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Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree Programme

in

European, American and Postcolonial Languages and
Literatures

Final Thesis

Until the Spell was Broken:

Rewriting the Princess Figure in Nineteenth-Century Victorian Literature

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Academic Year

2025 / 2026

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Introduction

Fairy tales have frequently been considered enduring narratives that possess the capacity to transmit universal values across generations. Yet their apparent simplicity conceals a more complex cultural function. Far from being neutral stories intended solely for children, fairy tales have historically participated in the construction of social ideals and gender expectations. The sleeping princess awakened by a prince's kiss, the virtuous maiden rewarded with marriage, the heroine whose happiness depends upon male intervention: such images have circulated with remarkable persistence across centuries and media. Among the figures most closely associated with these conventions is the princess, whose narrative has traditionally linked feminine virtue with beauty, passivity, and romantic fulfilment. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, profound social and cultural changes - including debates surrounding the Woman Question and the emergence of new models of femininity - increasingly challenged the assumptions that had long sustained these narratives. Victorian literary fairy tales thus became a privileged space in which inherited conventions could simultaneously be preserved, questioned, and reformulated.

This thesis explores how late Victorian literary fairy tales reshaped the image of the princess and examines whether these stories effectively challenge traditional femininity while still relying on the recognizable fairy-tale framework. Rather than approaching the princess as a fixed archetype or a mere residue of folklore, this study understands her as a cultural and narrative construction whose meanings are shaped by processes of reception and mediation. More specifically, it examines the tensions between continuity and change that characterise fin-de-siècle fairy tales and explores whether acts of subversion produce genuine rupture or merely expose the limitations embedded within the genre itself.

Before outlining the structure of the thesis, it is necessary to clarify the central terms on which the argument depends. The phrase "literary fairy tale" is used throughout to designate written, authored narratives that draw upon the conventions of the oral and folk tradition while consciously reworking them for a literate, predominantly middle-class readership (Tosi, 2007, p.12). This distinction, elaborated most fully by Jack Zipes, is crucial: unlike the folk tale, which is the product of collective transmission and anonymous revision, the literary fairy tale bears the marks of individual authorship and ideological intention, and it is precisely this intentionality that makes it available for the kind of critical reading this thesis performs. "Subversion" is likewise used in a specific sense: not the wholesale rejection of fairy-tale conventions, but the strategic displacement, inversion, or denaturalisation of the assumptions embedded within them. Following Linda Hutcheon's account of self-conscious narrative, subversion is understood here as a process that works from within inherited forms rather than against them, making their conventions visible precisely in order to interrogate their authority. "Femininity," finally, is treated not as a natural category but as a cultural script, a set of behaviours, dispositions and narrative positions whose apparent inevitability conceals the mechanisms of their production.

The scholarly context for this study is provided by a substantial body of work on the politics of the fairy tale and its relationship to gender. Jack Zipes's foundational contributions, particularly *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1983) established the critical framework within which the fairy tale could be understood as an ideologically charged form rather than an innocent vehicle of universal wisdom. Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994) extended this analysis by tracing the gendered history of the storytelling tradition itself, attending to the ways in which female figures, including the princess, have been constructed, idealised, and disciplined across centuries of narrative. Maria Tatar's work, especially *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1987), provided essential tools for understanding the

processes of sanitisation and ideological normalisation through which the canonical fairy-tale corpus was assembled. More specifically focused on Victorian culture, U.C. Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers's conception of "cross-writing", the complex negotiation between adult authors and child audiences that characterises much Victorian children's literature, informs the reading of the three primary texts developed in Chapter Three. The feminist critique of the fairy tale, pursued across different registers by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Karen Rowe, and more recently by scholars such as Lissa Paul and Laura Tosi, has made it possible to identify the princess not merely as a passive narrative function but as a site of ideological contestation. This thesis situates itself within this critical tradition while directing particular attention to the specific historical conditions of late Victorian Britain and to the formal strategies through which individual authors negotiate the conventions they inherit.

The three primary texts examined in this thesis - Mary De Morgan's *The Seeds of Love*, Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta*, and E. Nesbit's *The Last of the Dragons* - have been selected on the basis of a combination of criteria. Together they represent three formally and ideologically distinct modes of engaging with the princess figure and with the conventions of the fairy tale. De Morgan, Wilde and Nesbit bring to the genre markedly different social positions, aesthetic commitments, and relationships to the feminist debates of their time, and their texts accordingly produce markedly different kinds of subversion. At the same time, all three are in different ways marginal to the canonical fairy-tale tradition: they are not Perrault, not the Grimms, not Andersen. Although Wilde's fairy tales have garnered ongoing critical interest, Nesbit's works and, to a lesser degree, De Morgan's have attracted relatively less scholarly focus. Comparing these three authors, however, becomes particularly fruitful, as it uncovers recurring motifs and methods that studies focused on more canonical texts or single authors might overlook. The selection also reflects a deliberate gender balance: two women writers and one male author whose relationship to questions of femininity and social convention

was itself complex and historically freighted. Read together, the three texts illuminate a spectrum of possibilities available to late Victorian writers who wished to inhabit the fairy tale while simultaneously putting its assumptions under pressure.

To address these questions, the thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining literary criticism, feminist fairy-tale studies, reception theory and close textual analysis. Particular attention is devoted to the historical processes through which fairy tales were translated, adapted, illustrated and circulated in Victorian Britain, as well as to the ways in which individual texts negotiate inherited narrative conventions. The methodology is not uniform across the three case studies: each text demands a slightly different critical emphasis. De Morgan's tale calls for attention to the affective and symbolic dimensions of fairy-tale convention; Wilde's requires sustained engagement with aestheticism and its ambivalent relationship to ideals of beauty and suffering; Nesbit's invites analysis of the metafictional strategies through which narrative convention is made visible and subjected to comic scrutiny. Close reading remains the primary instrument throughout, but it is consistently situated within the broader historical and theoretical frameworks established in the first two chapters.

The study is thus divided into three chapters. Chapter One reconstructs the historical and theoretical framework necessary for understanding the Victorian fairy tale, examining its origins, modes of transmission and the formation of the princess as a cultural script by tracing how a set of narrative conventions came to appear canonical. Chapter Two explores the relationship between fairy tales, gender ideologies, and processes of revision, focusing on the persistence and adaptability of the princess figure within Victorian culture and on the historical pressures that made revision both possible and necessary. Chapter Three offers close readings of the three primary texts, analysing in each case the specific formal and ideological strategies through which the princess figure is renegotiated, and assessing the extent to which these

strategies achieve genuine subversion or remain constrained by the very conventions they seek to challenge.

This study ultimately contends that late Victorian fairy tales do not discard the princess figure; instead, they make its conventions more noticeable. By uncovering how femininity is constructed and rewarded, these stories turn the princess from a taken-for-granted ideal into a debated and self-aware character, illustrating both the potentials and boundaries of subversion at the end of the century.

Chapter One: The Fairy Tale Tradition and the Representation of Women

Few literary forms have combined imaginative vitality with moral purpose as powerfully as the fairy tale. Beneath its polished simplicity lies a narrative mode that has shaped how cultures conceive virtue, transformation, desire. Fairy tales instruct not through direct moralisation but through the enchantment of form: they translate moral and social tensions into symbolic resolution, turning conflict into coherence and chaos into order. The marvellous operates as an instrument of comprehension while transforming experience into pattern, uncertainty into meaning.

In this capacity for transformation lies the genre's enduring appeal and its ideological force. The fairy tales mirror and reproduce the civilising processes of their time (Zipes, 2006a, p.8), encoding social hierarchies and ethical norms within concise narratives of enchantment and virtue. Yet the harmony of their endings, as marriage, prosperity, restored order, often conceals a subtler negotiation of power. The *happy ending* functions less as organic resolution than as a moralised closure: a symbolic reconciliation that naturalises prevailing ideas of gender, virtue, and social hierarchy.

The fairy tale's apparent universality is therefore historically contingent. Emerging at the intersection of oral tradition and print culture, it absorbed the moral ideals of the societies that codified it. Stories, once communal and fluid, were reshaped into authored artefacts designed to instruct as much as to delight (Haase, 2008, p. 32). In seventeenth-century France, this transformation took on a distinctly gendered dimension: the literary *conte de fées* reflected and reinforced patriarchal values under the guise of civility and refinement (Bottigheimer, 2010, p. 9; Harries, 2003, p. 50). In the hands of Charles Perrault, the genre became a vehicle of moral pedagogy, celebrating obedience, modesty and beauty as the cornerstones of feminine virtue. Such tales moved women from marginal figures in the folk tradition to central but constrained heroines of moral exemplarity (Bottigheimer, 2010, p. 9).

The shift from voice to text marked not merely a change in medium but a reorganisation of authority. Walter Ong argues that the move from orality to literacy transforms consciousness itself: what was once collective and situational becomes fixed and authored (Ong, 2002, pp. 11–13). The literary fairy tale functions as a simulation of orality (Harries, 2003, pp. 30-33), serving as a written mimicry of speech that preserves the intimacy of storytelling while maintaining the author's control. Authorship became possession: the imagined female narrator, whether a nurse, governess, or mother, was retained as a rhetorical mask, while creative power shifted to the male author and publisher.

This chapter argues that the rise of the literary fairy tale established a gendered narrative order that both idealised and constrained the feminine. The heroine's movement from trial to reward mirrored the pedagogy of her culture, even as it contained within it the potential for critique. It is in this capacity for reimagination that the genre's most subversive potential resides. The discussion that follows traces the origins of this paradox: how the fairy tale's formal symmetry and moral closure emerged from processes of textualisation and social regulation, and how those same processes made possible the later redefinition of the female hero.

1.1 Defining the Fairy-Tale Tradition

Defining the fairy tale as a literary genre first requires distinguishing it from related narrative forms, particularly the folk tale and the tale of magic. Traditional histories often use these terms interchangeably, obscuring the distinct functions, structures and audiences of each (Bottigheimer 2010, p.2).

Folk tales differ from fairy tales in both structure and worldview. They are brief, linear narratives that mirror the daily experiences and belief systems of their audiences. Their characters are peasants, husbands and wives, tricksters, priests or servants belonging to the familiar world rather than to one of enchantment. Their conflicts concern ordinary human

matters such as money, deceit, or marital tension and often end in irony, failure or acceptance. Even when folk tales include upwardly mobile marriages, success results from luck, not from magic, giving these tales a pragmatic and moralizing tone (*ibid*, pp.4-5).

Tales of magic, by contrast, form a broader and older category encompassing divine, mythological and supernatural narratives. These stories include gods transforming humans, saints performing miracles, or heroes confronting the uncanny (*ibid*, p.6). Their aim is not to depict human happiness, but to evoke wonder or revelation of virtue. Unlike myth or religion, where magic manifests divine power, the fairy tale reimagines it as a human artifice: a narrative instrument that enables transformation within the human experience itself (Warner 2014, pp.161–163)¹.

The fairy tale thus occupies a distinct and more modern position. It borrows the marvellous from tales of magic but redirects it toward social and emotional fulfilment, combining the everyday realism of the folk tale with the transformative wonder of myth. Its protagonists are often of humble origin and use magic to overcome adversity, transcend class boundaries and achieve justice or happiness (Bottigheimer 2010, p.9). The recurrent presence of princes and princesses, or of characters who become them, symbolizes the process of transformation: nobility in fairy tales is less a matter of birth than of moral worth and perseverance.

Although the term “fairy tale” is often used loosely, scholars agree that it possesses specific structural and thematic features. The combination of a linear plot, magical intervention, concise structure and a harmonious resolution defines the fairy tale’s characteristic

¹ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 161–163. In this section, Warner distinguishes the “miraculous” logic of myth and religion from the imaginative rationalism of the fairy tale. She argues that fairy-tale magic is not a sign of divine intervention but a *secular creation* - a symbolic, human-made artifice that explores moral and emotional transformation within the bounds of human experience. By tracing this shift, Warner situates the genre within Enlightenment culture, where wonder becomes an instrument of reflection rather than revelation.

“compactness” as a narrative form (Harries W. 2003, pp. 11-12)². Unlike the sprawling plots of medieval romances, the fairy tale compresses transformation, trial and resolution into a short self-contained arc. The concision is not merely a matter of length, but of design: every event, object and encounter performs a function that propels the hero or heroine toward restoration. This formal narrative concentration parallels Vladimir Propp’s structuralist model in *Morphology of the Folktale*³, where the fairy tale is defined not by character or theme, but by a sequence of recurrent functions: deprivation, departure, trial, magical intervention and return, stages that compose the cycle of metamorphosis central to the fairy tale (Propp, pp. 25–65, 1928). For Propp, what distinguishes the fairy tale is its teleological structure: each function moves inexorably toward closure, restoring equilibrium and reasserting moral or social order. The protagonist begins in a state of lack or exclusion, encounters obstacles that test endurance or virtue, receives supernatural aid, and ultimately achieves restoration or elevation (Bottigheimer 2009, p. 7). This logic of change seems to give the fairy tale its rhythm of inevitability, even when the marvellous intervenes, and it does so within a strict narrative frugality that eliminates digression and ambiguity.

Magic, within this structure, operates as the mechanism that enables movement across boundaries, these being social, moral or metaphysical. It provides the necessary mediation between deprivation and reward, serving as the facilitator for renewal (Bottigheimer 2009, p. 12). Recurrent motifs such as enchanted helpers, metamorphosis and magical objects act as narrative signposts, might be seen as creating patterns of recognition that link individual tales to a shared cultural imagination. These tropes generate what might be called a poetics of

² Harries draws on Walter Benjamin’s notion of the fairy tale’s “chaste compactness,” a phrase from *The Storyteller* (1936) that praises the economy and purity of form in the Grimms’ *Märchen*. She uses this idea to show how the Grimms’ version of brevity and symmetry came to define the genre’s structure. See Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 91; Harries, *Twice upon a Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 11–12.

³ While Propp’s morphology was devised for Russian wonder tales transmitted orally, its functional sequence remains a useful heuristic to illuminate the compact teleology shared by many literary contes, provided we keep in view the context and the authorial framing that reshape those functions.

predictability: the reader's expectation of transformation fulfilled through resolution. The "happy ending", functions more than a sentimental formula: it provides narrative closure and moral equilibrium, signalling the restoration of order and the containment of desire. Such endings are not merely emotional but ideological, reaffirming the social and ethical values of the culture that produces them (Zipes 2006a, pp. 33-35, 68-71)⁴. The fairy tale's movements of loss, trial, and restoration, mirrors the moral order it seeks to preserve: virtue is rewarded, evil punished and chaos resolved into harmony.

Taken together, these features define the fairy tale as a literary form at once concise and adaptable, capable of crossing historical periods and languages while preserving a recognisable moral and emotional pattern. The structural tightness of the genre endows it with both clarity and resilience, allowing for continual reinterpretation across time and culture. Understanding these structural and thematic properties provides the groundwork for tracing the fairy tale's evolution: from its origins in oral storytelling to its codification as a written, authorial genre and finally to its reappropriation as a medium for social commentary and the negotiation of gendered ideals.

1.2 From Orality to the Rise of Narrative Authority

The transition from oral storytelling to the written fairy tale constitutes what might be considered one of the most significant shifts in the history of narrative culture. Oral traditions, what later came to be called *folklore*, were originally rooted in communal practices of speech and repetition, functioning as both entertainment and social communication. They were ephemeral events rather than fixed artefacts, shaped by the voices and responses of the community. Once recorded, oral tales cease to be spontaneous social performances and become

⁴ Zipes shows that the classical fairy tale functions as a socializing instrument within the broader "civilizing process." From Perrault onward, its apparent innocence masks an ideological purpose: to mould behaviour in accordance with dominant norms of class, gender, and morality. The narrative closure of the happy ending serves to naturalise this social harmony and to legitimise existing hierarchies. See Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (2nd edn, Routledge, 2006), pp. 33–35 and 68–71.

literary artefacts, subject to the conventions of the culture that codifies them. The act of documentation thus constitutes not preservation but representation, an interpretive act that filters the multiplicity of voices through the singular authority of the scribe or collector (Zipes, 2012, pp. 45–46). Writing fixes what in oral culture was variable and situational: it arrests the flux of language, conferring durability and ownership. In this sense, the written fairy tale cannot be considered a transparent window onto oral tradition; it is already a form of adaptation, shaped by the material and aesthetic conditions of literacy.

Walter Ong's theory⁵ of orality and literacy offers a crucial framework for understanding this transformation. For Ong, the advent of writing does not merely record speech but reorganises consciousness itself. In oral cultures, thought and memory are sustained through formulaic patterns, rhythm, repetition, and other mnemonic devices that preserve knowledge within communal performance (Ong 2002, pp. 33–35). Writing, by contrast, introduces distance and reflexivity: it allows words to exist independently of the speaker and fosters abstraction and critical reflection (*ibid*, pp. 80–81). When applied to the fairy tale, this insight reveals that the shift from orality to print transformed not only the means of transmission but also the experience of storytelling. The transition to print altered both the form and the social dynamics of the genre: where oral narration functioned as a collective act of exchange, the written tale encouraged a more individualised and introspective mode of reception. Literacy, as Ong observes, restructures consciousness itself, turning communication from an interactive, situational process into a reflective, interior one (Ong 2002, p. 173). In this sense, the written

⁵ Walter J. Ong, S.J. (1912–2003) was an American scholar and cultural theorist whose work explored how communication technologies shape human consciousness. Ong conceives writing as a technology that transforms human consciousness from within. Unlike earlier media, which preserve the immediacy of speech, writing externalises language and detaches it from its speaker, enabling analysis, abstraction, and self-reflection. This shift from orality to literacy produces new ways of thinking, remembering and relating, reshaping both the individual psyche and social interaction. See Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 33–35, 80–81, 173.

fairy tale did not erase the social experience of storytelling but reframed it, shifting authority from teller to writer and interpretation from shared participation to private reading.

Yet, paradoxically, early literary versions of fairy tales sought to retain the illusion of orality. Writers and editors often employed stylistic strategies that mimicked the cadences and intimacy of speech: the use of repetition, exclamations, direct address as “Once upon a time, Dear reader...”, or proverbial phrasing gave the text a performative immediacy. Elizabeth Harries (2003, p. 52) describes such devices create a simulation of orality: deliberate artifice that allows the written tale to evoke the warmth and spontaneity of storytelling while asserting the author’s mastery over language and structure. This simulated voice creates a tension between familiarity and control: the tale appears to speak with communal authority, yet it is orchestrated by an individual author whose perspective and ideology shape its tone. The fairy tale thus became not merely a story told but a text to be read, an object designed for the eye as much as for the ear. Through these devices, print culture transformed the fluid temporality of oral narration into a spatial ⁶ and visual form: the tale could now be owned, reprinted, translated and canonised.

This development also had significant social and ideological implications. The emergence of print in early modern Europe coincided with the expansion of literacy, the growth of urban centres and the rise of the publishing market. Stories that had once circulated through local, oral exchange now reached broader audiences across class and region. At the same time, the act of collecting and editing tales became entwined with questions of authorship, authority and propriety. This process centred on the question of narrative ownership: who held the right to tell and shape the stories of the people. The shift to literacy surely reconfigured the relationship between the teller and the tale: knowledge that was once communal becomes

⁶ This formulation recalls Walter J. Ong’s analysis of how writing and print technologies convert language from a temporal and auditory phenomenon into a spatial and visual one. Ong describes the rise of writing and print as a process of the *spatialisation of language*: a shift whereby words, once temporal and evanescent in oral performance, become fixed in visual space.

institutional, stored in books and libraries, and controlled by those with access to education and print (Goody and Watt, 1963, pp. 304–306). Consequently, control over selection, revision, and dissemination shifted from communal settings to editors, publishers, and named authors, who could stabilise variants and prescribe meanings (*ibid*).

The stakes were cultural as well as formal. In a commercial print market, tales were standardised and sanitised to suit polite readerships, transforming wonder into an instrument of civility and moral grooming (Warner, 1994, pp. 87-89). As critics have shown, the literary fairy tale was institutionalised to socialise children and adults into prevailing norms, classed, gendered and domestic, thus converting narrative pleasure into pedagogy (Zipes, 2006a, pp. 9-11).

