarosa, Byatt gives shape to a new female personality that becomes a vehicle for criticising the stereotypical female characters of classic fairy tales.

Something that calls the reader’s attention is the way in which the first lines of ‘Cold’ resemble those in the Grimms’ tale, with the respective mothers of both protagonists voicing their desires. In the latter, Snow White’s mother says: ‘What if I were to have a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of this window-frame’.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in ‘Cold’, Fiammarosa’s mother ‘longed for gentleness and softness, whilst her powerful

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<sup>4</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Brothers Grimm: Popular Folk Tales* (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1978), 61. Hereafter quotations from ‘Snow White’ will be identified as SW, followed by page number.

father longed for delicacy and beauty' (C 115). With these words, Byatt recalls those traits considered typically female, inherent in female nature, while they have to do, rather, with what men and patriarchal society expect of women. Physical fragility, evocative of a weak, docile character, fits the established canons of femininity, which contrast with the way male characters are described. Fiammarosa is a fragile and very thin girl who needs to be taken care of, kept warm and protected. Her initial description further evokes that of the Grimms' Snow White, as Fiammarosa 'had a fine, transparent skin, so the blush of blood was fiery and rosy; and her hair [...] a soft, black fur' (C 115-116). However, as she grows up, she changes in a way that recalls Snow White's slumber. She becomes a drowsy, lifeless girl, her early 'rosy' skin becomes 'milky' and 'softly pale, like rose petals', while her black hair turns into 'pale golden hair' (C 117). Interestingly, the representation of femininity through the female characters in fairy tales is related to the description of Fiammarosa in these quotes. As Sako points out, this comes from the 'tradition of the aesthetisation of the dead female body', where a 'strong link between femininity and death in different social, cultural and historical contexts' is delineated (80). Byatt's tale evokes this connection between female beauty and death through the fusion of whiteness, cold and lifelessness in her main female character, emphasising in her tale, as in traditional fairy tales, the woman's beauty.

However, in spite of these similarities between Snow White and Fiammarosa, it is not a man that 'wakes her up' from her slumber, but the discovery of her own identity through the revitalising effects of cold. In traditional fairy tales, the female protagonist is rescued from her adverse circumstances by a man, like the prince that rescues Snow White. In 'Cold' the appearance of the prince threatens the pleasures of Fiammarosa's newly discovered identity and puts an end to the happiness that the cold brings to her. Inherited from the second female character on which Byatt bases her Fiammarosa, a strong sense of self and an independent spirit are the traits that Byatt resorts to in order to suggest that the key to

happiness is not in a man but, first of all, in the woman herself. Thus, to the sweet, innocent and white-skinned Fiammarosa are later added the features of one of the most powerful female characters in Andersen's tales: the Snow Queen. Byatt sets aside the polarised representation of women in traditional fairy tales –as weak/good (Snow White) or powerful/evil (the Snow Queen)– and makes her protagonist more complex and multisided by giving her the coldness, rationality and independence of the Snow Queen.

This blending of traits makes of Fiammarosa an atypical fairy tale protagonist, as atypical as her reflections when she ponders that all the 'anxious love' she had received in childhood 'had simply made her ill and exhausted. There was more life in coldness. In solitude. [...] She was too happy alone to make a good bride' (C 133-136). By depicting Fiammarosa as she does, Byatt questions the way in which female characters in fairy tales are presented as always in need of a man who stands out for them and who has what they lack: intelligence, determination, resourcefulness. Fiammarosa feels happy in solitude, and it is in solitude she develops intellectually in a way that further sets her apart from traditional fairy tale protagonists. She studies the 'flowers and mosses' (C 134) in the summer; and the 'snow-crystals and ice-formations' (C 134) in the winter, transferring all this knowledge onto a creative activity: tapestries. Although spinning, sewing or embroidering are considered typical female activities, Fiammarosa's tapestry making goes beyond that, as it is presented in the tale an art derived from her intellectual inquisitiveness and her curiosity about nature. Her thirst for learning leads her to maintain correspondence with 'gardeners and natural philosophers' (C 135), 'spinners of threads and weavers all over the world' (C 135), conveying, in this way, something that female characters usually lack in fairy tales: intellectual interests and creativity.