This shift also had gendered implications. The maternal or communal voice frequently invoked as narrative mask, such as the nurse, the governess, the mother (etc.), was ventriloquised through print, even as actual authority rested with male editors and publishers, meanwhile female characters within the tales themselves were recast as models of obedience and restraint (Warner, 1994, pp.87-89). As the genre moved from performance to page, heroines increasingly embodied moral exemplarity rather than unruly agency, becoming central but constrained within a within a culturally prescribed system of feminine virtue (Bottigheimer, 2010, p. 9). In short, the transition to literacy may not have abolished communal storytelling but can be seen as shifting its dynamics of power: from negotiated, participatory meaning to more regulated forms of authorship, as print institutions increasingly mediated questions of access, legitimacy, and the acceptable limits of female representation.

Yet the reorganisation of narrative power did not entail the disappearance of the oral voice. Rather, it gave rise to an ongoing dialogue between spoken and written traditions, one that would come to define the fairy tale's development⁷. The interaction between orality and

⁷ Zipes views the relationship between oral and literary storytelling as a process of continual “remaking” rather than simple succession, in which oral tales are reshaped through print and institutional mediation (Zipes, 2012:

print was never a simple substitution of one medium for another; instead, it remained symbiotic and complex, continually shaping the fairy tale into a form that oscillates between collective memory and individual authorship (Zipes, 2012, pp. 3–5). Even after transcription, tales continued to circulate orally, adapted and reinterpreted by storytellers who reabsorbed printed versions into speech. The genre's evolution is thus characterised by this fluid reciprocity: the fairy tale embodies the paradox of a written voice that still speaks as if from within a communal past (*ibid*, pp. 9–10). In this sense, the rise of print did not silence the oral voice but formalised and transformed it: print crystallised the tales into durable artefacts, yet these artefacts remained dynamic.

The earliest writers of vernacular fairy tales in print, Giovanni Francesco Straparola⁸ in the sixteenth century and Giambattista Basile⁹ in the seventeenth, epitomise this process, as both authors acknowledged their debt to oral tradition while simultaneously transforming it. Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (1550–53) wove popular motifs into a sophisticated frame narrative modelled on Boccaccio, blending oral wonder tales with classical and manuscript sources. Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–36) went further by embedding his collection in a fictive oral context, having the stories told by peasant women whose coarse humour and dialect evoke the sound of popular storytelling (*ibid*, 2012, pp. 24–28). In both cases, the fairy tale becomes a textual form that captures the vitality of the spoken word while situating it within the hierarchy of print culture.

3–10). This dynamic has particular implications for gender and authorship: as stories moved into written culture, the communal and often feminine voices of oral narration were appropriated and reframed within patriarchal structures of authorship and authority, a process also noted by Elizabeth Harries (2001: 29) and Ruth Bottigheimer (2010: 9).

⁸ Giovanni Francesco Straparola (c.1480–c.1557), a Venetian writer and editor, compiled *Le piacevoli notti* (1550–53), the earliest known printed collection of European wonder tales. Drawing on oral and literary sources, Straparola combined popular motifs with a humanist frame narrative modelled on Boccaccio, effectively inaugurating the literary fairy-tale tradition in print.

⁹ Giambattista Basile (c.1566–1632), a Neapolitan court poet and soldier, authored *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–36), also known as *The Tale of Tales*. Written in the Neapolitan dialect, Basile's work provided the first literary versions of numerous canonical stories, including *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* and exemplified the translation of oral narrative structures into baroque literary artifice.

By the late seventeenth century, the French contribution consolidated this evolution. In the salons of Louis XIV's France, writers such as Charles Perrault and Madame Catherine-Anne d'Aulnoy consciously mediated between oral and literary forms. D'Aulnoy's coining of the term *contes de fées* ("tales about fairies") in 1697 signalled a new self-awareness of the fairy tale as a distinct literary genre (*ibid*, pp. 22–23). The popularity of the term, which quickly spread through salon and print culture, reflected the genre's rapid institutionalisation between 1690 and 1710 (*ibid*, pp. 23–25). Both male and female authors invoked the supposed voices of nurses, governesses, and servants as narrative sources, establishing a symbolic link to popular orality even as they reshaped these voices within the decorum of polite society. Performed first in salon conversation and later refined for publication, these tales illustrate what may be described as a process of elite mediation: the filtering of oral material through class and gender hierarchies into narratives of civility and moral instruction (*ibid*).

The Nineteenth century finalized this textualization process. Notably, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm played a key role with their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812–1857), which turned oral stories into a foundational part of a national literary tradition. The Grimms claimed to be preserving authentic folk material gathered from peasants and provincial storytellers; yet, as Zipes(2012, pp.104-107) observes, their editorial interventions continually reshaped these tales to align with the moral and ideological expectations of the emerging bourgeois culture. Across the collection's seven successive editions, dialects were standardised, regional speech smoothed into High German and narrative voices re-cast in the register of domestic propriety. Erotic and violent elements were attenuated or removed altogether, while plots were reframed to promote ideals of family harmony, Christian virtue, obedience and industriousness as values consistent with the nineteenth-century German *Bildungsbürgertum*¹⁰(*ibid*).

¹⁰ The term *Bildungsbürgertum* refers to the educated middle class that emerged in German-speaking Europe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rooted in ideals of *Bildung*, self-cultivation through moral, intellectual, and aesthetic education, this social group became a driving force in shaping national identity and cultural values. Its members championed literature, pedagogy and domestic virtue as instruments of moral

Taken together, these developments suggest that the recording of oral tales was both an act of preservation and of transformation. However faithfully collectors claimed to reproduce the voices of the people, their transcriptions inevitably reflected the linguistic habits and moral values of their own age. What emerges from this long process is not a simple story of loss or continuity, but a gradual reconfiguration of storytelling itself. As narrative moved from the spoken to the printed page, it acquired new forms of ownership and legitimacy: tales that had once circulated anonymously within communities became attached to identifiable authors whose education and social authority conferred prestige. The storyteller, once a shared and mutable voice, evolved into the figure of the author as an emblem of individual creativity and moral responsibility. This redefinition, though it secured the fairy tale's place within literary culture, also established the moral and aesthetic boundaries within which later writers would operate, boundaries that Charles Perrault would soon refine and codify in the emerging *conte de fées*.

1.3 Charles Perrault and the Gendered Codification of the Conte de fées

The French fairy tale took literary shape within the refined conversational culture of late seventeenth-century France, a milieu governed by politesse, moral civility, and the aesthetic discipline of the Grand Siècle. Salons and courtly gatherings provided highly codified arenas in which language and behaviour were regulated as signs of virtue and rank. As Joan DeJean shows, such settings fostered a distinctly French vocabulary of civility and refinement, in which conversation itself became an ethical and aesthetic practice (DeJean 1997, pp.124–130).

Within this culture of social grace, the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes
11 reframed literary value by opposing reverence for classical antiquity to the claims of modern

refinement, and their tastes profoundly influenced the Grimms' editorial revisions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, aligning the tales with bourgeois notions of propriety, piety and family order.

¹¹ The *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* ("Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns") refers to a major intellectual dispute in late seventeenth-century France concerning the supremacy of classical antiquity versus the achievements of the modern age. The *Anciens* defended the timeless perfection of Greek and Roman art and

reason, religion, and social progress. The *Modernes*, writers and thinkers such as Charles Perrault, Fontenelle, Temple, argued that contemporary culture, shaped by rational enquiry, had achieved a moral and intellectual advancement that surpassed that of the ancients. For them, literature should no longer imitate ancient models but address the needs and virtues of the present. Charles Perrault's own contribution to this debate was decisive. Aligning himself with the modernist camp, he maintained that the present age could equal or even outshine antiquity and that art should harmonise pleasure with instruction, delight with moral usefulness (*ibid*, pp. 6–8). In his view, narrative ought to cultivate virtue through elegance and clarity, values that mirrored the social aesthetics of *politesse*. The spread of print culture further reinforced these priorities, favouring works that were succinct, decorous, and easily assimilated by both courtly and domestic audiences.

It was precisely at the intersection of these intellectual and social ideals that Perrault's fairy tales took shape. The literary discipline of the *Modernes*, the conversational ethos of salon culture, and the moralised elegance of the *Grand Siècle* converged to produce a new narrative form that blended civility with wonder. The period's drive to 'refine' wonder transformed imaginative play into a mode of social grooming (Warner, 1995, p. 67). Within this framework, the *conte de fées* emerges as a genre that renders enchantment intelligible to polite society, aligning the marvellous with legible patterns of virtue and transgression.

Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697) effectively consolidates this cultural programme. He re-imagines inherited motifs as balanced prose tales whose texture often mimics the rhythms of salon conversation: concise phrasing, rhetorical symmetry and the avoidance of coarse detail. The spontaneity of oral performance is re-presented as calculated

letters, while the *Modernes* (notably Charles Perrault, Fontenelle, and Temple) contended that modern society, guided by Christianity, science, and civility, had attained higher standards of virtue and reason. The controversy, which unfolded in the Académie française and in salon culture during the reign of Louis XIV, reshaped conceptions of literary value by privileging clarity, moral utility, and social decorum over imitation of classical forms

grace, serving both elegance and pedagogy (Zipes, 2006, p. 8). In each tale a *moralité* closes the narrative by translating wonder into ethical lesson; the marvellous thus becomes a frame for reasoning rather than a challenge to it. Perrault's style appears to translate the conversational ideals of *politesse* into narrative form, producing a refinement and brevity that could have facilitated the tales' circulation between courtly and domestic audiences. Such accessibility might be viewed as situating the fairy tale within the sociable exchanges of polite culture, where women and children figured prominently as readers and auditors.

Individual tales reveal the didactic logic shaping Perrault's vision of the *conte de fées*. *Cendrillon*¹² exalts patience, humility, and gentleness; the heroine's ascent depends as much on restraint and composure as on supernatural aid. Her metamorphosis from servitude to grace affirms the belief that merit resides in conduct, how one carries oneself, speaks and endures humiliation with poise. *La Belle au bois dormant*¹³ enshrines passivity and chastity, transforming the suspension of time into an emblem of moral preservation. The heroine's prolonged sleep becomes both a literal and symbolic safeguard of virtue, ensuring that renewal coincides with social and emotional restoration. *Le Petit Chaperon rouge*¹⁴, by contrast, functions as a warning tale in which curiosity and desire precipitate ruin. The wolf's deception exposes the peril of unguarded speech and bodily freedom, recasting disobedience as a spectacle of moral consequence. Considered together, these narratives construct a discipline of conduct in which the regulation of gesture, tone, and movement defines ethical value. Female integrity

¹² *Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de verre* ("Cinderella, or The Little Glass Slipper") first appeared in Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1697). The story recounts the transformation of a mistreated young girl into a princess through a fairy godmother's aid and the power of grace and virtue. It codifies the motif of recognition through tokens (the slipper) and idealises humility, patience, and gentleness as pathways to social elevation.

¹³ *La Belle au bois dormant* ("The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood") was first published in Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697). Drawing on earlier versions such as *Perceforest* (14th century) and Giambattista Basile's *Sole, Luna e Talia* (1634–36), the tale narrates the story of a princess cursed to sleep for a hundred years until awakened by a prince's kiss. Perrault's version tempers the violence of its predecessors, transforming the motif of enchanted sleep into a parable of patience, chastity, and divinely sanctioned renewal.

¹⁴ *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* ("Little Red Riding Hood") also appeared in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697). In Perrault's telling, a young girl's disobedience and credulity lead her into a fatal encounter with a wolf who deceives and devours her. The absence of rescue, unique to Perrault's version, underscores the tale's moral lesson: that naïveté, unguarded speech, and sexual curiosity are perilous for young women.

is articulated through moderation, self-command and the governance of impulse, all qualities that resonate with the ethics of *politesse* and the hierarchies it reinforced (*ibid*).

Perrault's authorial posture further strengthens this codification. The narratorial tone often evokes the maternal or governess voice, a ventriloquised intimacy that, as Elizabeth Harries suggests, represents the domestication of wonder: the refashioning of fantasy into instruction under the sign of domestic virtue (Harries, 2001, pp. 30-33). This simulated orality, familiar and warm, helps to legitimise the lessons while masking the asymmetry of authority between the implied female storyteller and the male author who decides structure and closure. In this sense the tales 'speak' in a feminised register while retaining the imprimatur of masculine authorship (*ibid*).

The gendered implications of this development are significant. The tales' didactic impulse consistently exalts traits culturally coded as feminine, obedience, modesty, patience, while condemning curiosity and desire. This moral framework can be read as translating absolutist ideals of governance into domestic allegory: the well-ordered household mirrors the well-ordered state, and the compliant heroine becomes an emblem of civic harmony (Zipes, 2006, p. 8; Warner, 1995, p.67). Female advancement is presented not as the result of intellect or agency but as the reward for decorous conduct. Virtue here is inward, silent and rendered visible through beauty and comportment (Bottigheimer, 2010, p. 25). This moralisation of wonder also restructures narrative authority. Although the narrative voice often simulates the warmth of a maternal storyteller, the authority to stabilise the text, to select variants, shape endings, and append morals, rests with the male author and his publishers. The fairy tale thus becomes a durable textual artefact whose moral itinerary is predetermined, its meanings curated and disseminated through editorial and pedagogical mediation rather than collective performance.

Yet Perrault's standardisation arguably occluded a prior and more various history. The literary fairytale was actually initially set up by a group of women, one of such Madame d'Aulnoy's whom works as *L'Île de la félicité* (1690) and *Contes des fées* (1697) precede Perrault work and establish many stylistic conventions later associated with him (Harries, 2003: 44-45). The subsequent celebration of Perrault as 'father' of the genre thus appears to reflect the gendered mechanisms of literary prestige (Seifert, 1996, pp.115–117; Zipes, 2006,p. 14), and his adoption of the 'Mother Goose' persona and the publication of the *contes* under his son's name exemplify how a maternal mask can legitimise moral instruction while preserving patriarchal control over authorship (Zipes, 2006,p. 14). The fairy tale's cultural success in polite society is on this double movement: enchantment softened into civility, and female address subordinated to male certification.

The implications of Perraults tales are twofold. First, the ideological work of the Perraultian fairy tale helps to naturalise a linkage between obedience and reward, translating political order into domestic pedagogy. Second, the historiographical effect of canon formation obscures women's precedence and innovation in the genre, narrowing the archive to texts that most closely match the didactic and stylistic preferences of the *Grand Siècle*. As Warner suggests, the feminisation of the form did not guarantee female authority over it; rather, it made the tales 'safe' for polite culture, where their moral uses could be amplified (Warner, 1995, p.67). Recognising these dynamics clarifies why women writers, mainly the *conteuses*, matter. Their tales participate in the same circuits of refinement yet rework them from within: irony, masquerade, and allegory become tools for testing the very moral scripts Perrault stabilised. In this sense, the *conte de fées* offers not a closed system but a contested field in which civility, authorship, and gender ideals are negotiated under the sign of wonder (Harries, 2001, p.55; Zipes, 2006,p. 14; Bottigheimer, 2010, p.27).

If Perrault can be seen as codifying a polite, didactic fairy tale whose feminised voice carries a masculinised authority, the *conteuses* may be understood to intervene at that very juncture. Writing in the same salons that cultivated *politesse*, they appear to adapt the genre's brevity and elegance to alternative ends: testing the limits of obedience, complicating virtue through discernment and wit, and reasserting a measure of female agency beneath the surface of civility. The following section considers how the *conteuses* reconfigure the gendered dynamics of the *conte de fées*, transforming a discourse of refinement into a potential medium of critique.

1.4 The *Conteuses* and the Transformation of the Female Heroine

Where Perrault codified the *conte de fées* as a instrument of decorum and didacticism, the *conteuses* may be understood to have reinterpreted it as a more dialogic and reflective form. Between 1690 and 1715, the literary vogue for fairy tales in France was dominated by women writers of the nobility such as Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, and a century later Laprince De Beaumont who collectively shaped what came to be known as the *mode des contes de fées* (Duggan 2023,p. 23). Their stories, written for adult and aristocratic readers, address complex themes, arranged marriage, female autonomy and moral choice under the polished surface of fantasy. As Anne Duggan observes, these women writers “treated mature subjects ranging from pregnancy and the problem of arranged marriage to gender equality and criticism of monarchy”, revealing that the fairy tale was never a simple diversion but a refined instrument of reflection (*ibid*, p.24).

Though often marginalised in literary history, the *conteuses* played a central role in shaping the early development of the *conte de fées*. Their collective output accounted for nearly two-thirds of all fairy tales published during the genre's first flowering between 1690 and 1709, a figure that indicates how deeply women's authorship informed its origins (*Seifert, 1996,p. 14*). The salon provided the ideal milieu for this creativity: a social and intellectual forum

governed by *politesse* and *esprit*, where women could participate in cultural life through the art of conversation. Within this environment, the fairy tale emerged as a natural extension of sociable wit: graceful and imaginative in form, yet capable of expressing moral discernment and philosophical curiosity. As Duggan observes, the *conteuses*' fictional worlds, like the salons they inhabited, offered "rooms of their own", areas of exchange where women could articulate ideas and negotiate identity without overtly transgressing decorum (Duggan, 2005, p.31). The marvellous thus mirrored the structure of the salon itself: a realm of regulated liberty, where speech and imagination were permitted to roam within the boundaries of social tact. In their hands, the fairy tale became less a vehicle of polite restraint than a medium of moral conversation, a literary space in which intellect, irony and emotion could coexist under the guise of elegance.

Within this environment, the *conteuses* produced tales that were at once complicit with and resistant to the patriarchal order. Their heroines exemplify can be described as a paradoxical empowerment: women who act, speak and decide within the boundaries prescribed by social decorum (Seifert, 1996, pp.18–21). Their agency is expressed through prudence, eloquence, and self-command, all qualities reframed as signs of ethical intelligence and inner strength rather than submission. The *conteuses*' achievement lies in this delicate negotiation between accommodation and critique. Rather than rejecting Perrault's moral framework, they reinterpret it, turning the language of moderation and courtesy into a vehicle for irony and moral reflection. Their tales recast the archetypal fairy-tale heroine, once the emblem of silence and obedience, into a figure of judgment, verbal dexterity and ethical complexity.

This section examines how that transformation unfolds through the works of three major writers; Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy explores metamorphosis and disguise as metaphors for identity and adaptability; Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier refines the art of eloquence into a form of ethical reasoning; and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, writing a generation later,

translates the fairy tale into Enlightenment pedagogy, aligning virtue with rational understanding. Within the limits of civility, the *conteuses* discovered the imaginative freedom to remake the fairy tale in their own image.

1.4.1 Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy: Disguise and the Limits of Female Transgression

Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, baronne d'Aulnoy (1650–1705), is often described as one of the most inventive and imaginative writers of the early *conte de fées*, a view supported by critics who emphasise her stylistic daring and allegorical complexity (Harries 2003, p.45; Seifert 1996, p. 118). A noblewoman by birth, she moved between worlds of privilege and precarity: married at thirteen to a much older man, implicated in a failed political intrigue, exiled and later confined in convents before re-emerging in Parisian society. By the 1690s, she had transformed personal instability into literary invention. Her salon on the Rue Saint-Benoît became a meeting point for writers and intellectuals who blended conversation, irony, and social observation with storytelling (Duggan 2023, pp.25–30). Within this setting, she helped define the fairy tale as an art of polished ambiguity: a form that could both instruct and provoke reflection on power and gender. D'Aulnoy's heroines speak the language of refinement while testing its limits, revealing the tension between social obedience and interior freedom.

In *Belle-Belle ou le Chevalier Fortuné* (1697) disguise, magic and irony converge to question the ideals of femininity and virtue. The tale follows Belle-Belle, the youngest daughter of a ruined nobleman, who resolves to save her father from the king's military levy by taking his place in disguise. Her decision to act, unlike her sisters who fail through vanity and hesitation, immediately sets her apart from the passive heroines of Perrault's moral tales. From the outset, d'Aulnoy constructs transformation as a moral act rather than a supernatural one. For instance, Belle-Belle's courage arises from compassion, not enchantment:

‘Truly, I pity you,’ said Belle-Belle, ‘and to prove my compassion I will help you[...] Do not weep, my good mother," she said to the shepherdess; "here is your sheep, and considering the length of time he has been in the water, he seems pretty cheerful."

‘You have done a kindness to one who will not be ungrateful. I recognise you, lovely Belle-Belle. I know where you are going and all your plans. Your sisters passed by this meadow. I recognised them too, and knew what was in their minds. But they seemed so hard-hearted, and their behaviour to me was so ungracious[...]. You have acted very differently, and you will profit by it, Belle-Belle, for I am a fairy and am glad to heap benefits on those who are deserving. Your horse is horribly skinny; I will give you another.’ (D’Aulnoy, 1856, p.197)

This scene marks Belle-Belle’s moral awakening and the true beginning of her journey. Her decision to stop and help the shepherdess, where her sisters had passed by indifferent, reveals compassion as a deliberate moral choice rather than a reflex of duty. The episode tests her discernment: she acts out of empathy, not calculation, it is this spontaneous generosity that initiates her metamorphosis. The shepherdess then reveals herself to be a fairy in disguise, transforming what seemed a simple act of kindness into a test of virtue. Moved by Belle-Belle’s compassion, the fairy rewards her with a talking horse, a magical trunk filled with arms and riches and the masculine identity of *Chevalier Fortuné*. After the fairy equips Belle-Belle with her disguise and magical gifts, she sets out to serve the king, fulfilling his royal decree that all nobles must either join the army or send a substitute. D’Aulnoy seems to frame this decision as both filial duty and moral opportunity: Belle-Belle enters the king’s service not to seek glory, but to save her impoverished father from ruin. Her journey therefore begins as an act of devotion and self-sacrifice.

Once at court, *Chevalier Fortuné* quickly earns admiration for his manners and wisdom: the king appoints Fortuné to a position close to his person. The court becomes the setting where Belle-Belle’s virtues can be displayed publicly and tested politically. The queen dowager, who

is the king's sister and one of the most powerful women in the realm, becomes infatuated with the seemingly perfect knight. Her infatuation introduces the central conflict of the second half of the tale: desire colliding with virtue and feminine authority turning tyrannical when refused. When Fortuné rejects her advances out of loyalty to the king and respect for moral decorum, the queen's wounded pride transforms into vengeance. She accuses Fortuné of attempting to seduce or assault her, leading to a trial and death sentence. In that moment, the act of unveiling turns into a revelation of truth and justice:

“When Fortuné had been fastened to the stake, in order that his heart might be stabbed, his coat and vest were removed; but picture the consternation of the large assembly when they saw the alabaster bosom of the real Belle-Belle! Every one knew she was an innocent girl unjustly accused.” (D'Aulnoy, 1856, p.280)

The exposure of her true body can be read as reasserting innocence and appears to undermine the fiction of masculine virtue; what the world perceives as gallantry and strength is reinterpreted here as the natural expression of feminine reason and moral steadiness. Through this revelation, d'Aulnoy may be seen as completing the circle of transformation: the disguise that once concealed identity becomes the instrument of revelation, turning masquerade into a gesture of moral vindication.

Ultimately, *Belle-Belle ou le Chevalier Fortuné* imagines an alternative reality for women where the heroine temporarily transcends the confines of gender through disguise (Trost 1991, p. 66). Yet the tale's apparent transgression is circumscribed by the moral and aesthetic codes of its age. Belle-Belle's empowerment is conditional: it depends on a fairy's sanction, a male identity and the maintenance of secrecy. Her authority is tolerated only while concealed, once her true sex is revealed, she is swiftly reabsorbed into the social order she had disrupted, D'Aulnoy projects an ideal of feminine strength that can exist only within the bounds of fiction (*ibid*, p. 67).

This constraint defines the limits of d'Aulnoy subversion. *Belle-Belle* gestures toward the possibility of equality but cannot imagine its realisation beyond the enchanted frame of the tale. Transformation remains symbolic rather than structural; cross-dressing exposes the arbitrariness of gender, yet it also restores decorum. D'Aulnoy's irony can be understood as emerging from her vision of freedom as something that exists only in performance.

1.4.2 Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier: Eloquence and the Intellectual Feminine

Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon may be seen as exemplifying the *femme savante* of the late seventeenth century: a woman whose intellect and civility were mutually reinforcing. Educated in a humanist household, she appears to have absorbed the classical disciplines of rhetoric, history and moral philosophy, which seem to have informed her literary and ethical outlook. She can be understood to have refined *la conversation* into a disciplined exchange in which wit served reason and decorum tempered judgment.

L'Héritier's fairy tales translates the ideals of eloquence and fidelity inherited from humanist culture into a creative, feminine art that blends moral reflection with social grace (Bottigheimer, 2010: 57). In her hands, the fairy tale appears to function both as a mirror of the salon's intellectual refinement and as an instrument for ethical self-fashioning. Her heroines tend to prevail not through magical intervention but through rhetorical intelligence: eloquence serves both as metaphor and as instrument of creative power. In this sense, L'Héritier envisions, or can be read as envisioning, rhetoric as a distinctly feminine mode of agency: persuasive, reasoned, and intellectually autonomous.

This model finds its fullest articulation in *The Discreet Princess*, a tale that relocates the fairy-tale drama of virtue and peril from the realm of enchantment to the theatre of discourse. The narrative opens with a familiar moral structure: a widowed king prepares to depart on crusade, fearing that his three daughters, confined for their protection, might fall into dishonour.

Within this setting, Finette, the youngest of the sisters, emerges as the counterpoint to her idle and talkative sisters, embodying the values of intellect:

The youngest of these three sisters was of a quite different character. Her thoughts and hands were continually employed: she was of a surprising vivacity, and she applied it to good uses. She danced, sung and played upon music to perfection; finished, with wonderful address and skill, all those little works of the hand, which generally amuse those of her sex. She put the king's household into exact regulation and order, and, by her care and vigilance, hindered the pilferings of the lower officers; for even in those days princes were cheated by those about them. Her talents were not bounded there: she had a great deal of judgment, and such a wonderful presence of mind, that she immediately found the means of extricating herself out of the greatest difficulties. This young Princess had, by her penetration, discovered a dangerous snare which a perfidious ambassador had laid for the king her father, in a treaty just ready to be signed by that prince. (L'Héritier, 1755, pp.12–13)

The description establishes Finette as a moral and rational heroine whose virtue is inseparable from practical intelligence. Her vigilance in managing her father's household and her exposure of political deceit reveal the capacity of reason to operate within, and against, structures of patriarchal authority. The episode serves as an allegory of moral discernment: L'Héritier's heroine does not await rescue or divine intervention but actively prevents catastrophe through rational inquiry. By opening the tale with a scene of 'political deception', the author signals that her focus lies not in domestic virtue alone but in a more public, civic understanding of female intellect.

The tale's central confrontation between Finette and the deceitful Prince Rich-Craft transforms these qualities into the realm of interpersonal power. When the prince, disguised

and manipulative, attempts to seduce her as he has her sisters, Finette responds with calculated eloquence:

Finetta, who with good reason distrusted this Prince, found her suspicions redouble by this answer. [...] She readily consented to marry him; but she was fully persuaded that marriages which were made at night were always unhappy, and therefore desired he would defer the ceremony till the next morning. She added, he might be assured she would not mention a syllable of all this to her sisters, and begged him to give her only a little time to say her prayers; that afterwards she would lead him to a chamber where he should have a very good bed, and then she would return to her own room till the morrow morning. (L'Héritier, 1755, pp.32–33)

Finette's speech performs submission while enacting control: she adopts the moral idiom of modesty only to invert its meaning: her persuasive logic delays her aggressor, creating both temporal and moral space for agency. The very qualities patriarchal discourse idealised in women, patience, self-restraint, obedience, are recast here as tactical virtues. In this sense, L'Héritier anticipates the rhetoric of enlightened reason: speech as a vehicle for both ethical reflection and social survival.

Overall, L'Héritier's *The Discreet Princess* reimagines the fairy-tale heroine as an intellectual and moral agent rather than a passive recipient of grace; by replacing passivity with prudence and virtue with intellect, she advanced a model of female subjectivity grounded in reasoned speech and ethical discernment. However, her heroines achieve autonomy only through the rhetoric of obedience; their agency remains coded as modesty and their resistance disguised as refinement. L'Héritier's art thus seems to mirror the paradox of the salon itself: a space that granted women intellectual visibility while demanding the performance of restraint. Her eloquent heroines illuminate the potential of feminine intellect in a culture that prized

women's silence, yet they also reveal the limits of what could be imagined or uttered in a patriarchal literary economy (Harries 2003, p.32).

In this balance between innovation and conformity, L'Héritier anticipates the later Enlightenment tension between reason and propriety, agency and virtue. Her *conte de fées* neither fully dismantles nor wholly affirms patriarchal order but it renders visible the narrow corridor through which female authorship and authority could move.

1.4.3. Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont: Moral Choice and the Enlightened

Feminine

Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–1780) stands as one of the most influential figures in the moral and literary reconfiguration of the fairy tale during the eighteenth century. Born in Rouen to a bourgeois family, she received an exceptional convent education, where intellectual discipline and religious sensibility combined to shape her later pedagogical character (Warner, 1995, p. 292). Following an unhappy marriage, she settled in London in the early 1740s and began working as a governess. she published a substantial body of educational works, frequently translating her own French texts into English to instruct an audience of young aristocratic women under eighteen. Upon her return to France in 1762, her productivity continued unabated; her bibliography ultimately comprised more than seventy volume (*ibid*).

It was in this context that what is considered one of Beaumont's most influential tale, *La Belle et la Bête*, first appeared, merging moral instruction with psychological realism in a form that would redefine the European fairy tale (*ibid*, p.293). Where d'Aulnoy had employed metamorphosis and masquerade to explore female identity, and L'Héritier had turned eloquence into a mode of intellectual self-assertion, Beaumont's project culminates their moral reformation of the genre. Her reimagined heroine transforms nobility from a matter of birth into a quality of mind and heart. Princesshood becomes a moral condition attainable through education and inner virtue.

La Belle et la Bête thus replaces the external enchantment of the marvellous with the interior revelation of character, turning the fairy tale into an allegory of ethical perception. Beaumont's tale follows the virtuous merchant's daughter Belle, who, after her father falls into ruin, exchanges a life of comfort for domestic simplicity. When her father, threatened by the Beast for picking a rose from his enchanted garden, faces death, Belle offers herself in his place:

“Why should I, answered Beauty, it would be very needless, for my father shall not suffer upon my account; since the monster will accept of one of his daughters, I will deliver myself up to all his fury, and I am very happy in thinking that my death will save my father's life and be a proof of my tender love for him.” (Leprince de Beaumont [1783] 1989, pp. 140-141)

Beaumont defines heroism through reasoned virtue rather than miraculous deliverance. Belle's voluntary sacrifice embodies Enlightenment ideals of rational benevolence and filial piety. Her calm resolve contrasts sharply with the emotional excess of her sisters and the violence of her brothers. The supposed victim becomes the moral centre of the tale: her decision restores order not through force but through discernment. By making filial duty an act of self-governed virtue, Beaumont transforms the traditional princess into an emblem of ethical agency, a heroine who governs herself and, by extension, the moral logic of the story.

As the tale unfolds, Beaumont deepens this vision through Belle's growing understanding of the Beast's nature:

“I own I am pleased with your kindness, and when I consider that, your deformity scarce appears. Yes, yes, said the Beast, my heart is good, but still I am a monster. Among mankind, says Beauty, there are many that deserve that name more than you, and I prefer

you, just as you are, to those, who, under a human form, hide a treacherous, corrupt, and ungrateful heart.” (Leprince de Beaumont [1783] 1989, p. 143)

This exchange shows the opposition between ‘heart’ and ‘form’ that allegorises the Enlightenment distinction between appearance and essence¹⁵. Belle’s insight, that moral deformity resides not in ugliness but in vice, signals the tale’s shift from physical transformation to ethical recognition. The disclosure is hers, not the Beast’s: her capacity for judgment replaces magical as the story’s transformative force. In recognising goodness beneath monstrous form, Belle exercises what Beaumont presents as the highest feminine virtue, *jugement*, the union of intellect and compassion. The tale thus becomes a meditation on perception itself: an education in how to see rightly. The final confession completes this process of moral awakening:

“No, dear Beast, said Beauty, you must not die; live to be my husband; from this moment I give you my hand, and swear to be none but yours. Alas! I thought I had only a friendship for you, but the grief I now feel convinces me that I cannot live without you.”
(Leprince de Beaumont [1783] 1989, p. 146)

Here, love becomes the visible form of moral truth, uniting reason and feeling in an Enlightenment ideal of balanced virtue. Beauty’s consent, freely offered and morally justified,

¹⁵ The Enlightenment’s moral and philosophical discourse was deeply preoccupied with the relationship between appearance and essence meant as the social performance of virtue and its inner reality. Thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot explored this tension as central to the formation of modern subjectivity: the individual was increasingly defined by sincerity and authenticity rather than by adherence to external codes of decorum. As Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (written c.1770) suggests, performance could reveal truth precisely through artifice, blurring the boundaries between seeming and being. In literary culture, this opposition informed moral readings of disguise, education and sentiment, framing the masquerade as both a threat to and a test of genuine virtue (Starobinski, 1966: 9–12; Jones, 1982: 55–57).

transforms the conventional marriage plot into an affirmation of mutual respect and understanding.

Yet, as Beaumont's critics have observed (Warner, 1995), this resolution also exposes the boundaries of her subversion. The heroine's autonomy culminates in the restoration of social and patriarchal harmony: moral enlightenment reaffirms, rather than dismantles, the domestic order. Within the tale's didactic framework, female intellect remains valorised only insofar as it sustains virtue and civility. Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête* thus redefines the fairy tale as an instrument of moral education and ethical introspection.

Through Belle's rational compassion, the narrative completes the *conteuses*' collective project: to rearticulate the feminine ideal from passive beauty to moral intelligence. D'Aulnoy's metamorphic heroines challenged patriarchal authority through disguise; L'Héritier's eloquent princess reasoned her way to autonomy; Beaumont's virtuous heroine achieves wisdom through ethical perception. Each transforms the princess archetype into a mirror of contemporary debates about education, virtue and gender.

Together, these writers turned the *conte de fées* into a space where women could imagine power within the boundaries of decorum, converting civility into critique. Yet the conclusion of Beaumont's tale reminds the reader once again that this moral agency remained constrained by the very virtues it celebrated. The fairy tale became both an instrument of emancipation and a vehicle of social order. As the genre started to spread in England, these tensions between imagination and instruction, intellect and obedience, would be reinterpreted within a new cultural framework. The next chapter will trace this transformation: how the French *conte de fées*, born from salon wit and moral conversation, was reimagined in eighteenth-century England as a tool of national pedagogy, reshaping the fairy tale into a distinctly domestic form of enlightenment.

Chapter Two: Making the Fairy Tale Victorian

The Victorian literary fairy tale did not emerge as a standalone national form. Still, it evolved through a sustained process of reception and adaptation rooted in earlier European traditions, most notably the French *conte des fées*. From the late seventeenth century onwards, French literary fairy tales circulated widely across Europe via print and translation, with Britain serving mainly as a centre of reception rather than an origin (Bottigheimer 2009, pp. 53–63; Zipes 2006b, pp. 1–9). As these narratives entered British print culture, they were gradually reshaped through acts of selection, moral reframing, and editorial mediation, transforming tales originally aimed at adult salon audiences into stories geared towards a child-centred, pedagogical readership (Warner 1994, pp. 207–209; 294–296). Nineteenth-century Britain experienced an unprecedented influx of translated fairy-tale collections and anthologies, alongside the institutionalisation of folklore studies; processes that simultaneously broadened access to continental fairy tales and redefined their cultural significance by prioritising specific forms, voices, and narrative values over others (*ibid*). Rather than viewing this development as a linear inheritance, this chapter considers the genre through the lens of what might be called *Victorianisation*: a historically specific process whereby inherited European fairy tales were selectively adapted, moralised, and canonised in line with British cultural norms, pedagogical priorities, and gendered assumptions.

This methodological framework ¹⁶ draws on reception-oriented approaches in book history and translation studies, particularly Roger Chartier’s emphasis on the social and material conditions of reading (Chartier, 1994) and André Lefevere’s account of translation as ideologically regulated literary rewriting (Lefevere, 1992). From this perspective, fairy tales and their modes of circulation do not merely transmit texts but actively reconfigure their

¹⁶ This approach differs from source-hunting or motif-based folkloristics by treating reception, format, and mediation as constitutive of meaning rather than secondary to it.

audiences, functions and orientations. The Victorian fairy tale is therefore approached here as a historically layered form, shaped through successive acts of mediation that redefined how fairy tales were read, valued and understood within British culture. Recent scholarship has further emphasised the hybrid and historically contingent character of the Victorian fairy tale. As Laura Tosi observes, fairy tales in nineteenth-century England developed at the intersection of popular tradition and literary culture, circulating between adult and child audiences and combining aesthetic pleasure with pedagogical intent. Rather than following a linear progression from folklore to children's literature, the English fairy tale emerged through processes of translation, revision and moral reframing that produced a genre marked by internal tensions and ideological negotiation (Tosi 2007, pp. 11–13). This hybridity helps to explain both the consolidation of normative meanings and the persistence of ambiguity and contradiction within Victorian fairy-tale narratives.

The British understanding of the French fairy-tale model cannot be fully comprehended without examining the specific channels through which these narratives were disseminated. Tales originally crafted within the aristocratic salon culture of late seventeenth-century France, primarily targeting adult, as elite audiences, entered Britain via translations and adaptations in the early eighteenth century, rather than through an immediate transition into children's literature (Bottigheimer 2009, pp. 49-63; Harries 2003, pp. 24-27). Recent scholarship emphasises that these early English versions circulated among overlapping readerships in which adult and young audiences coexisted, thereby reflecting the fluidity of public categories within early fairy-tale print culture (Harries 2003, pp. 44-47).

During the Victorian era, the reception of fairy tales intersected with changes in reading culture, which focused on supervising children's reading. Rising literacy, compulsory schooling, and affordable print made children a distinct reading group under the moral oversight of parents, educators, and religious authorities (Reynolds 2007, pp. 18-19). As Jacqueline Rose has argued,

children's literature in this period is shaped by adult fantasies of control¹⁷, positioning the child reader as an object of regulation rather than as an agent of autonomous interpretation (Rose 1984, pp. 141-142). Reading was reconceptualised as a supervised domestic and pedagogical practice, often by women, within broader regimes of moral instruction and self-improvement (Sumpter 2008, pp. 14-17). In this perspective, Victorian reading culture can be understood as consonant with Michel Foucault's account of discipline as a diffuse form of power exercised through everyday practices rather than overt coercion (Foucault 1977, pp. 135–169).

At the same time, fairy tales served as influential sites for shaping gendered meanings, not only through their plot structures but also via the mediating practices that dictated how stories were presented and understood. Victorian adaptations often reinforced conventional models of femininity by emphasising traits such as patience, passivity, and moral endurance - qualities closely linked with domestic ideology (Warner 1994, pp. 294). These traits were not inherent to the fairy-tale tradition but were actively influenced by editorial choices, illustrative conventions and alignment with contemporary conduct literature (Sumpter, 2008). As Gilbert and Gubar have demonstrated, nineteenth-century literary culture consistently depicted female figures through the male gaze as "domestic angels", requiring self-regulation and self-denial (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, pp. 20-21). In illustrated fairy-tale editions, this ideal was frequently depicted through recurring motifs of stillness, lowered gaze, and bodily control, emphasizing ideals of feminine self-discipline as seen in prescriptive texts aimed at women and girls (Sumpter 2008, pp. 164).

Within the tension between normative instruction and imaginative potential, the princess figure attains particular cultural significance in Victorian fairy tales. As Laura Tosi has shown, 19th-century British fairy tales were deeply involved in debates about the Woman Question, providing a culturally accepted space to explore and redefine female roles, abilities and agency

¹⁷ For critiques and qualifications of Rose's position, see Stephens (1992) and Nikolajeva (2014), who emphasise reader agency and interpretive plurality.

(Tosi 2007, pp. 19–21). Lieberman highlights that princesses are distinguished by their physical beauty, which makes them stand out in the story and typically leads to their selection and elevation through marriage, creating a direct link between feminine virtue, recognition and reward (Lieberman 1972, pp. 384–386). For child readers, the princess serves as an object of identification, as she is singled out and rewarded, offering a fantasy of being chosen, elevated, and validated as worthy (*ibid*, p. 385). Therefore, it could be argued that the issue is not solely the portrayal of femininity but also the way fairy tales might teach recognition itself: they potentially instruct readers about what is desirable and the conditions under which desire is acknowledged and rewarded.