However, there comes a point in the story when the protagonist decides to renounce her intellectual pursuits and happy independence for the sake of the man she falls in love



with, which risks both her identity and her life. Despondent when several other suitors ask for her hand, Fiammarosa is captivated by the presents brought by Prince Sasan, complex structures of glass made by himself that, to her, resemble ice. The artistry of Sasan opens Fiammarosa's heart, which is also the heart of an artist. Although she knows the fatal effects that the heat will have on her, she makes up her mind to marry him and follow him to his kingdom in the desert. The situation recalls what was discussed in the previous section, as fairy tale revisionism engaged with feminist concerns is intended to examine here –as in Donoghue's tale– gender relations from the perspective of the connection between female love and sacrifice.

While Snow White awaits her prince to save her, the Snow Queen maintains the independence and power that characterises female evil figures in fairy tales. But are these the only alternatives? It would seem that intelligent and independent women are doomed to be alone, while fulfilment in love is predicated on the woman's passivity, submission, and lack of intellectual abilities, replaced, rather, by the always rewarded physical beauty. Moreover, evil is connected with the former type of character, while goodness is a trait of the latter. Byatt explores these, initially mutually exclusive, alternatives by making Fiammarosa choose between them: or maintaining her interests, independence and power, or renouncing them to become Sasan's wife. She follows the prince, but as she lacks the simplicity of protagonists like Snow White, her choice is like death: 'Dying is an ancient metaphor for the bliss of love, and Fiammarosa died a little, daily. But she was also dying in cold fact. Or in warm fact, to be more precise.' (C 164). If the outcome of all this was Fiammarosa renouncing her love, the idea that there are only two alternatives for women would be reinforced. It is important to mention that Sasan, unlike the merchant's son in Donoghue's tale, is presented as deeply in love with Fiammarosa, for what she is, and that Fiammarosa does not idealise Sasan, she simply fights for the man she loves and who also loves her with

the same intensity –an intensity reflected in their feelings and also in their sexual relations, traditionally excluded from fairy tales. In line with this, the tale’s ending emphasises the idea that, even if it may be difficult, a woman can rightly aspire to have it all, or at least come close to: she can be good, she can have love, she can be active and intelligent, and she can be herself. There is, then, a mid-position between the two aforementioned alternatives; there is, metaphorically, a space where cold and heat, ice and fire can meet. This fusion is connected with glass, the glass artistry that enters the tale with Sasan: glass resembles ice, but glass-making requires fire.

Sasan becomes one of the few princes in a fairy tale that listens to, gets to know and helps her princess to preserve her identity. After conquering Fiammarosa, his main concern is keeping her happy. He puts her safety before his own wish to marry and it is her who is determined to follow him. Then, he suffers and feels tormented ‘that he had hurt her’ (C 157) and that their love should exact such a high price on her. This attitude contrasts with the lack of interest and concern for the needs of women shown in fairy tales and reveals a new and more complex facet of the prince’s personality. As he did to win her love, Sasan uses his talent with glass and gives her gifts made of complex glass-structures which prompt animated conversations about the Sasanians’ use of sand and glass and the long tradition of glassmakers in the royal family. This conveys again an image of the princess –the woman– as a person with intellectual concerns and intelligence, presented here as female traits appreciated by a man, in this case, her husband. Glass, thus, becomes the ‘point of intersection between herself and Prince Sasan’ (Tiffin 56). It is her endurance and his talent with glass that make for a happy ending: she does not give up and he finally builds a glass-palace in the heart of a mountain that amounts to his creating a space for her in his world. There, she can not only survive but also develop her study of the natural world (in the gardens he plants for her inside the building) and resume her correspondence with specialists

worldwide. Regarded by Fiammarosa as a place full of ‘miracles’ (C 177), not only for what there is inside but also because it gives access to the mountain’s snowy areas, this marvellous and immense glass-palace allows her to reconnect to what she is, thus preserving her identity and her love of life.