This chapter contends that the Victorian fairy tale functions as a space of cultural negotiation, shaped by international reception, reading practices and lively debates around gender ideologies. Instead of viewing translation, print distribution and performance as separate or sequential stages, it highlights how these processes are interconnected to create a system that moralised and tailored fairy tales to Victorian childhood culture. Unlike scholarship that sees the princess mainly as a leftover figure from folklore or a static symbol of idealized femininity, this study considers her as a dynamic, contested figure whose meanings are co-created through narrative structure, visual depictions, and reading practices. Consequently, the princess is viewed not as a fixed archetype but as a versatile narrative role that Victorian writers used to explore the boundaries and potentials of female identity within the fairy tale's imaginative world.

2.1 From French *Contes* to British Children

The British reception of the French literary fairy tale was not a single event of transfer but a lengthy and uneven process influenced by translation methods, publishing tactics, market segmentation, and evolving notions of morality and childhood (Bottigheimer 2002, pp. 22-24). French fairy tales arrived in Britain bearing the influence of late seventeenth-century salon

culture, where writers like Charles Perrault and the *conteuses* crafted stories that blended folkloric motifs with literary refinement and social critique (*ibid*, p. 17; Warner 1994, pp. 13–15). These stories assumed an adult audience familiar with salon social customs and capable of engaging with the performative aspects of storytelling (Warner 1994, p. 29; Harries 2003, pp. 17).

When these tales entered the British context, they encountered a literary culture marked by increasing concern over fiction's moral influence on young and impressionable readers, alongside broader religious and educational discourses that emphasised supervision and restraint (Immel in Grenby 2009, pp. 19–20). These anxieties intersected with an expanding commercial book market that more clearly differentiated audiences by age, class, and purpose, contributing to the emergence of children as a distinct reading public (*ibid*). Jack Zipes demonstrated that fairy tales within Protestant cultures frequently underwent moral and ideological edits, especially when publishers and translators tailored them for family or youth audiences (Zipes 2006b, pp. 7–9).

Reception in Britain can perhaps be seen not simply as a neutral process of transmission but as a class-based form of market repositioning, where fairy tales were intentionally translated, reframed, and packaged to attract specific reading audiences. From this perspective, the gender norms that later appeared natural within Victorian fairy tales are perhaps better understood not as directly inherited from the French tradition, but as the outcome of repeated acts of selection and adaptation within British print culture.

2.1.1 Translation as Ideological Rewriting

Translation in the Victorian period must be understood not simply as a linguistic practice but as a culturally and ideologically charged mode of literary transfer. Building on polysystem theory, Susan Bassnett recalls Itamar Even-Zohar's argument that cultures translate according to need, and that periods of literary expansion or instability tend to generate intensified

translation activity (Bassnett 2013, pp. 85-86). Nineteenth-century Britain, characterized by rapid social change, a growing reading public, and the development of a national literary identity, created a complex context. During this period, translation was closely tied to issues of cultural authority and readership, especially when texts were imported from Continental traditions that were both esteemed and potentially problematic. These perspectives offer a context for understanding how fairy-tale translation influenced narrative values and gendered meanings in Britain.

Within this framework, translating French fairy tales into English cannot be considered a neutral act of transmission; translation is “never an innocent activity” (*ibid*, 85). Texts produced in one historical and cultural context are reconfigured for new audiences with different expectations, values and ideological assumptions, leading to unavoidable discrepancies between source and target reception (Bassnett 2013, pp. 85-86; Lefevere 2016, pp. 11–16). In Victorian Britain, translation practices were influenced by unequal power relations between cultures, particularly between Protestant Britain and Catholic, court-centred France, as well as by competing models of fidelity. This was especially clear in genres associated with education and moral development, where translation became a tool for regulating content rather than merely preserving otherness (Bassnett 2013, pp. 76-80).

When fairy tales were translated from French into English, these ideological pressures intersected with the systemic constraints shaping children’s literature, including expectations of moral clarity, age-appropriateness, and pedagogical usefulness. As Zohar Shavit demonstrates, translation in children’s literature functions as part of a broader transfer process between literary systems, often involving not only linguistic translation but also abridgement, adaptation, and reclassification from adult to child readerships (Shavit 1986, pp. 111–113). Since children’s literature occupies a relatively marginal position within the literary polysystem, translators were possibly granted significant liberties, as long as the resulting text

appeared to align with the prevailing standards of what was deemed educationally appropriate and morally acceptable for children.

British translators' approach to French fairy tales reflects broader eighteenth-century concerns about governing imagination rather than outright hostility to fiction. During that time, imaginative literature was seen as potentially destabilising, especially for young readers whose reasoning was still developing (Locke, 1996, pp. 199–201). These anxieties, rooted in Enlightenment debates on education and passions, linked excessive fantasy to emotional disorder and lack of self-discipline. Locke warned that unregulated imaginative exposure could foster fear, irrational beliefs, and moral confusion, undermining reason and self-control (*ibid*). Scholars note these concerns didn't reject imaginative texts but led to strategies for supervising and reshaping them (Immel in Grenby 2011, pp. 26–31; Sumpter 2008, pp. 14–18). These beliefs influenced translation by systematically transforming fantasy into morally and psychologically regulated forms.

A comparison between Perrault's *Cendrillon* (1697) and its early English translations clearly demonstrates this shift in the definition of feminine virtue. In the French version, *bonté* functions as a socially effective trait: Cinderella's goodness is explicitly described as “sans exemple”¹⁸ (Perrault 1904 p.27), and it culminates in a public act of forgiveness that affirms her authority within the newly redefined social hierarchy. Her moral superiority is demonstrated through action: she opts for reconciliation, redistributes favour, and exercises judgement, rather than through passive endurance alone. As Warner notes, Perrault's heroines succeed by combining ethical conduct with social intelligence and performative grace, qualities closely aligned with the courtly culture in which the tales were created (Warner 1994, pp. 215–217). Crucially, however, *bonté* should not be seen as a neutral or solely individual moral quality. As

¹⁸ *Sans exemple* is a French expression meaning “without equal” or “unprecedented.” In Perrault's usage, it serves to elevate Cinderella's gentleness and modesty beyond comparison, reinforcing her moral exceptionalism rather than situating her within a relative scale of virtue.

Ayres-Bennett demonstrates, seventeenth-century French moral–linguistic regimes assign social value to specific registers and demeanours, creating hierarchies of “good” and “bad” conduct that circulate through courtesy literature and the modelling of socially stereotyped personae (Ayres-Bennett 2025, pp. 101–103, 115–120). Within this ideological field, morally evaluative terms such as *bonté* act as culturally recognisable markers of alignment with valued feminine personas (notably the *honnête femme*, linked to *douceur*, *politesse*, and moral sweetness), and thus function as a form of moral capital rather than a purely private disposition (Ayres-Bennett 2025, pp. 115–121).

In contrast, English translations increasingly depict Cinderella’s virtue through the language of patience, meekness and suffering. Although references to kindness and forgiveness remain, they are no longer presented as socially strategic or authoritative acts but as the natural outcome of prolonged silent endurance. This is exemplified in the 1796 translation by R. S. Gent, which presents both the French Perraultian text and the English rendering: Gent translates “*bonté sans exemple*” as “unparalleled goodness” (Gent 1796, p. 82). This version somewhat narrows the semantic and ideological range of *bonté*, reducing a culturally rich category of moral and social comprehension into an abstract, internalised virtue. The narrative focus consequently shifts from Cinderella’s ability to act upon others to her willingness to endure hardship without complaint.

The process of rewriting was neither uniform nor entirely eliminative. Rewriting often involves selective recalibration rather than erasure, producing hybrids shaped by competing cultural values (Lefevere 2016, pp. 14–16; Bassnett 2013, pp. 85–86). In English translations that emphasise patience and meekness, elements of Perrault’s courtly logic, such as visibility, persist; Cinderella’s elevation depends on being seen and acknowledged, indicating that social recognition remains key to narrative reward (Lieberman 1972, pp. 384–386). While agency is increasingly expressed through endurance rather than decisive action, femininity still requires

public recognition (Warner 1994, pp. 294–296). English adaptations merge social intelligence and moral passivity unevenly, allowing residual courtly ideals to survive within a moralised framework (Zipes 2006b, pp. 21–27; Sumpter 2008, pp. 159–166).

The significance of this uneven recalibration may lie in the instability it generates in the figure of the fairy-tale heroine. By combining moral restraint with ongoing demands for visibility and recognition, English adaptations seem to create a model of femininity that is neither fully passive nor entirely active, but fundamentally conflicted. This hybridity is important because it complicates the narrative logic of reward: Cinderella is appreciated both for enduring suffering and for being publicly distinguished, even as the basis of that distinction shifts from social skill to moral endurance. Rather than completely transforming the courtly logic of performance into a purely moral framework, Victorian rewriting can be seen as maintaining it in a diminished form, making feminine virtue both comprehensible and restricted. It is arguably this unresolved tension that renders the princess figure especially susceptible to later reinterpretation.

2.1.2 Bowdlerisation and the Production of Childhood Innocence

Bowdlerisation can be viewed as a process of selective editing aimed at making literary works suitable for family and young audiences, rather than outright banning them. In the Preface to *The Family Shakespeare*, Thomas Bowdler describes his editorial approach as removing passages that could not “with propriety be read aloud in a family,” while otherwise maintaining the authority and cultural significance of the original text (Bowdler 1807, Preface, pp. v–vii). Crucially, bowdlerisation does not attempt to prohibit texts or remove them from circulation but instead recontextualises their content so they can function within morally guided reading environments. This approach of censorship through omission was highly influential in nineteenth-century editorial practices, extending far beyond Shakespearean drama to influence the handling of popular narrative genres, including fairy tales.

Within nineteenth-century children's publishing, bowdlerisation often served as a cautious mediatory practice that moderated what forms of danger, violence, and transgression could be made visible to young readers. As previously noted, in illustrated fairy tales, both textual and visual elements were frequently adjusted, with editors and illustrators often softening or suppressing disturbing material to align with prevailing ideas about childhood innocence. These interventions typically involved omission, euphemism, narrative substitution, or visual redirection, rather than overt moral commentary. The result was not the complete removal of troubling content, but a controlled shifting: moments of threat were made less explicit while still maintaining emotional interest and moral closure.

These practices were rarely enforced through formal censorship. Instead, they reflected a form of internalised moral control embedded within the everyday processes of editing, translation, and adaptation. As scholars of Victorian children's literature have demonstrated, translators and editors often proactively adjusted content in anticipation of religious, pedagogical, and social expectations, responding to an implicit notion of appropriateness rather than to external bans (Reynolds 2007, pp. 18–19). Bowdlerisation thus operated from within the production process itself, influencing narrative structure, character motivation and causal logic in ways that frequently had significant ideological effects. By downplaying explicit depictions of power and desire, it helped to depoliticize narratives that originally addressed hierarchy, authority, and female agency more directly.

The cultural force behind these interventions was a progressively idealised idea of childhood innocence, which gained significant regulatory influence in Britain during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead of depicting an actual state of childhood, innocence served as a normative framework that shaped reading habits and moral expectations. Childhood was increasingly regarded as a condition of moral purity that needed protection from influences linked to sexuality or explicit conflict. As Jacqueline Rose has argued, such constructions of

innocence reveal less about children themselves than about adult fears concerning authority, desire and control - fears that literature was then meant to address and contain (Rose 1984, pp. 8–11).

Imaginative literature for the young was intended to omit explicit sexual content, coercion, moral ambiguity, or female desire that could potentially challenge established normative values. As Carolyn Steedman illustrates, Victorian childhood discourses were associated with social discipline, wherein safeguarding innocence legitimized surveillance and behavioral regulation (Steedman 1995, pp. 3–6). Editorial intervention in children's literature was justified not solely on aesthetic grounds but also as a moral safeguard, based on the premise that exposure to ambiguous or disturbing material could jeopardize development and social order. Innocence was actively preserved through careful selection and omission, rather than merely maintained (*ibid*).

French salon fairy tales proved especially vulnerable to such intervention because of their aristocratic origins and thematic focus. Created within elite social milieus, these stories often blended courtly wit with political satire and depictions of female desire, elements that sat uncomfortably with British ideals of propriety and moral suitability (Bottigheimer 2009, pp. 53-57). Their reception in Britain, therefore, involved not only moral regulation but also a process of class redefinition, as tales linked with elite socialising were adapted for middle-class domestic and juvenile audiences. As Elizabeth Harries has demonstrated, English adaptations of Madame d'Aulnoy's tales often omitted episodes involving court politics and female strategic agency, thereby neutralising the texts' engagement with dynastic power and patriarchal authority (Harries 2003 , pp. 43).

La Chatte Blanche provides a particularly instructive case study because it demonstrates how bowdlerisation in the British reception of French fairy tales operated across multiple levels simultaneously. As scholars of nineteenth-century adaptation have observed, Victorian

rewritings did not merely suppress content considered sexually or morally inappropriate, but often intervened at the level of narrative logic, reshaping causality and redistributing agency within the story (Zipes 1983, pp. 7–9; Grenby 2008, pp. 61–63). Taken together, these forms of intervention indicate that bowdlerisation served not only to make fairy tales acceptable for young audiences, but also to recalibrate the kinds of power and meaning they were allowed to convey.

At the level of sexual and social regulation, bowdlerisation is apparent in the systematic removal of an episode central to d'Aulnoy's critique of patriarchal authority. In the French original, the White Cat recounts an attempted forced marriage to an elderly king who "wanted to possess her, despite her tears" (« le roi voulait me posséder, malgré mes larmes »), describing the arrangement as "a marriage that filled her with horror" (« un mariage qui me faisait horreur ») (d'Aulnoy, *Contes*, vol. 2, pp. 196–198). As Harries has shown, such moments of courtly violence and female protest were particularly vulnerable in Lang and Wright's English adaptations, which often cut scenes involving dynastic power, coercive marriage, and female strategic resistance (Harries 2003, pp. 46–48). Victorian versions remove this episode entirely, replacing it with a morally neutral explanation in which a "wicked fairy" becomes the cause of the heroine's suffering. As fairy-tale adaptation critics have noted, this kind of narrative substitution shifts responsibility from human institutions onto abstract enchantment, transforming structural violence into impersonal misfortune (Zipes 1983, pp. 23–25). Therefore, sexual threat is not denied but effectively depoliticised.

Simultaneously, a parallel form of bowdlerisation takes place at the level of narrative authority. As Lewis Seifert suggests, *La Chatte Blanche* is fundamentally about the power of female storytelling: the White Cat is not only a sovereign but also a writer and composer, presiding over a realm built on art, spectacle, and narrative memory (Seifert 1996, p. 50). D'Aulnoy repeatedly highlights failures of interpretation; the cat's poems survive but cannot

be read because a male secretary transcribes them poorly; the prince initially perceives the cats' poetry as meaningless noise, indicating that women's texts require patient, contextual reading rather than instant judgment (ibid., pp. 50–52). Hence, storytelling itself functions as a form of power that defies simple readability. These metafictional elements are systematically stripped away in English adaptations, which preserve the plot but remove reflections on female authorship, unreadable women's texts, and narrative self-awareness (Harries 2003, pp. 47–48). What is lost in this process is not merely stylistic excess but epistemic authority: the heroine's ability to produce, control and interpret meaning.

Considering these two forms of bowdlerisation - sexual and ideological - appear to operate in a mutually reinforcing manner. The removal of coercive marriage diminishes the critique of patriarchal authority within the narrative, while the elimination of narrative self-reflexivity suppresses its challenge to masculine control over storytelling itself. In both instances, agency is not entirely obliterated but redistributed: danger becomes abstract, resistance is rendered unnecessary, and female agency is reconceptualised as endurance rather than expression (Lefevere 2016, pp. 14–16).

From this perspective, the Victorian bowdlerisation of *La Chatte Blanche* clarifies the wider role of such practices in nineteenth-century fairy-tale culture. The focus was not only on shielding children from explicit sexuality or violence but also on preserving stable meaning by limiting female agency that could be socially, politically, or interpretively disruptive (Warner 1994, pp. 294–296). Consequently, the narrative retains its recognizability while undergoing a fundamental transformation. It is deemed safer, not only due to reduced explicitness but also because readers are no longer compelled to confront the gendered power structures underlying the heroine's suffering or the authority she employs to narrate her story.

2.1.3 Anglicanisation and Protestant Moral Causality

Alongside translation and bowdlerisation, the English reception of French fairy tales seems to have been shaped by another mediating process that could be called *Anglicanisation*. Instead of directly inserting religious doctrine, this process can be understood as a reorganisation of narrative causality influenced by Protestant pedagogical ideas about virtue, discipline, and personal moral responsibility. Scholars of translation and children's literature have demonstrated that, within Protestant cultures, narrative outcomes are often reshaped so that reward and punishment are seen as logical results of moral behaviour rather than as consequences of fortune. (Bassnett 2013, pp. 85–86; Grenby 2008, pp. 25–33).

The term "*Anglicanisation*" is used here as an analytical shorthand rather than as a category derived from a singular source. It integrates insights from translation studies (Bassnett, 2013), scholarship on British children's publishing (Grenby, 2008), and critical analyses of fairy-tale moral logic (Harries, 2003; Warner, 1994) to describe a recurring pattern in the reception of French fairy tales within England: the propensity to reorganise narrative causality so that moral conduct is portrayed as the primary cause of reward or punishment. This process should be understood within the broader context of the post-Reformation period in England and the consolidation of Anglican moral culture during the eighteenth century. As David Hempton has illustrated, Anglicanism during this era functioned less as a strict system of doctrinal enforcement and more as a broad cultural consensus emphasizing moderation and moral discipline (Hempton, 1996, pp. 16–18). Although levels of theological engagement and church attendance varied, the Church of England sustained a widespread influence through its monopoly over rites of passage, its participation in education and welfare, and its integration with the political and social institutions of the state (*ibid*, pp. 17). Consequently, Anglicanism provided a moral frame through which everyday practices, including reading, were interpreted and evaluated. Hempton further underscores that popular Anglicanism was characterized by

what he terms "an unspectacular orthodoxy": an adaptable moral stance that prioritized self-regulation, behavioral propriety, and communal order over enthusiasm, miracles, or doctrinal fervor (*ibid.*, pp. 18).

In this context, fairy tales were primarily not just tools for teaching concepts but also spaces where narrative causality was intentionally adjusted to fit an Anglican-influenced cultural view of moderation and self-control. Walsham has shown that from the seventeenth century onward, Protestant thought aimed to replace explanations based on fate, luck, or magic with a providential perspective in which events are morally meaningful and intentional (Walsham 1999, pp. 9–16). Consequently, in fairy tales, misfortune was regarded as purposeful rather than accidental, and success as a divine reward or a form of judgment. More significantly, providence functioned more as a narrative interpretation than as a distant theological concept, shaping how stories and experiences were narrated and understood (*ibid.*, pp. 12–15). When French fairy tales entered this setting, similar expectations likely influenced their reception. Anglicanization here does not refer to the addition of religious content but to the shaping of narrative structure to align with a moral culture that rejected chance, distrusted magical explanations, and preferred ethical causality over randomness or structural causes of harm.

The English reception of *Barbe bleue* provides a particularly instructive example of Anglicanisation that operates not through explicit religious didacticism. Zipes's account of fairy-tale transmission is useful here as it highlights the cultural transferability of tales through processes of appropriation and remaking: once a narrative gains memetic resonance, it circulates across different contexts in forms that obscure authorial origin while emphasising locally relevant moral themes (Zipes 2012, 42-54). In Perrault's 1697 *version of Barbe bleue*, moral causality is explicitly enforced through two appended morals, which openly depict female curiosity as culpable and simultaneously shift responsibility away from male violence by portraying Bluebeard as an exceptional, archaic figure rather than a symbol of normative

marital authority (Tatar 2004, p.24). However, the story's narrative economy does not fully endorse this moral logic: the wife's repentance does not guarantee her survival, which instead relies on chance, specifically the fortunate arrival of her brothers, thereby revealing a tension between the moral lesson imposed and the actual narrative outcome. Nineteenth-century British adaptations, including Lang's 1889 version, preserve Perrault's narrative structure and morals but reframe the story's moral understanding in accordance with Victorian Anglican cultural norms by shifting the focus from structural male violence to the wife's emotional excess and psychological disturbance. English print and performance adaptations frequently redirect attention away from the explicit moral against curiosity towards the wife's terror, hysteria, monomania, or masochistic fascination (Cabiati 2023, p. 3). This narrative shift, this thesis argues, operates ambivalently: rather than straightforwardly empowering the female protagonist, it also risks disciplining female transgression within culturally accepted regimes of conjugal authority, presenting deviance as the understandable basis of violence. It is at this point that Anglicanised moral causality appears to gain traction: violence is presented not solely as a patriarchal power issue but potentially as a result of individual fault, emotional misalignment, or improper feminine desire, subtly normalising disciplinary logics within what seems to be a secular framework of fairy-tale adaptation.