Moving away from the traditional and stereotyped Snow White and Snow Queen, Fiammarosa becomes “all in one”. In her and in her world, opposites are fused to create something new and admirable, just as cold and heat, ice and fire are united in glass-form — glass thus evoking in the tale the connection, through the protagonists, of creativity, intelligence, beauty and love. Despite the fantastic elements that characterise fairy tales, this story feels closer to reality due to the complexity of characters that do not fit the typical polarisations in the genre –regarding the traits of “good” *versus* “evil” women, and also the polar opposition between male and female traits. Moreover, Byatt shows that happiness in love cannot be achieved if the price to pay is one’s own self. On the contrary, a woman can enjoy love *only if* she manages to preserve her sense of self. This requires determination and character on the woman’s part, as is the case with Fiammarosa, but also a man, like Sasan, that is generous, intelligent and that cares for a sincere relationship in which both partners give and receive.

### III. CONCLUSION

Donoghue's 'The Tale of the Voice' and Byatt's 'Cold' illustrate the way in which contemporary writers critically approach traditional fairy tales, as the previous section has shown. Both stories challenge the patriarchal construction of femininity in tales like Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Snow Queen', and the Grimms' 'Snow White'. In 'The Tale of the Voice', Donoghue subverts some of the traits of the fairy tale genre by resorting to strategies, like the use of an internal narrator, which reveal in a clearer way the male-centred ideology that the genre promotes and which allow her to question things like female sacrifice for love. 'Cold' evokes similar concerns through her main character, who, like Donoghue's protagonist, renounces her identity and accepts the suffering that it entails in order to be with the man she loves. Thus, these authors help the reader to question the influence that men have on women in fairy tales and the way in which only women seem to sacrifice themselves for love in this genre. Moreover, both Donoghue and Byatt "derail the straight path of female destiny encoded in the tales" (Bobby 14): while in 'The Tale of the Voice' the protagonist does not die but learns from her mistakes and then marries someone who loves her for what she is, in 'Cold' a happy ending is reached against all odds, as Fiammarosa –the 'icewoman'– and her beloved —Sasan, the desert prince– manage to find bliss in a way that neither the woman's body nor her intellectual pursuits are compromised.

Although Byatt herself is reluctant to admit the implicit feminist messages that can be found in her stories, the author's 'need to reconfigure her acquired assumptions of what it means to be a woman' is clearly seen in her works (Pereira 68), as shown by 'Cold'. Here Byatt rejects the view of women as just beautiful objects –Snow White– or clever witches –the Snow Queen– and fuses traits of both in Fiammarosa. She focuses her story on the internal and psychological processes of the protagonist, her restless and curious personality, and her 'cold', independent nature that does not exclude passion. All this contributes to

making her a complex character and turns her beauty into a secondary issue. Differently, in 'The Tale of the Voice' beauty is made present through her absence, as it is connected to the plain looking protagonist's obsession with getting the love of her beloved and her eventual realisation that beauty is overvalued. Crucial to that learning process is the witch, who, far from being evil, is turned into a wise adviser whose words uncover the indifference towards the woman's voice and sense of self in traditional tales.

In sum, by giving new nuances and complexity to their female characters both stories reappraise and redefine femininity and gender roles. In the case of 'The Tale of the Voice', beauty is downplayed at the end of the story to highlight, instead, the importance of the woman's voice and sense of self, which no love sacrifice should risk. As to 'Cold', the intelligence and strong personality of the female are able to coexist with an alternative version of the traditional fairy tale hero, who eventually becomes here the vehicle for the preservation of female identity. Thus, the often anti-feminist messages of classic fairy tales are drown in a world where the woman is no longer considered inferior when compared to men or to an irrationally idealised version she has of herself; where beauty is no longer the first requirement; and where women can be happy in love without changing what they are or renouncing the assets they have to sacrifice themselves in the name of love.

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