Exemplary is the difference between Perrault's formulation and Lang's reformulation, highlighting a significant shift in the way authority and punishment are narratively framed. In Perrault, the threat is expressed in terms of the husband's unqualified *colère* :

“[...]Pour cette petite clef- ci, c'est la clef du cabinet du bout de la grande galerie de l'appartement bas : ouvrez tout, allez partout; mais, pour ce petit cabinet, je vous défends

d'y entrer, et je vous le défends de telle sorte^ que, s'il vous arrive de l'ouvrir, il n'y a rien que vous ne deviez attendre de ma colère.»¹⁹ (Perrault, 1904, p.8)

This scene illustrates how authority is exercised through the strategic creation of temptation and the anticipation of transgression. By granting the wife unrestricted access to the domestic space while confining her to a single forbidden chamber, Bluebeard sets the conditions under which curiosity becomes a predictable part of the narrative, thus turning obedience into a test of submission rather than a morally grounded norm. His anger does not serve as a proportionate or normatively justified response to wrongdoing, but as an extra-normative punishment that ensures compliance through intimidation rather than moral reasoning. The interaction thus presents marital authority as structurally unequal and ethically ambiguous: obedience is demanded without proper justification and punishment is threatened without proportional accuracy. In this arrangement, violence is not mainly depicted as the moral consequence of disobedience, but as the exercise of sovereign authority within an unequal domestic system, exactly the setup that later English adaptations aim to reorganise.

Lang's version reproduces the situation almost exactly, but adds a morally critical modifier:

[...]but for this little one here, it is the key of the closet at the end of the great gallery on the ground floor. Open them all; go into all and every one of them, except that little closet, which I forbid you, and forbid it in such a manner that, if you happen to open it, there's nothing but what you may expect from my *just* [emphasis added] anger and resentment." (Lang , 2010, pp.226–227)

¹⁹ Literally: "As for this little key, it is the key to the cabinet at the end of the great gallery of the lower apartment: open everything, go everywhere; but as for this little cabinet, I forbid you to enter it, and I forbid it in such a way that, if you happen to open it, there is nothing you should not expect from my anger."

Lang's intervention is minimal at the content level but significant at the narrative logic level. The addition of the adjective *just* subtly redefines Perrault's asymmetry by introducing a vocabulary of moral and legal legitimacy. Punishment is no longer solely a consequence of Bluebeard's capacity for violence but is now justified by the wife's potential transgression. This lexical change helps reframe narrative causality: the threat is depicted less as an arbitrary exercise of patriarchal authority and more as the ethically understandable result of disobedience. In this way, authority is naturalised through a logic of deserved punishment, making the husband's violence clearly a response to misconduct rather than an expression of structural domination. This analysis does not imply that Anglican moral culture supports patriarchal violence; instead, it demonstrates how English interpretative frameworks can narratively transform relations of domination into moral causes, making violence appear as a natural consequence within the narrative's logic even when the underlying power relations remain coercive. As Zipes explains, this exemplifies how remaking functions as cultural appropriation: the story endures, but the interpretive framework through which it gains meaning shifts according to the moral context of the receiving culture (Zipes 2012, pp.42-54).

2.2 Distribution and Circulation of Fairy Tales

Besides translation, moral filtering and ideological adjustment, the way French *contes* were received in English was largely influenced by the physical and institutional mediums through which these stories circulated (Sumpter, 2009, pp. 1–5). Fairy tales didn't enter British culture as fixed texts but rather travelled through a diverse media environment in which their form, audience and methods of circulation actively influenced how they were interpreted (*ibid*). Imported fairy tales appeared in distinct formats, such as chapbooks, juvenile magazines, illustrated gift books, and, later as performances, each tied to specific class dynamics, reading

habits, and institutional contexts. These formats did more than just deliver stories; they shaped their perceived meanings, how they were read, and the moral and narrative roles they were expected to serve (*ibid*, pp.11-62).

The distinction in format carried significance partly because it influenced how fairy tales were experienced. Budget chapbooks, produced quickly for widespread distribution among working-class and semi-literate audiences, promoted abridged versions, episodic narratives, and explicit moral lessons, emphasizing action and consequences over psychological complexity or irony (Spufford, 1981, pp. 234–238; Altick, 1957, pp. 70–75). Conversely, fairy tales published in middle-class juvenile periodicals or compiled in bound volumes were presented as enhancing literary education, frequently accompanied by editorial commentary, moral prefaces, or didactic framing that positioned the tale as an instructional tool rather than mere entertainment (Grenby, 2008, pp. 25–33; Harries, 2002, pp. 39–41). As Sumpter demonstrates, these periodicals fostered supervised reading practices whereby fairy tales were integrated within patterns of serial consumption, moral contemplation, and domestic pedagogy (Sumpter, 2009, pp. 63–70).

Crucially, the circulation of fairy tales did not end with the printed page. The migration of fairy tales into theatrical forms, most notably pantomime, extended their reach while further reshaping their narrative logic (Sumpter, 2009, p.32). Stage adaptations amplified visual spectacle, simplified moral conflict and privileged recognisable character types, ensuring that fairy tales remained accessible to audiences across class boundaries, including those with limited literacy. Pantomime did not merely popularise fairy tales; it reinforced their emphasis on visibility and transformation, translating print-based narrative structures into embodied, communal forms of reception (*ibid.*, pp. 149–156). In this context, theatrical adaptation served both as a result of earlier print dissemination and as an additional step in the narrative mediation process.

This matters because format differentiation helps to reveal how fairy tales can both stabilise and reshape narrative values across different reading contexts. Characters like the princess seem to have gained cultural influence not only through plot or motif but also through repeated circulation in media that tend to prioritise visibility and recognition. Format may have influenced which forms of agency were understood, which virtues were highlighted or rewarded, and which narrative outcomes appeared natural or desirable. In this way, fairy tales can be seen less as fixed texts and more as adaptable cultural scripts, whose meanings are continually negotiated and adjusted through their modes of transmission. Focusing on format therefore enables us to understand how gendered narrative roles were not merely adopted from French models but were actively constructed and normalised within specific British reading cultures.

2.2.1 Chapbooks and Popular Circulation

Chapbooks predate the widespread circulation of fairy tales in Britain and were not originally meant for children or exclusively for fiction. As Margaret Spufford shows, chapbooks appeared in the early modern period as inexpensive pamphlets containing a diverse range of material: ballads, saints' lives, abridged romances, moral stories, prophecies, criminal biographies, and practical advice (Spufford, 1981, pp.19-45). Printed on low-quality paper and sold cheaply, they were distributed by travelling peddlers, at fairs, markets, and through informal rural networks, reaching audiences with limited access to books and formal education (*ibid*, pp. 47–55). From the beginning, chapbooks were shaped by the conditions of popular literacy; many readers were semi-literate or relied on communal reading, in which texts were read aloud, shared, or consumed in parts rather than silently and in order (Spufford, 1981, 111-113). Therefore, chapbooks were not intended for long-term preservation or detailed study; they were created for rapid circulation and entertainment rather than for deep interpretation.

By the eighteenth century, chapbooks had become one of the most widespread forms of popular reading in Britain, aiding what Richard Altick describes as the gradual democratisation of reading through affordable print (Altick, 1957, pp. 63–78). Their popularity extended across rural and urban working-class audiences, although they remained largely separate from the bound volumes associated with middle-class domestic reading. This social positioning influenced their content: chapbooks tended to favour stories with straightforward action, strong emotional appeal, and conclusive endings, features that made them comprehensible within fragmented reading circumstances (Spufford, 1981, pp. 234–238).

French literary fairy tales mostly entered the English chapbook market through shortened versions of Perrault's tales and, to a lesser degree, those of d'Aulnoy and the *countesseuse* (Bottigheimer, 2009, pp. 53–63). To fit the constraints and moral standards of cheap print, episodes involving political satire, erotic ambiguity, or complex female agency were often removed. Chapbook editions also favoured straightforward plots and clear character motivation (Zipes, 2001, pp. 61–63). As Zipes states, chapbooks played a key role in transforming elite fairy tales into formats compatible with popular morality and new ideas of childhood, crafting stories where ethical behaviour directly led to reward or punishment (*ibid*). Through repeated circulation, these adaptations seemed to become a form of tradition, despite being a specific reworking of the French originals that was historically contingent.



Figure 1 - Perrault, C. (1904) *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez*. Originally published in 1697 Paris : Claude Barbin. Available at : Archive.org : <https://archive.org/details/contesdeperrault00perr>

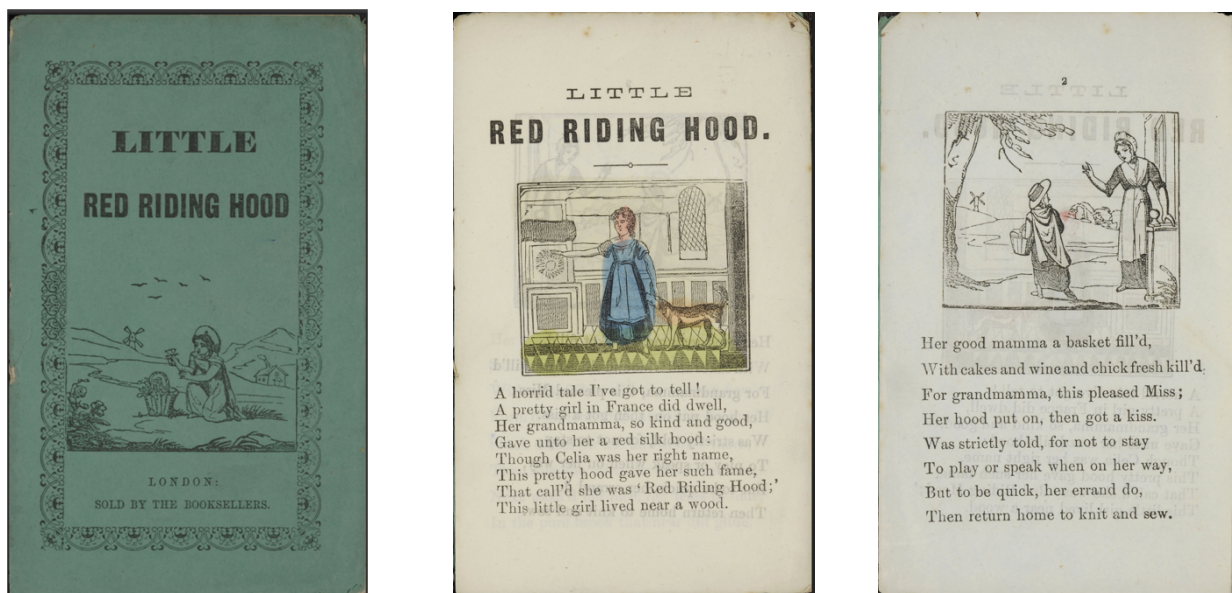


Figure 2 - McGill University Library (1840?) Chapbook: "Little Red Riding Hood". McGill Digital Library, Chapbooks Collection. Available at : <https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/chapbooks/fullrecord.php?ID=8193>

Comparing the French literary depiction of *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* in Charles Perrault's 'Histoires ou contes du temps passé' (Fig. 1) with the English chapbook version "Little Red Riding Hood" (Fig. 2) is highly beneficial for understanding their differences. As book historians have noted, fairy tale meaning is produced by a combination of text, illustrations, and circulation methods, not just the story itself (Chartier, 1994; Bottigheimer, 2009). In Perrault's French context, the story appears as continuous prose, with illustrations that are modest and subordinate to the text. The *moralité*, included at the end, guides interpretation by framing the tale as a warning about female vulnerability and social behavior (Warner 1994, pp. 294–296), without fully explaining the story's causal logic. In contrast, the English chapbook emphasizes visual repetition and story compression. Short captions divide the story into episodes; chapbooks favored brevity, familiar motifs, and immediate visuals to enable quick reading and broad distribution (Spufford, 1981, pp. 19–45). This simplification aligns with Bottigheimer's argument that English print reduced the social and psychological complexity of French fairy tales to improve moral clarity (Bottigheimer, 2009, pp. 53–63). In Perrault, danger develops through speech and delayed recognition, while in the chapbook, moral messages are instantly visible. Zipes notes that such adaptations act as ideological filters, transforming elite narratives into formats compatible with popular morality and ideas of childhood innocence (Zipes, 2001 p. 60). The comparison shows that chapbooks did more than just transmit French fairy tales; they reimagined them, turning reflective salon stories into visually driven moral tales. Through compression and illustration, the chapbook foreshadows Victorian methods of controlling fantasy by making danger, virtue, and outcome immediately recognisable (Grenby, 2008).

Chapbooks are therefore crucial to understanding how French fairy tales were received in Britain, as they represent the first mass-mediated interface between those tales and British popular audiences. They did not merely transmit French narratives unchanged; they reshaped

them through material constraints. Print capitalism favoured versions of fairy tales that could circulate efficiently, be easily remembered, and deliver recognisable moral effects (Zipes, 2006b, 41-50).

2.2.2 Periodicals and the Pedagogical Press

Periodicals held a central role in Victorian print culture by shaping how reading was organised and understood. By the mid-19th century, magazines had become one of the most widely circulated print forms in Britain, driven by advances in printing technology, the repeal of the “taxes on knowledge” between 1853 and 1861, expanded railway distribution, and increasing literacy among the middle classes (Altick, 1957, pp. 302–307; Beetham, 1996, pp. 15–18). Scholars highlight that Victorian magazines were characterised more by formal variety than by consistent genre: fiction, essays, religious commentary, advice columns, biography, and illustration appeared together within a recurring serial format (Beetham, 1996, pp. 1–6). This structure trained readers to interpret imaginative stories alongside moral and instructional material, fostering a reading experience where literary pleasure and ethical instruction complemented each other rather than opposed.

Magazines did not merely serve as a medium for an already established audience; through their editorial decisions, formats, and modes of address, they actively contributed to shaping the identities of their readership and their reading behaviors. Elements such as editorial tone, layout, illustration, and content curation constructed readers in accordance with gender, class, and age (*ibid* pp. 20–24). Women’s and juvenile periodicals often positioned their audiences as morally impressionable and in need of guidance, thereby linking reading to broader Victorian discourses surrounding domesticity and childhood dependency (Rose, 1984, pp. 141–142). Significantly, children were seldom the direct purchasers of these magazines. Typically, periodicals were acquired by middle-class households, educational institutions, Sunday schools, or religious societies, and read within supervised domestic or institutional

environments (Grenby, 2008, pp. 55–58). As a result, reading in this context was predominantly regarded as a monitored social activity rather than a private, imaginative pursuit.

The serial format of magazines reinforced specific reading habits. These periodicals promoted incremental reading, in which stories appeared irregularly across issues rather than as complete narratives. Scholars suggest that seriality helped readers develop familiarity with narrative patterns over time, particularly those that highlight delayed gratification, moral endurance, and cause-and-effect. Fairy tales that rewarded patience, obedience, and restraint fit well with this publication style, aligning with Victorian Protestant educational ideals, even when religious language is not explicitly used (Sumpter 2009, p.60-63)

From their inception, Victorian periodicals were closely linked with pedagogical and reformist aims. Many magazines explicitly depicted reading as a morally beneficial activity, claiming to refine character, regulate behaviour, and cultivate disciplined habits even when they presented leisure material (Beetham, 1996, pp. 12–16). Publications aimed at women, families, and young readers were especially explicit in connecting pleasure with domestic virtue and self-control rather than with autonomous consumption (ibid., pp. 16–20). Although ideological positions varied across titles, a widespread Victorian belief persisted, shared by publishers, educators, and religious organisations, that reading influenced character and social conduct (Altick, 1957, pp. 82–89).

Within this printing system, magazines emerged as essential mediums for the dissemination and reinterpretation of fairy tales. As Sumpter illustrates, nineteenth-century juvenile and family



periodicals such as Aunt Judy's Magazine (Fig. 3), The Monthly Packet, and Good Words for

the Young consistently published fairy tales alongside moral essays, religious guidance, educational commentary, and exemplary biographies (Sumpter, 2009, pp. 52–68).

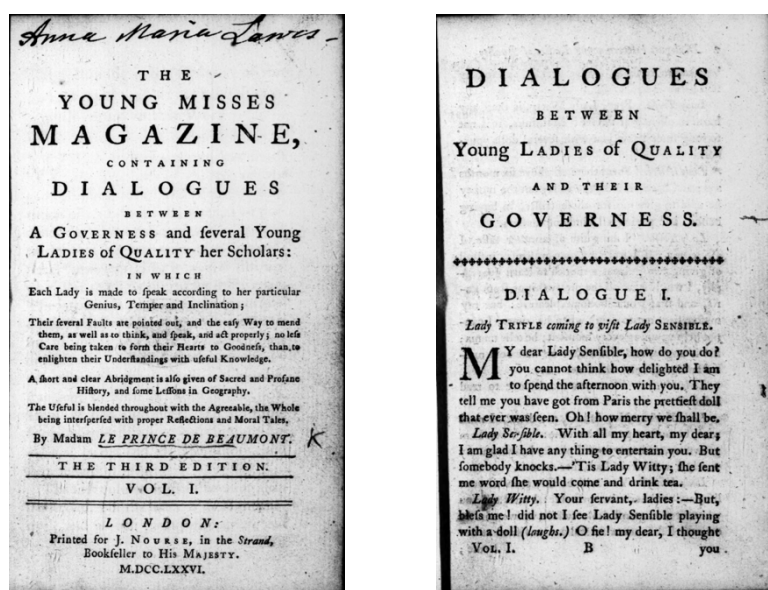


Figure 3 - Leprince de Beaumont, M. (1776) *The Young Misses Magazine; Containing Dialogues between a Governess and Several Young Ladies of Quality Her Scholars. Vol. I.* London: J. Nourse. Available at: <https://dn720207.ca.archive.org>

Consequently, fairy tales were seldom encountered as independent narratives; rather, they were incorporated within curated textual environments that directed readers toward interpretations aligned with discipline, self-improvement, and ethical reflection (*ibid*, pp. 60–63). This Victorian arrangement did not arise by itself but evolved from earlier periodical practices that had already incorporated fairy tales, many of them translated or adapted from continental sources, into pedagogically structured reading regimes.

The title page from *The Young Misses' Magazine* (Fig. 4, London, 1776) exemplifies, well before the Victorian era, the pedagogical and gendered logic that later juvenile periodicals would reinforce.

Firstly, the magazine explicitly presents reading as a guided moral activity. Knowledge is not directly accessed by the child reader but is mediated through a dialogic structure between a governess and “young ladies of quality”, confirming that narrative enjoyment, including fairy tales, is authorised only within a hierarchy of instruction. (Rose, 1984, pp. 141–142).

Second, the magazine's broad diversity is clear. Fairy tales and dialogues sit alongside lessons in "*Sacred and Profane History*" and "*Geography*", indicating that imaginative stories are part of a wider educational programme. This shows that fairy tales entered British juvenile culture not as separate literary forms but as parts of mixed pedagogical systems, where fiction worked alongside historical, religious, and factual teaching. As Beetham argues, the magazine format creates meaning through relationships: texts are read in dialogue with each other, generating moral coherence across genres rather than freedom of interpretation (Beetham, 1996, pp. 1–6).

Thirdly, attributing the work to Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont is essential. Beaumont's role places French fairy tales within a British instructional context that already encompasses Victorian moral pedagogy. As Bottigheimer observes, and as discussed in Chapter One, Beaumont's works were often adapted in Britain as tools for female moral education, blending fairy-tale storytelling with discipline, rational self-governance, and social refinement rather than with solely adult irony (Bottigheimer, 2014, pp. 14–18).

Finally, the address to "*young ladies of quality*" may suggest the class and gender roles present in such publications. The magazine seems to teach readers not only virtue but also social aspiration, portraying proper femininity as shaped through controlled reading under female supervision. This potentially foreshadows the Victorian periodical's role in shaping the fairy-tale heroine, especially the princess, as a figure of moral visibility, disciplined desire, and socially accepted elevation rather than independent agency. It is possibly this connection between narrative form, educational oversight, and institutional authority that would later define children's literature as a distinct and regulated cultural domain.

The integration of fairy tales into periodical culture helped establish Victorian children's literature as morally regulated. As Rose argues, children's literature then was shaped by adult anxieties about authority, producing texts to control imagination rather than promote

interpretive independence (Rose, 1984, pp. 141–148). Periodicals reinforced this by embedding fairy tales in pedagogical programs that normalised supervision (Stevenson in Grenby, 2008, pp. 119–122). Magazines played a complex role in women’s authorship: they provided women Writers regular publication opportunities, especially in genres linked to domesticity, childhood, and morality, including fairy tales (Beetham, 1996, pp. 33–38). Yet, this access often came with constraints, as women’s writing was expected to uphold domestic virtue and moral exemplarity, limiting expression (Beetham, 1996, pp. 40–44). This tension explains why women’s fairy tales often blend superficial conformity with subtle critique, exploiting genre flexibility while remaining within pedagogical limits (Warner, 1994, pp. 294–296).

The period context also influenced the reception of central fairy-tale characters, especially the princess. In magazines, princess stories appeared alongside conduct advice, biographies of exemplary women, religious teachings, and visual material, creating a rich intertextual landscape in which femininity was repeatedly presented as visible, measurable, and controlled (Beetham, 1996, pp. 77–82). Beetham’s analysis of the magazine’s emphasis on spectacle and display indicates that readers were encouraged to associate value with recognition and approval while also embracing restraint and moral discipline (Beetham, 1996, pp. 85–90).

2.2.3 Prize Books and Institutional Legitimacy

Alongside their presence in chapbooks and periodicals, fairy tales also gained access to Victorian culture through more durable and socially exclusive formats, placing them within elite and institutional reading spaces. By the mid-1800s, fairy tales increasingly appeared in bound, illustrated volumes designed for home libraries, private schools, and religious institutions. These formats were distinctly different from temporary chapbooks and serial magazines in terms of cost, durability, and intended audience (Altick, 1957, pp. 81–99; Sumpter, 2009, pp. 79–92). Scholars generally agree that this transition into respectable book formats played a key role in reclassifying fairy tales as legitimate children’s literature rather

than fleeting popular print (Zipes, 2006b, pp. 65–72). This change not only influenced who encountered fairy tales but also the conditions under which they were read and assessed.

These volumes were often marketed and distributed as gift books or prize books: tangible objects deliberately embedded within systems of moral judgment and institutional recognition. As Altick shows, prize books served as tools for moral education in nineteenth-century Britain, linking literary possession to obedience and diligence (Altick, 1957, pp. 88–94). Fairy tales included in such volumes did not merely depict moral rewards; they also promoted them. The book itself served as a visible symbol of approval, reinforcing the association between good behaviour and social recognition. In this way, fairy tales circulated within elite circles not only as texts to be read but also as objects that enacted moral judgment through their mode of distribution.

Access to these editions was structurally restricted. Unlike chapbooks or magazines, which were relatively affordable and widely circulated, illustrated gift books generally required more financial resources, leisure time, and institutional support (Grenby, 2008, pp. 55–58). Grenby notes that children's books of this kind were most often bought by middle- and upper-class families, schools, and religious organisations rather than by children themselves (*ibid*). Consequently, reading was typically conducted within supervised domestic or educational environments, where interpretation was influenced by adult authority within broader regimes of moral instruction. Fairy tales encountered in these settings tended to be seen less as imaginative play and more as morally enriching reading suitable for respectable childhood.

Material form played a decisive role in stabilizing interpretation. High-quality paper, elaborate bindings, and carefully curated illustrations signaled cultural value and seriousness of purpose, distinguishing these volumes from inexpensive editions (Sumpter, 2009, pp. 85–90). Illustration, in particular, served as an interpretive guide. As Sumpter notes, nineteenth-century illustrated children's books frequently emphasized scenes of obedience and reward through

sentimental or idealized imagery, thereby encouraging readers to associate virtue with patience (*ibid*). By visually privileging endurance over action and resolution over ambiguity, such images restricted interpretive possibilities and aligned fairy-tale causality with prevailing middle-class ideals of discipline and self-regulation.

Within this exclusive reading culture, fairy tales gained cultural importance. Using Bourdieu's framework, owning books tied to moral refinement and literary legitimacy acted as a social marker, indicating taste and respectability (Bourdieu, 1984). Zipes also contends that fairy tales gained a sense of tradition not through their origins but via selective repetition and institutional backing, which gave authority to certain versions while marginalising others (Zipes, 2006b, pp. 68–72). These elite access conditions significantly affected gendered interpretations. Fairy tales found in gift-book and prize-book contexts were part of systems that valued endurance and obedience - values aligned with nineteenth-century ideals of femininity (Beetham, 1996, pp. 77–82). Domestic reading habits for children and women often portrayed virtue as something to be demonstrated over time and recognized by external authorities rather than asserted independently (*ibid*). In such settings, fairy tales did more than mirror gender norms; they helped rehearse and reinforce them through repeated material practice.

The implications for the fairy-tale heroine, especially the princess, are profound. In elite reading settings, the princess is portrayed less as an active agent and more as a figure whose worth is validated through recognition. As scholars have noted, nineteenth-century fairy tales circulating within pedagogical and institutional environments consistently depict female value as something acknowledged by external authority rather than demonstrated through initiative (Lieberman, 1972, pp. 384–386; Warner, 1994, pp. 294–296). This narrative structure closely mirrors the function of the prize book itself. Patience comes before recognition, suffering precedes elevation, and virtue is confirmed through public reward. Altick shows that prize books embodied moral judgment by turning obedience and endurance into visible signs of

merit, reinforcing a Victorian economy of delayed gratification (Altick, 1957, pp. 88–94). In such frameworks, fairy tales do more than illustrate reward; they also partook in its disciplinary logic (Sumpter, 2009, pp. 85–92). Although elite formats conferred cultural prestige on fairy tales, they also limited interpretive possibilities, favouring narratives where moral behaviour is visibly approved and socially sanctioned (Warner, 1994, pp. 294–296).

From this perspective, elite access to fairy tales not only expanded their audience but also subtly shifted their cultural significance. By incorporating fairy tales into material reward systems, Victorian print culture subtly linked narrative fantasy to institutional power. This connection was instrumental in establishing the princess as a widely recognized symbol of moral clarity and socially endorsed ambition, a theme that will be examined more closely in the following sections.

2.2.4 Pantomime and the Stage-Page Feedback Loop

In nineteenth-century Britain, pantomime was a major non-print medium used to spread and reinterpret fairy tales, mainly influencing how audiences received them through performance rather than written texts (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 58–60). Unlike chapbooks or magazines, pantomime engaged audiences collectively and visually, shaping narrative meaning through spectacle, repetition, and familiar stage conventions, instead of relying on detailed narration or close reading (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 60–63). It was neither marginal nor solely for children; it drew diverse social groups and served as a shared cultural event during seasonal rituals, especially Christmas. For French fairy tales, pantomime was a particularly influential medium, transforming printed stories into public performance scripts. Scholars suggest this process emphasized visibility, typification, and clear endings over narrative complexity or psychological depth (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 61–63). Although pantomime did not replace literary versions, it likely enhanced fairy tales' cultural importance by staging them repeatedly as collective experiences of recognition, transformation, and resolution.

Historically, British pantomime arose in the early eighteenth century through the convergence of Italian *commedia dell'arte*, English theatrical interludes, and popular performance traditions, especially fairground and musical entertainments (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 58–59). Early pantomimes centred around the *harlequinade*, a performance format based on stock characters, physical comedy, transformation scenes, and swift visual changes, first popularised at venues such as Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 58–59). Meaning in these performances was generated more through gesture, costume, and recognisable stage conventions than through dialogue, enabling narratives to remain understandable to audiences with different levels of literacy and cultural capital (Atlick, 1957, pp. 268–271). Throughout the nineteenth century, pantomime gradually moved away from classical and mythological frameworks and adopted a relatively fixed repertoire of fairy-tale plots, including *Cinderella*, *Puss in Boots*, *Bluebeard*, and *Sleeping Beauty* (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 59–60; Schacker, 2008, pp. 52–55). Scholars associate this shift with pantomime's increasing connection to Christmas entertainment, domestic festivity, and childhood, as well as the rising cultural importance of fairy tales within British popular and literary culture (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 60–61; Zipes, 2006b, pp. 64–72). Particularly for fairy tales of French origin, pantomime served as a powerful medium of reception and reinterpretation. Tales by Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy, already familiar through translation and print, were re-enacted on stage through highly visible and repetitive performances; rather than transmitting fairy tales as fixed texts, pantomime transformed them into publicly shared scripts centred around spectacle, character types, and resolution, reinforcing their place within the collective cultural imaginary (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 61–63).

Crucially, pantomime prioritised recognisability over textual fidelity. Rather than retelling fairy tales in full, pantomime fragmented plots into sequences of spectacle, comic business, musical display, and topical allusion, relying on audience familiarity to secure

narrative coherence rather than completeness (*ibid*). Korneeva emphasises that this recognisability enabled pantomime writers to exaggerate, rearrange, or temporarily disrupt narrative elements without risking failure, as closure was assured by convention rather than plot logic (*ibid*). The outcome was a mode of reception where fairy tales served as performative templates: sufficiently stable to hold meaning, yet flexible enough to accommodate spectacle and topical variation, while still aligning with moral and social resolutions (*ibid*, 63-65).

Cinderella provides a prime example of this process. As one of the most enduring and frequently staged pantomime narratives, it is immediately recognisable to British audiences across different classes and ages. Scholars demonstrate that pantomime versions expand the story into a comic domestic melodrama, punctuated by chase scenes, ensemble routines, and topical songs, culminating in an elaborate transformation scene that literalises social mobility through spectacle (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 60–61). In this format, narrative development is subordinate to theatrical interpretation: characters are organised as types, moral positions are visually signalled, and emotional or psychological subtlety is replaced by recognisable roles enacted through costume, gesture, and repetition (*ibid*, pp. 60–63). While the fairy tale's authority is reinforced through repeated performances, its interpretive range is consequently narrowed by the conventions of theatre.

The implications of this medium for gender representation, particularly the figure of the princess, are considerable. The princess appears less as an active agent than as a figure whose worth is affirmed through recognition and ceremonial finality, most clearly in the concluding transformation scene. Her elevation functions as a spectacle of confirmation, observed collectively and ratified theatrically rather than earned through decision or strategy (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 60–63; Warner, 1994, pp. 294–296).

For this thesis, pantomime is important because it shows how fairy tales, many of which are of French origin, were transmitted into British culture through performance and print. By

repeatedly staging familiar stories within a framework of spectacle, recognisability, and resolution, pantomime reinforced fairy tales as shared cultural assets while directing their meanings towards visibility and moral conclusion (Korneeva, 2014, pp. 60–63; Altick, 1957, pp. 268–271). Simultaneously, its reliance on theatrical artifice and gender play prevents total ideological closure. Therefore, pantomime holds a central role in Victorian fairy-tale reception: it presents the princess as a spectacle of recognition and reward, even as it periodically exposes the constructed nature of that role. This tension helps explain why later Victorian rewritings could both reproduce and challenge the gendered scripts inherited from earlier fairy-tale mediation (Warner, 1994, pp. 294–296).

2.3 The Princess as Cultural Script

The princess figure examined in this chapter should be understood as the result of historical, material and institutional processes, rather than as a character created solely by fairy-tale storytelling (Chartier, 1994, pp. 12–15; Lefevere, 1992, pp. 1–9). The mediations discussed in Chapters 2.1–2.2, including translation, format differentiation, illustration, periodical framing, and theatrical performance, did not just change stories; they repeatedly chose, simplified, and stabilised specific ways of representing femininity (Grenby, 2008, pp. 56–63; Harries, 2002, pp. 99–104). From this convergence, what appears is not an archetype in the folkloric sense, but a recognisable social role: the princess as a position defined by visibility, restraint, lineage, and externally conferred value (Warner, 1994, xvii–xix, 294–296). To understand this figure theoretically, it is therefore necessary to place her within broader histories of elite femininity and social recognition rather than merely within fairy-tale typology.

2.3.1 Elite Femininity and Social Recognition

Historically, what later becomes recognised as the princess figure seems to derive less from folk narrative traditions alone than from aristocratic cultures centred on public display and

dynastic evaluation. In medieval and early modern court societies, social hierarchy was articulated through visible signs of lineage, honour, and comportment (Keen, 1984, pp. 126–130), with elite women frequently positioned as symbolic bearers of continuity, alliance, and legitimacy within these systems of recognition (Davidoff and Hall, 1987, pp. 180–185, 321–325). As Maurice Keen shows, chivalric culture cast noble women less as agents of action than as figures whose appearance and conduct authenticated male lineage and political alliance (Keen, 1984, pp. 145–150). Elite women's social value appears to have been assessed within ritualised scenes of recognition governed by formalised codes of visibility, restraint, and controlled speech. Within these frameworks, waiting and endurance can be understood not simply as passivity but as socially meaningful competencies: the capacity to inhabit delay without disruption functioned as a marker of suitability for incorporation into aristocratic and dynastic structures.

This aristocratic paradigm holds significance because it delineates identity as performative intelligibility rather than as an intrinsic internal expression. Susan Crane's scholarly analysis of medieval selfhood demonstrates that courtly identity was contingent upon outwardly recognizable behavioral patterns instead of inner psychological profundity (Crane 2002, pp. 3–7). Particularly, feminine identity was constructed through the reiteration of stylized acts such as modesty, stillness, and regulated visibility, which conveyed moral reliability to the observing audience (*ibid.*, pp. 45–49). Consequently, value appears to stem not from initiative or voluntary choice but from the successful performance under scrutiny. This conceptual framework offers a historical antecedent for the fairy-tale princess, whose narrative role similarly relies on recognizable positioning rather than on internal development or sustained agency.

Longer-term processes of behavioural discipline further stabilised this script. Norbert Elias's account of the civilising process traces how European court culture progressively

internalised regimes of emotional control, bodily regulation, and self-monitoring, particularly among elite women whose conduct was subject to constant observation (Elias, 2000 [1939], pp. 53–60, 103–110).²⁰ Femininity became associated with the capacity to endure regulation without overt resistance, transforming obedience, delay, and composure into markers of refinement rather than subordination (*ibid*). Although Elias does not address fairy tales directly, his analysis clarifies the social conditions under which waiting could acquire positive value as an index of worth. It is therefore reasonable, though necessarily inferential, to suggest that fairy-tale heroines inherit a cultural meaning in which immobility signifies suitability rather than absence of value.

These elite scripts did not directly integrate into children's culture; rather, they were mediated through the processes examined earlier in this chapter. Translation played a pivotal role. As demonstrated in Section 2.1, the English reception of French *contes* involved systematic abbreviations, moral adjustments, stylistic simplifications, favoring narratives that could be rendered ethical and narratively closed. Such practices did not merely sanitize content; they also restricted narrative possibilities. Heroines whose worth could be demonstrated through suffering, patience, and eventual recognition were preserved and emphasised, whereas figures whose agency complicated moral evaluation were marginalised or reshaped. Consequently, translation can be understood as a selective cultural practice that favoured forms of worth acknowledged through external approval - such as obedience or virtue rewarded by authority- while marginalising forms of agency based on resistance or strategy. Material and visual mediation further reinforced this role. Pantomime reinforced the same logic through performance, condensing narrative meaning into tableaux and recognition scenes. Theatrical adaptation encouraged audiences to interpret moral value based on immediate visual cues rather than narrative development (Schacker, 2008, p. 58). Across both media, the princess was

²⁰ Elias does not address fairy tales or gendered narrative roles directly; the relevance of his model here lies in its account of how restraint and delayed gratification acquire positive social value within court societies.

perceived as an icon whose significance lay in being seen and endorsed. Institutional framing completed this process by embedding the princess within regimes of estimation and reward. As discussed in Section 2.2 juvenile magazines, school readers, and prize books presented fairy tales as morally exemplary narratives infused with pedagogical aims. Within these contexts, delay and endurance were explicitly framed as virtues, with recognition appearing as the appropriate outcome of disciplined waiting (Grenby, 2008, pp. 25–33). The princess served here as a model of sanctioned aspiration- exceptional, but only insofar as she remained intelligible within existing authority structures. Her elevation did not challenge hierarchy; rather, it reaffirmed it, mirroring institutional experiences in which worth was confirmed through examinations, reports, and prizes rather than through autonomous assertion.

Overall, these processes indicate that the princess should be understood less as a fairy-tale invention and more as a socially constructed role that has been translated across cultures. Instead of originating a concept of feminine recognition, fairy tales serve to transform evaluative norms already present in aristocratic and educational societies into storytelling, thereby facilitating their repetition and dissemination (Keen, 1984, pp. 145–150; Warner, 1994, pp. xv–xviii). This does not mean that these stories were always oppressive or passively accepted (Nikolajeva, 2014, pp. 31–34), but it clarifies the structural framework in which the princess emerges as a culturally meaningful figure, whose worth is based on being observed, judged, and rewarded (Brooks, 1984, pp. 23–25).

Understanding the princess as a historical social script has direct implications for the analysis that follows. If her narrative power comes from recognisability rather than agency, then deviations from this script - such as cruelty, failure, refusal or rebellion - gain significance precisely because they disrupt a repetitive pattern of recognition.

2.4.2 Waiting, Delay and the Narrative Logic of Reward

Critical discussions concerning the fairy-tale princess have frequently focused on issues of passivity, ideological containment, and normative femininity (Rowe, 1986; Warner, 1994; Bacchilega, 1997). While this scholarship has been instrumental in highlighting the gendered implications inherent in princess narratives, it has predominantly examined the figure primarily at the levels of representation or moral messaging. Less attention has been devoted to the *narrative economy* through which the princess operates: specifically, the structured relationship between vulnerability, delay, and reward that organizes both plot development and readerly desire.

This section contends that the princess figure functions as a narrative device that gives meaning to vulnerability by translating endurance into eventual recognition and reward. Rather than serving as a model of action or autonomy, the princess is situated within plots that make endurance, waiting, and exposure to judgment narratively constructive. This argument draws on narratological accounts of desire and temporality (Brooks, 1984), feminist analyses of fairy-tale structures (Warner, 1994; Bacchilega, 1997), and scholarship on childhood as a condition characterised by deferral and evaluation (Rose, 1984).

In numerous fairy tales centred on princess figures, the resolution of the narrative is often attained not through cumulative moral development or decisive actions, but through moments of public recognition that retrospectively affirm the valour of the heroine. Scholars have consistently observed that such tales culminate in scenes of selection, revelation, or elevation - as balls, weddings, unveilings - where societal valuation is externally validated rather than internally asserted by the protagonist herself (Warner, 1994, pp. xvii–xviii; Bacchilega, 1997, pp. 7–9). Importantly, recognition within these narratives does not function as a gradual process. Instead, it is typically sudden, event-based, and conferred by an authoritative gaze. As Warner notes, fairy-tale heroines often exist in a state of suspension

between invisibility and spectacle, with narrative tension directed towards the moment when they are finally seen and acknowledged (Warner, 1994, p. xvii). Consequently, recognition operates less as a result of ethical deliberation and more as a narrative endpoint that retrospectively reconfigures meaning.

From a narratological perspective, this structure reflects Peter Brooks's interpretation of plot as the regulation of desire through anticipation and delay. Brooks posits that narrative produces meaning predominantly through the postponement of resolution, thereby instructing readers to long for the conclusion that will ultimately justify what has come before (Brooks, 1984, pp. 23–25). In princess narratives, this longing is focused not on transformation via action, but rather on the arrival of recognition itself. The plot encourages readers to await alongside the heroine for the moment when her worth shall be affirmed.

Within this structure, vulnerability is not merely an incidental condition but a crucial narrative resource. Princess figures are often introduced in situations of deprivation, marginalisation, or powerlessness: confined to domestic labour, subjected to neglect, silenced, displaced, or rendered socially invisible. Instead of prompting immediate resistance, these conditions cause narrative delay, prolonging the period during which worth remains unrecognised. Several scholars have observed that such vulnerability is presented as provisional rather than final. The heroine is marked as exceptional from the beginning, even while denied recognition, creating what Bacchilega describes as a “double logic” where subordination and distinction coexist (Bacchilega, 1997, pp. 9–11). This structure permits suffering to be narratively reinterpreted as meaningful because it is promised eventual resolution.

This perspective fits within a broader cultural story about childhood. Jacqueline Rose contends that childhood is socially shaped as a period of dependency and delay, characterized by waiting for authority, independence, and recognition as future milestones rather than current abilities (Rose, 1984, pp. 45–48). Princess stories clearly reflect this timing. The heroine's value

is presumed to exist before recognition, but it only becomes meaningful when confirmed externally at the appropriate moment. It would be overly simplistic to say these stories merely tell children to accept powerlessness. Instead, they seem to provide a symbolic structure that makes waiting understandable and emotionally manageable. As John Stephens notes, children's literature often fosters identification through structural coherence rather than direct imitation, enabling readers to see themselves in roles that mirror their own experiences of limited agency (Stephens, 1992, pp. 68–70). The princess embodies such a role: vulnerable, restricted, yet destined for future acknowledgment.

The emotional impact of the princess story doesn't stem from themes of domination or independence but from the idea that vulnerability will be acknowledged and rewarded. Psychological theories suggest that stories help children develop cognitive and emotional tools to predict outcomes in uncertain situations (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11–15). Princess stories, with their consistent progression from hardship to reward, offer a clear model for understanding how judgment functions. Regularly hearing these stories may foster the belief that patience and endurance will eventually lead to fairness and recognition. Nonetheless, there is no concrete evidence that children strictly adopt fairy-tale logic as deterministic. Experts in children's literature argue that such narrative patterns shape expectations around values and assessments, especially when seen across various media and settings (Stephens, 1992, pp. 8–10; Nikolajeva, 2014, pp. 23–27).

This narrative can be seen as fundamentally gendered. Feminist critics have pointed out that fairy tales often associate femininity with patience, silence, and delayed gratification (Rowe, 1986, pp. 56–58; Warner, 1994, pp. 312–315). The defining trait of the princess is not just her passivity, but how this passivity is woven into the story in a productive way. In this context, delay becomes a way to demonstrate worth, rather than an obstacle to be overcome.

Viewed in these terms, the princess figure is neither purely oppressive nor entirely empowering. She acts as a narrative solution to a cultural issue: how to make vulnerability meaningful within systems that deny recognition. Princess tales transform structural dependence into a narrative expectation, providing a form where waiting seems purposeful and judgment appears fair.

This explains both why the princess archetype remains prevalent and why it is open to critique. Since the narrative structure heavily relies on delayed recognition, it can be challenged by denying rewards, highlighting the drawbacks of waiting, or showing recognition as arbitrary or cruel. The fairy tales discussed in Chapter 3 specifically leverage these vulnerabilities. By refusing happy endings (*The Seeds of Love*), revealing aristocratic cruelty (*The Birthday of the Infanta*), or breaking down the damsel stereotype (*The Last of the Dragons*), Victorian authors push the boundaries of a narrative form that had become culturally dominant.

2.4.3 Pedagogies of Desire and Deferred Evaluation

While the previous section explored the princess as a narrative structure centred on vulnerability, delay, and reward, this part shifts focus to the institutional conditions that upheld and heightened such logic in Victorian Britain. Fairy tales did not circulate in a cultural vacuum; their values were continually reinforced by pedagogical practices, domestic supervision, religious teachings, and periodical culture aimed at children and families (Rose, 1984, pp. 45–48; Grenby, 2008, pp. 55–62). Victorian educators and publishers generally believed that reading influenced moral character and emotional development, especially in childhood, and thus favoured stories that linked imaginative enjoyment with discipline, endurance, and delayed gratification (Altick, 1957, pp. 81–99; Beetham, 1996, pp. 12–16).

Scholars of childhood and education have demonstrated that in nineteenth-century Britain, childhood was increasingly seen as a crucial stage that required careful moral and emotional guidance (Rose, 1984, pp. 141–148; Steedman, 1982, pp. 24–29). In this context,

imagination was not outright rejected but controlled. Fantasy was allowed as long as it could be aligned with principles of discipline, self-control, and delayed gratification. This section suggests that the princess served as a particularly effective symbol for this educational aim because her story transformed institutional waiting into a form that was emotionally understandable.

Victorian pedagogy emphasized indirect moral teaching through stories that engaged emotion and imagination more than explicit rules. Fairy tales were seen as especially suitable, used in school readers, Sunday school, and manuals. Nineteenth-century children's literature was judged by its ability to shape conduct, favoring stories that rewarded patience, obedience, and endurance over initiative or dissent (Grenby, 2008, pp. 25–33). Princess stories, in particular, showed virtue as something proven over time through endurance and waiting. While not a unified ideological program, this reflected a link between narrative form and pedagogical goals. Victorian educators relied on repetition and routine to develop feelings and judgment, especially early on (Gallas, 2003, pp. 41–44). Princess tales, with their pattern of deprivation, endurance, and reward, mirrored these practices.

Although modern developmental psychology hadn't yet been established as a formal field, Victorian educational debates were guided by common beliefs about how children learn. Childhood was seen as a time of increased suggestibility, where consistent exposure to certain behaviors and emotions would influence character development. Consequently, methods like memorization, recitation, and repeated reading played a key role in early and religious education (Tucker, 1981, pp. 63–67).

Within this context, stories were valued less for their interpretive openness than for their capacity to imprint emotional and moral patterns through recurrence (*ibid*). Princess narratives were particularly well suited to this function. Their plots are highly predictable, their emotional arcs stable, and their resolutions consistent. This predictability may have contributed to what

Nikolajeva describes as the “comforting regularity” of children’s narratives, which permits readers to rehearse expectations concerning fairness and reward (Nikolajeva, 2014, pp. 26–29). It would be inappropriate to claim that such narratives directly shape children’s desires. However, it is reasonable to suggest, following Bruner’s account of narrative cognition, that repeated exposure to similar story patterns helps develop expectations about how evaluation functions in the world (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11–15). Princess tales consistently model a world in which worth is recognised retrospectively, patience is justified and judgment appears predictable. This modelling does not dictate behaviour, but it provides a framework through which experiences of dependency and delay can be interpreted.

The relationship between princess narratives and Victorian institutions is most apparent when one focuses on systems of evaluation. Victorian childhood was shaped by delayed assessment: examinations, annual reports, inspections, and prize-giving ceremonies interrupted long periods of effort and restraint (Davidoff and Hall, 1987, pp. 311–315). Worth in aristocratic and pedagogical cultures was rarely self-asserted; it was usually bestowed by external authorities at specific moments of recognition. Historical analyses of court society and elite development highlight that status was confirmed through public rituals, such as marriage, inheritance, or prize-giving, rather than through individual declaration (Keen, 1984, pp. 145–150; Elias, 1994, pp. 53–58). Scholars of Victorian childhood similarly observe that moral and social worth was routinely appraised retrospectively via examinations, reports, and rewards, reinforcing a model where worth existed prior to recognition but only became socially influential when officially acknowledged.

Princess narratives tend to reproduce this evaluative structure consistently. The heroine’s worth is seldom challenged within the story, yet it remains socially unrecognised until a climactic moment of acknowledgment, often staged publicly and ceremonially, through transformation, naming, or elevation. As Marina Warner notes, fairy-tale heroines are often

caught between invisibility and spectacle, with recognition arriving as an event that retrospectively affirms endurance rather than rewarding strategic action (Warner, 1994, pp. xvii, 312–315). From a narratological standpoint, such plots shape meaning around delayed confirmation, where narrative closure acts as a form of social approval rather than causal success (Brooks, 1984, pp. 23–25). Seen in this context, recognition functions less as a result of agency than as the moment when existing worth is finally made visible. This parallel does not suggest that fairy tales were consciously created to reflect schooling. Instead, it indicates that narrative and institutions operated within a shared cultural logic. As Foucault asserts, discipline works most effectively not through coercion but through normalisation, repetition, and internalised expectations (Foucault, 1977, pp. 170–177). Princess stories can be understood as engaging in this process by making deferred evaluation emotionally understandable and narratively gratifying.

These pedagogical and psychological dynamics were heavily influenced by gender. Davidoff and Hall demonstrate that 19th-century ideas of femininity emphasized self-control, emotional restraint, and moral perseverance, qualities considered women's primary social roles (Davidoff and Hall, 1987, pp. 179–184). Princess stories absorbed these ideals not through direct moral lessons, but by embedding them in their plot structure. In these stories, desire is allowed but carefully managed. This does not mean that desire is absent; rather, it is shaped such that wanting and waiting follow patterns of delay and reward. As Steedman points out in her historical account of Victorian childhood, fantasy and role-play often provided spaces where children could imagine being exceptional without threatening social order (Steedman, 1982, pp. 30–34). Princess play, frequently mentioned in nineteenth-century childhood accounts, can be understood in this context. While such play gave children, particularly girls, the opportunity to explore visibility and distinction, it did so within a script that promoted patience and moral worthiness as the path to recognition (*ibid*). This interpretation should

remain cautious, as direct evidence of children's subjective experiences is limited. Nevertheless, the persistent presence of princess imagery across various institutional settings suggests a cumulative influence.

Victorian teaching methods, beliefs about learning, and evaluation practices together created a framework in which the princess story served as a potent cultural template. Her tale transformed institutional delays into a story of hope, providing a structure where dependence and vulnerability were seen as meaningful rather than random. This, however, does not mean that everyone received or interpreted the story the same way or that it was entirely fixed in meaning. As scholars of children's literature have often highlighted, children interact with stories in unique and creative ways, sometimes challenging or reshaping the intended messages (Nikolajeva, 2014, pp. 3–6). Nevertheless, the connection between princess stories and social institutions explains why this character remains culturally significant and why any departure from her usual path holds significant importance.

2.4.4 Transformation without Rupture: The Limits of Subversion

The enduring presence of the princess figure throughout history prompts an important inquiry for feminist and cultural analysis that questions how a figure can undergo continual transformation without relinquishing its fundamental structural role. Victorian fairy tales already exhibit considerable diversity in tone, genre and moral emphasis; yet, the princess remains remarkably persistent as a narrative archetype centred on visibility. This section posits that such persistence is not coincidental. Instead, it reflects the princess script's ability to incorporate critique while maintaining its core narrative logic. Scholars of fairy-tale revision have consistently observed that changes within the genre often occur at superficial levels, such as character traits, tone and setting, rather than at the structural level of the narrative (Rowe, 1986, pp. 210–212; Bacchilega, 1997, pp. 23–25). This section expands upon that insight by

analyzing how and why transformation frequently halts short of rupture, resulting in figures that appear subversive whilst continuing to organize values through familiar patterns.

Starting from the mid-19th century, fairy tales increasingly reflect concerns about inherited moral binaries and aristocratic privilege. Techniques like satire, irony, inversion, become more common, especially in literary fairy tales targeted at adult or mixed audiences. The princess often continues to hold a central structural role in fairy tales. Warner observes that revisions of these stories frequently question the heroine's role without removing her narrative importance (Warner, 1994, p. 298). This ongoing significance can be understood through narratology; Peter Brooks explains that narrative closure depends on recognizable patterns that help organize and resolve desire (Brooks, 1984, pp. 22–25). The princess archetype offers an efficient template, even when her moral traits change—such as becoming cruel, foolish, passive, or resistant—the plot generally still hinges on moments of judgment. While these changes alter what is judged, they usually do not disrupt the judgment process itself. Consequently, fairy tales that appear radically different can still feel structurally familiar. The princess remains the central figure where narrative value is tested, even in situations where the outcome is destined to fail.

Feminist scholarships have long recognised the ambivalence of princess narratives. Early critiques emphasised their role in reinforcing passivity and dependency (Lieberman, 1972, pp. 385–387), while later work complicated this view by exploring irony, agency and subversion within the genre (Rowe, 1986; Warner, 1994). Yet a recurring concern in this scholarship is how critique itself easily becomes accommodated. Bacchilega argues that many revisionary fairy tales “redecorate” inherited plots rather than dismantle them, preserving the core narrative structures that govern reward and closure (Bacchilega, 1997, pp. 23–25). In such cases, feminist gestures like irony, refusal of marriage, and critique of beauty are incorporated without destabilising the narrative balance that makes the princess intelligible in the first place.

This process is not unique to feminist revision. As Zipes notes, fairy tales have historically survived by adapting to dominant ideological climates, absorbing critique while maintaining emotional resolution (Zipes, 2006b, pp. 72–75). The princess's persistence thus reflects not ideological stagnation, but structural flexibility: the capacity to reframe recognition without abandoning it.

Notably, continuity does not imply narrative comfort. In fact, moments of transformation frequently induce anxiety, especially when the princess's script is strained but not entirely broken. As Brooks points out, narratives under stress tend to generate excess - such as irony, cruelty, and exaggeration - that highlight instability within the form (Brooks, 1984, pp. 101–104). Victorian fairy tales increasingly focus on these tension points. Features like cruel princesses, failed transformations, and ironic rewards reveal the costs of a system that values recognition. Such figures reveal what traditional narratives suppress: the violence of evaluation, the randomness of reward and the vulnerability created by visibility. Warner observes that these moments often serve as a “dark corrective,” turning fairy tales against their own comforting mechanisms (Warner, 1994, pp. 298–301). These anxieties are especially apparent in stories that lack closure or render recognition purposeless. When the princess is recognized too late, rewarded ironically, or revealed to be morally empty, the story exposes the fragility of the system it otherwise upholds.

If the princess script is so vulnerable, why is it so rarely abandoned entirely? One answer lies in the cultural function of narrative resolution: stories that withhold closure or recognition altogether risk becoming unreadable within traditions that expect moral or emotional payoff (Keen, 2007, pp. 70–73). Fairy tales, in particular, are culturally associated with resolution, even when that resolution is unsettling. Furthermore, narratives provide frameworks for managing uncertainty by making evaluation understandable (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11–15). Complete rupture, stories without recognition, reward, or symbolic settlement, may undermine

this function too radically for it to remain culturally sustainable, especially within texts associated with childhood. This helps explain why even the most critical fairy tales often stop short of total negation. Instead, they stage what can be called a “partial failure”: recognition that wounds, transformation that destroys, virtue that leads nowhere.

This chapter ought to explain that the princess endures not due to rigid ideology but because she is structurally flexible. Changes in the fairy-tale tradition usually happen gradually, pushing characters to explore the boundaries of the narrative rather than leaving it entirely.

Chapter Three: Close Readings of Selected Tales Subverting the Princess

Script

Building on the theoretical and historical foundations from earlier chapters, this chapter conducts a close analysis of three late nineteenth-century British fairy tales to explore how the princess figure functions as a historically specific gender role rather than an eternal archetype. In the Victorian era, this role faces growing challenges. Instead of vanishing, it undergoes several narrative adjustments that reveal its internal flaws and ideological restrictions.

Subversion, in this context, does not only take the form of parody or generic rupture but emerges through narrative pressure: moments when the script is followed with such rigour, aestheticized so thoroughly, or reorganised so decisively that its underlying assumptions become visible and, in becoming visible, contestable (Zipes, 2006, pp. 1–10; Warner, 1994, pp. xxiii–xxv). The chapter argues that late Victorian fairy tales subvert the princess narrative model from within by staging an escalating confrontation with its structural failure: a progression that reflects broader late-Victorian debates about time, agency, femininity, and social function (Poovey, 1988, pp. 1–12; Ledger, 1997, pp. 1–18).

This chapter analyses three texts, each revealing a different flaw in the enchantment of the princess archetype. First is Mary de Morgan's *The Seeds of Love* (1877) explores a princess's attempt to preserve her romantic attachment while exercising a degree of agency, ultimately revealing the tragic costs of self-sacrifice demanded by love and convention. Second is Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta* (1891) shifts into the realm of aesthetic spectacle, exposing the moral fallout when femininity is stripped of emotional connection. Lastly, Nesbit's *The Last of the Dragons* (1899) responds to both preceding configurations by experimenting with a reorganisation of narrative roles: the princess acts, the prince is displaced, and recognition is no

longer postponed as a moral reward for endurance, in ways that resonate with late-Victorian debates around the New Woman and contemporary challenges to passive, dependent femininity.

3.1 Mary de Morgan, *The Seeds of Love*: Subversion Through Temporality

Mary de Morgan occupies a distinctive position within the late Victorian fairy-tale revival, shaped both by her cultural milieu and by her sustained engagement with questions of femininity and social conformity. Born in 1850 to Augustus De Morgan, a prominent mathematician, and Sophia Feind, a writer and intellectual, she grew up in an environment characterised by artistic experimentation and progressive debate (Tosi, 2023, p. 38). From an early age, De Morgan was in contact with leading figures of Victorian artistic culture, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, a context that decisively informed the aesthetic and symbolic texture of her writing (*ibid*). Her fairy tales frequently evoke a distant, quasi-medieval past. Yet, this temporal displacement functions less as escapism than as a critical device through which contemporary anxieties about women's roles and social expectation can be examined at a safe narrative distance. De Morgan herself never married, a biographical fact that, while not determinative, resonates suggestively with her fiction's persistent interrogation of marriage as a site of fulfilment and sacrifice (*ibid*).

Within the broader landscape of Victorian fairy tales, de Morgan's work participates in what Jack Zipes has identified as a late-nineteenth-century turn toward symbolic and experimental uses of the genre. Fairy-tale worlds in this period often serve as symbolic laboratories in which writers address social taboos and imagine alternatives to dominant English practices, particularly regarding child-rearing and gendered role-playing (Zipes, 1987, pp. xxiv–xxv). These experiments do not necessarily culminate in conventional happy endings; even when happiness is achieved, it is frequently set in sharp contrast to the normative ideals of Victorian and Edwardian society, thereby exposing the costs of conformity rather than

affirming it (*ibid*). De Morgan's tales align closely with this tendency, using recognisable fairy-tale structures to test, rather than reaffirm, the values they appear to endorse. Zipes repeatedly cites de Morgan alongside Mrs Molesworth and Evelyn Sharp as writers whose tales feature strong heroines and critical perspectives on convention-bound societies, describing such work as a 'critical utopianism' that opposes Victorian rigidity and links aesthetic innovation to social transformation (Zipes, 1986, pp. 13–15; 2016, pp. xxv–xxvi).

It is within this critical context that *The Seeds of Love* (1877), one of the opening tales in *On a Pincushion*²¹, emerges as a particularly productive case study for this chapter. On the surface, the tale appears to rehearse a familiar patriarchal narrative: a gentle, self-sacrificing heroine, Blanchelys, desires ideal love and royal marriage, while her more assertive cousin Zaire is positioned as jealous and restless. Yet it is at the moment when the tale appears to conform most closely to fairy-tale convention that it begins to diverge from it. Unlike the passive heroines of many traditional fairy tales, Blanchelys does not remain confined to a position of waiting. Faced with the threat to her marriage and happiness, she leaves the domestic sphere and embarks on a quest to find Love itself. This unexpected shift from passivity to action initially suggests the possibility of a more agentic form of princesshood. As the following analysis will demonstrate, however, the tale ultimately complicates this apparent empowerment, raising questions about the limits of individual agency within the structures that govern feminine happiness and fulfilment.

²¹ *On a Pincushion and Other Fairy Tales* (1877) was Mary De Morgan's first collection of literary fairy tales. The volume is framed by a domestic storytelling situation in which an aunt entertains a group of children with a series of tales, creating a link between the oral tradition of fairy-tale narration and the literary fairy tale. More than a simple framing device, this structure foregrounds the act of storytelling itself, reminding readers that fairy tales are transmitted and interpreted rather than received as fixed truths. The collection's stories frequently challenge conventional assumptions about gender, authority and social hierarchy, anticipating many of the revisionist tendencies that characterise later fairy-tale rewritings.

3.1.1 Blanchelys and Zaire as Desiring Subjects

At first glance, *The Seeds of Love* appears to establish a familiar opposition between two female characters who embody contrasting moral qualities. Blanchelys is presented as kind, patient and selfless, while Zaire appears vain, ambitious and resentful. Yet a closer reading suggests that the tale is less interested in opposing virtue and vice than in exploring two different ways of learning desire: De Morgan constructs two figures who begin from almost identical circumstances but gradually develop different relationships to visibility and love.

The text initially emphasises the similarities between the cousins. Both girls are orphaned, live in the same cottage, and share the same work. The narrator stresses that they were “just the same age, but not the least alike” (De Morgan, 1977, 27). This formulation is significant because it first establishes similarity before introducing difference. Their divergence cannot easily be explained through class, education, or family background, instead, the narrative invites the reader to look elsewhere, particularly at how each girl relates to the world around her. This distinction begins to emerge through their daily work at the bridge.

Zaire grumbled at the work, but Blanchelys did it cheerfully, and always said a pleasant word to each of the villagers as they came over the bridge (*ibid*: 28).

The passage not only is a simple moral contrast between kindness, but also concerns performance: the girls occupy the same position but enact it differently. Butler's emphasis on repetition is particularly relevant here. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gender is:

the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (Butler, 1999, pp. 43-44).

Read through Butler's lens, rather than establishing the contrast between Blanchelys and Zaire through a single defining moment, De Morgan constructs their identities through a series of recurring actions. Blanchelys repeatedly performs acts of care and devotion: she "did it cheerfully, and always said a pleasant word to each of the villagers," she continually returns to the gate to watch the Prince, and later devotes herself to the cultivation and protection of the rose-tree. By contrast, Zaire repeatedly grumbles, seeks recognition and measures her worth through visibility and social status. Through this accumulation of gestures and behaviours, the two girls gradually come to embody apparently opposite models of femininity. Butler's formulation encourages to read this difference not as an innate or natural distinction but as the effect of repeated performances that solidify over time into what appears to be a stable identity.

The difference becomes much more explicit when the Prince first enters the narrative. Knowing that the King's son will cross the bridge, both girls prepare carefully for the encounter. Significantly, they both "dressed themselves in their very best" (De Morgan, 1977, 30). The text therefore makes clear that both desire the encounter. What separates them is not the presence or absence of desire but the form that desire takes.

Before the Prince arrives, Zaire attempts to organise a hierarchy between her and her cousin Blanchelys:

"You stand back, and let me go first, for, as people say I am the prettiest girl in the village, it is right I should be seen." (*ibid*)

The statement illustrates Zaire's perception of feminine value: here, beauty is regarded not as a physical quality but as a claim to public visibility. Zaire assumes that because she is considered beautiful, she deserves to occupy the foreground: she wishes to be noticed, acknowledged. John

Berger's discussion of visual culture is useful here because in *Ways of Seeing*, Berger argues that women are often encouraged to understand themselves in terms of the possibility of being looked at, learning to evaluate themselves according to standards of appearance and visibility (Berger, 1972, pp. 46-47). Zaire's behaviour illustrates clearly this mechanism. Her sense of worth is inseparable from the expectation of being seen, while the narrative immediately places Blanchelys in a very different position. After Zaire's command, the narrator explains "So Blanchelys stood behind and looked over her cousin's shoulder"(De Morgan, 1977: pp.30-31). The spatial arrangement is important because, before Blanchelys is characterised by kindness or devotion, she is characterised by looking. Zaire seeks visibility while Blanchelys becomes a spectator.

The scene becomes even more revealing when the expected recognition fails to occur. As the royal procession crosses the bridge, the narrator notes that "none of the party noticed the two girls who stood at the cottage door"(ibid: p.31). The disappointment is shared, but the responses differ: Zaire focuses on the slight she has suffered, complaining about the dust thrown into her face by the horses, while Blanchelys reacts differently. Rather than dwelling on her own invisibility, she remains absorbed by the Prince himself: "Blanchelys stood at the door and watched the party of horsemen till they were quite out of sight." (De Morgan, 1977, p.32). This signifies the true onset of her desire, which arises unnoticed. The Prince has neither spoken to her, looked at her, nor acknowledged her presence. Thus, her desire evolves independently of any reciprocation. Blanchelys's attachment starts not through direct interaction but through her observation. After the Prince's departure, Blanchelys admits: "I would stand at the gate all day if he would only ride by once" (*ibid*). What matters here is not possession but sight itself. Blanchelys wishes only to see him, keeping the object of desire distant and inaccessible.

As the narrative continues, desire becomes a daily practice. The narrator repeatedly emphasises the cyclical nature of Blanchelys's behaviour:

“Every day he came across the bridge on his snow-white horse as he rode to the hunt, and every day Blanchelys came out and opened the gates and gazed on his face, but he never noticed her.” (*ibid*)

The repetition of “every day” is central: desire is not presented as a sudden emotional revelation but as something gradually learned through routine. Blanchelys repeatedly assumes the role of observer. Each encounter reproduces the same structure: she looks, he remains unaware and she returns home.

Eventually, this prolonged longing begins to affect her physically: “So the days passed, and Blanchelys grew thin and pale”(*ibid*). The body becomes a visible record of desire: what had begun as observation gradually transforms into emotional suffering. The tale therefore links ideal feminine devotion to forms of depletion. Desire is not empowering; it consumes. Notably, Zaire views this change using the language of marriage and social worth: “If you lose all your good looks like that, you will never get a husband” (*ibid*), thereby framing beauty as a form of marital and as a resource through which marriage may be secured. Blanchelys' answer, however, is far more revealing: “I want no husband whom I shall ever wed”(*ibid*). Her statement separates desire from marriage since Blanchelys does not simply want a husband; she wants the King's son specifically. The distinction is relevant because it anticipates one of the tale's central concerns: desire cannot be reduced to the social institution that is supposed to contain it.

The culmination of this process occurs when Blanchelys finally decides to use the magical candle entrusted to her and Zaire by thier grandmother. Earlier in the tale, the old woman explains that the candles possess the power to grant “the wish of your heart” and can only be used once, on a night when “there is neither moon nor star” (De Morgan,1977, pp. 28-29). The object is therefore associated not simply with magic but with the revelation of an

authentic desire. Significantly, Blanchelys initially follows her grandmother's advice and stores the candle away, intending never to use it. Only after weeks of longing for the Prince she returns to it.

Unable to sleep, Blanchelys rises in the middle of the night, retrieves the candle from its hiding place and walks alone into the garden. The scene is saturated with images of darkness: “there were neither moon nor stars” and “it was black, black night” (*ibid*: p.33). The repetition of *black* intensifies the sense of uncertainty, while the absence of both moon and stars removes the usual sources of orientation and guidance. On a literal level, Blanchelys enters a landscape deprived of light; symbolically, she steps beyond the boundaries of the familiar world and into a space governed by the logic of fairy magic. The atmosphere is also reinforced by the narrative's emphasis on secrecy and isolation. Unlike her previous encounters with the Prince, which consisted primarily of watching and waiting, this episode requires movement. The succession of active verbs “rose,” “took,” “went,” “hid,” and “lighted” creates a sense of progression, tracing Blanchelys's passage from passive longing to purposeful action. Although the narrator repeatedly notes her fear and trembling, these signs of hesitation do not interrupt the sequence. Each action leads directly to the next, producing a narrative rhythm that foregrounds determination. The scene therefore marks a significant shift in Blanchelys's characterisation: desire no longer remains an internal feeling sustained through observation, but becomes a force capable of prompting action.

When Love finally appears, he immediately asks a direct question: “What do you want with me?” (*ibid*, p.35). Later he repeats the request, urging Blanchelys to “tell me what is your heart's wish” (*ibid*). The encounter centres on articulation: Love cannot act until Blanchelys names her desire. Only then does she finally answer: “Give me the love of the King's son” (*ibid*). In this moment, the education of desire that has structured the opening movement of the tale is completed. Blanchelys's wish does not create her desire; rather, it gives voice to something that

has already been formed through repeated acts of looking and waiting. After watching the Prince *every day* and gradually becoming *thin and pale*, she is finally able to articulate what she wants.

The encounter thus culminates in an act of verbalisation. What has previously existed as an internal attachment finally acquires linguistic form in her answer to have the king's son love. At the same time, the exchange clarifies the emotional horizon within which Blanchelys understands fulfilment. Her wish not only creates a new desire, but it confirms one that has already structured her actions and imagination. Unlike Zaire, whose aspirations are mediated through beauty and public recognition, Blanchelys directs her attention towards a single emotional object. Nevertheless, the contrast between the two cousins is less absolute than it initially appears. Although they pursue different forms of gratification, both remain oriented towards the Prince as the figure through whom happiness is imagined and secured. De Morgan thus complicates the apparent opposition between the selfless heroine and the ambitious rival: rather than presenting two fundamentally different destinies for women, the tale reveals two responses to the same cultural framework, one in which female fulfilment continues to be organised around the same romantic ideals.

3.1.2 Care, Attachment and the Labour of Love

Although Blanchelys's wish appears to be fulfilled almost immediately, the tale quickly reveals that obtaining love is only the beginning of her story. Rather than granting her desire directly, Love gives her a set of enchanted seeds and instructs her to plant them, explaining that the Prince's love will grow as the rose-tree grows, and warning her to "guard well your tree" (*ibid*, p.36). From this moment onwards, love is no longer represented as a sudden emotional event but as something organic and conditional, dependent not on feeling alone, but on tending.

Significantly, the first thing Blanchelys does after planting the seeds is to place the flower-pot beside her window and declare: "Now I can watch it both night and day, and see that

no harm comes to it” (ibid: 37) . The return of the verb watch is particularly relevant: in the opening section of the tale, Blanchelys repeatedly watched the King's son as he crossed the bridge, now the object of her attention has changed, yet the structure remains the same. Desire has been fulfilled, but observation continues.

The story highlights how this process unfolds slowly by using repetitive language. As the Prince's affection increases, so does the rose-tree:

“Every day he stopped and spoke with Blanchelys, and every day stayed with her a longer time; and the plant in the pot grew larger and larger, till at last Blanchelys saw that it was a rose-tree, and that it was covered with tiny buds” (*ibid*, p.38)

The repetition of “every day” does more than establish a temporal rhythm, it performs, at the level of syntax itself, the gradualism it describes. Where the conventional fairy tale moves through sudden transformation, De Morgan's prose insists on accumulation: each day added to the last, each visit longer than the one before, the plant growing "larger and larger" in a language of slow and continuous increment. Love, here, is not an arrival but a process. Marriage, rather than interrupting this pattern, extends it. When Blanchelys becomes the Prince's wife and finds herself surrounded by "beautiful jewels", "fine dresses", and "great rejoicings" (*ibid*), the narrator quietly notes that "what she valued more than all was her pot with the rose-tree in it" (*ibid*). The syntactic structure of this sentence is itself significant: the accumulation of material splendours - jewels, dresses, rejoicings - is built up only to be displaced by a single, domestic object. Marriage thus opens a new phase in which the central task is no longer the attainment of love but its preservation. Once transplanted the rose-tree into the palace garden, she places it “just beneath her bedroom window, so that it might be the first thing she saw when she woke in the morning” (*ibid*, p.39). The tree is therefore not merely a symbol of love but an object that

structures her daily routine. And this gravitational pull manifests in a series of small, repeated acts: she "always watered it herself"; "her first care in the morning was to examine her rose-tree"; she carefully "brushed from it all insects, and cut off the dead leaves" (*ibid*). Each action is introduced as a regularity rather than an event. Taken together, they constitute not devotion in any romantic sense but something closer to a discipline: a set of daily obligations through which love is maintained.

The story strengthens this bond by associating the rose-tree's growth with Blanchelys's happiness. As she notes, "each day you are more beautiful, and I am happier" (*ibid*, p.45). The thriving of the tree, the success of the marriage, the birth of her children, and Blanchelys's sense of fulfillment are all depicted as interconnected elements of the same process.

Blanchelys' dependence becomes fully visible when Zaire asks what would happen if the tree died. Blanchelys immediately replies: "If my tree were to die, I think it would break my heart" (*ibid*, 41). By this point, her emotional well-being is inextricably linked to the survival of the tree. The episode ultimately demonstrates that in De Morgan's narrative, waiting is not a passive state. Blanchelys does not merely possess love; she sustains it through a series of learned caregiving practices. Ahmed's observation that a feminine relationship with objects often manifests as carefulness, which "restricts the mobility of the feminine body within domestic space" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 148), sheds light on this dynamic. Blanchelys dedicates hours to the tree, her attention fixed upon it, while her daily routine becomes organized around its preservation. The rose-tree functions, in Ahmed's terminology, as a sticky object (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 11-91), imbued with affective significance through repeated acts of care, such that attachment is strengthened through labor rather than despite it. Therefore, the seemingly stable fairy-tale conclusion rests upon an unexpectedly fragile foundation. Nonetheless, the habits of attention, perseverance, and devotion that Blanchelys develops over years of caring for the rose-tree will soon prove to be of significance in ways neither she nor the reader can yet foresee.

The apparent stability of Blanchelys's happiness is undermined by Zaire's growing resentment. When Blanchelys admits that the loss of the rose-tree would “break my heart” (*ibid*, 41), the narrator immediately shifts attention to her cousin's reaction. What begins as a seemingly innocent conversation gradually exposes a darker dynamic. Watching Blanchelys standing beneath the flourishing rose-tree with her child in her arms, Zaire observes: “You are a very happy woman, cousin Blanchelys” (*ibid*, p.40). Although Blanchelys initially explains her happiness through her affection for her husband and child, Zaire refuses to let the conversation end there. She repeatedly redirects it towards the question of what Blanchelys values most, gradually uncovering the emotional hierarchy that structures her cousin's life. When Blanchelys finally admits, “Next to them [king and child], I love my rose-tree” (*ibid*), Zaire's questioning is less an expression of interest than an attempt to locate the point at which Blanchelys is most vulnerable. The conversation effectively identifies the rose-tree as the object through which her happiness can be most easily harmed. From that moment onwards, “Zaire thought of nothing but how she could kill the rose-tree that her cousin loved so much” (*ibid*, 41).

Her hostility intensifies as Blanchelys's prosperity increases. During the coronation, while the crowd celebrates the new Queen, the narrator observes that “her hatred and envy knew no bounds” (*ibid*, 42). Later, at the ball, she remains isolated from the festivities, “watching Blanchelys, her lips trembling with rage” (*ibid*). The repeated emphasis on watching creates an illuminating parallel with Blanchelys herself. Yet whereas Blanchelys's gaze has been associated with desire and care, Zaire's becomes a vehicle for resentment, meant as she watches not because she longs for connection but because she cannot bear her cousin's happiness.

This opposition reaches its clearest expression in the episode of the magical candle. Blanchelys's wish summons Love; Zaire's summons a monstrous hag who finally identifies herself as “Envy” (*ibid*, p.44). The allegorical force of the scene is unmistakable; the

supernatural figures externalise the emotional paths that have shaped the two women throughout the tale. If Love generates growth and attachment, Envy seeks corruption and destruction. Acting on the hag's instructions, Zaire buries a serpent, carried in her breast, in the roots of the rose-tree and whispers: "kill it as quickly as you can, that it may die and cousin Blanchelys may mourn" (*ibid*, p.46). The tree's decline is therefore neither accidental nor inevitable; it is the direct result of Envy's intervention, transforming the rose-tree from a symbol of fulfilment into the site where the conflict between the two cousins reaches its most destructive form.

3.1.3 The Female Quest and the Abandoned Script

The death of the rose-tree marks a turning point in Blanchelys's story. Until that point, her life revolved around it, but once the tree dies, that structure collapses. As she observes her husband growing more distant, Blanchelys ultimately makes a decisive choice.

"Now I will stay here no longer," she said, "since my tree is dead and my husband no longer loves me. I will go and find Love, and ask him to help me." (De Morgan, 1977, p.48)

For the first time in the narrative, Blanchelys abandons the domestic spheres that have characterized her existence. She departs from the palace, her husband, and even her child, embarking alone in pursuit of Love. In Proppian terms, this moment signifies her assumption of the structural role traditionally held by the fairy-tale hero. She departs from home and embarks on a journey marked by a series of encounters. The fact that this role is assumed by a princess rather than a prince is particularly noteworthy, as De Morgan assigns a traditionally masculine narrative function to a female protagonist.

Yet the journey that follows is not simply a search for Love. It is also a process through which Blanchelys learns that Love cannot be found where she expects it to be. Earlier in the tale, Love had warned her: “I am to be found in many places. But I am often where you would never seek me, and seldom where you would look for me” (De Morgan, 1977, p.36). Initially, the statement seems mysterious, but the quest gradually uncovers its meaning.

Blanchelys first searches the garden where he last saw him, unsuccessfully. After wandering “night and day” until “her feet were sore and her face burnt with the sun,” she arrives at a church where “a grand wedding was taking place” (*ibid*, pp.48-49). Convinced that her search is finally over, she declares: “Here shall I surely find him”. Blanchelys assumes that Love must be present because the wedding embodies the very ideal towards which her own story has been directed. The scene shows that, despite leaving the domestic sphere, she continues to seek Love within the familiar structures that have previously defined fulfilment. The quest may have displaced her physically, but it has not yet altered the assumptions that guide her search. The princess proceeds into the church and waits as the ceremony takes place.

She waited till the wedding was over, and then watched the bridal procession coming out to see if Love was amongst them. The bride was grandly dressed, and there were many smart carriages and finely dressed people. But nowhere amongst them did she see the figure of Love, and she turned from the church with a heavy heart. (*ibid*, p.49).

The scene brings together many traditional symbols of fulfilment, such as marriage, beauty, wealth, and social celebration; everything about it suggests happiness and celebration. Nevertheless, the episode ends in disappointment and the pattern is repeated almost immediately.

Continuing her journey, Blanchelys encounters a young couple sitting together beneath a tree: “As she went along the road, she came to a large tree under which sat a couple of lovers courting. ‘Ah, here will Love surely be,’ she said.” (*ibid*). Once again, the language echoes the confidence of the wedding scene. Romantic companionship appears to be another obvious place to search for Love. The narrator proceeds to emphasise Blanchelys's role as observer: “She drew near the tree, and stood silently watching the young people as they whispered and laughed together”(*ibid*). The image recalls the opening of the tale, when Blanchelys stood by the bridge silently watching the King's son. Yet the outcome is once again the same: “But Love was not there, and Queen Blanchelys sought him in vain”(*ibid*).

The tale then repeats the pattern a third time. Arriving at a village where children are playing, Blanchelys once again confidently declares: “Now among these little ones shall I find him”(*ibid*). The scene introduces yet another image conventionally associated with happiness. Motherhood has been one of the defining features of Blanchelys's fulfilled life and therefore appear to offer another natural location in which to seek Love. Yet once again the search proves unsuccessful: “She waited and looked on at their games, but still she saw no trace of Love”(*ibid*).

By this point, the repetition becomes meaningful: marriage, romantic companionship and children all appear as places where Love should logically be found, yet the narrative systematically frustrates Blanchelys's expectations. Each scene follows the same structure: anticipation, observation, disappointment. Only after these repeated disappointments does Blanchelys finally encounter the figure she seeks. Exhausted and unable to continue, she arrives at a desolate coastal settlement and overhears two women discussing the funeral of a man remembered not with affection but with relief:

“He made her work for him day and night,” said one, “and never gave her a kind word.”

“He beat and kicked her,” said the other; “it’s very well for her that he is dead.”(*ibid*,p.50)

Nothing in this scene resembles the idealised images of happiness that structured the earlier episodes. There are no weddings, lovers, or children here; only suffering, grief and death. Nevertheless, Blanchelys is moved by what she hears: “‘Poor woman! she is unhappy; so am I,’ she said with tears in her eyes”(*ibid*). When she reaches the churchyard, the revelation finally occurs: “Only one woman stood beside it, but when she looked at her, Queen Blanchelys’ heart beat high, for close by her was Love dressed as a mourner.”(*ibid*). The contrast with the previous scenes could not be greater: Blanchelys fails to find Love at a wedding, among lovers, or among children. Instead, she discovers him at a in a moment of shared vulnerability and loss. The moment retrospectively illuminates Love’s earlier warning that he is “often where you would never seek” and “seldom where you would look” for him, making the quest function not simply as a search for Love but as a process of learning where Love is not.

The quest shows that Blanchelys is more active than she first seems. By leaving the palace and embarking on a journey typically associated with male heroes, she shows her agency and resolve. However, her journey is focused on regaining her lost life, not forging a new one. This tension becomes clear only at the end, where Blanchelys’s agency faces a final challenge.

3.1.4 Sacrifice and the Limits of Female Agency

Having successfully completed her quest, Blanchelys appears to have reached the moment of resolution traditionally associated with the fairy-tale hero. She has found Love, discovered the cause of her suffering, and finally obtained the knowledge necessary to save both the rose-tree and her marriage. Yet the solution Love offers radically alters the meaning of her journey.

When Blanchelys begs him for help, Love immediately reveals the truth that has remained hidden throughout the tale:

“Your cousin Zaire has killed it,” said Love. “She asked Envy to help her, and Envy has given her a viper, which she laid at the tree's roots, and it has spat its deadly venom on to the red heart which is in the centre of the trunk and killed it.” (De Morgan, 1977, p.51)

The passage confirms that Blanchelys' happiness is intentionally destroyed by Envy, not by accident, as the narrative hints since the tree's poisoning. Yet Love's diagnosis is accompanied by a far more disturbing revelation. When Blanchelys asks how the tree can be restored, he replies: “There is only one thing in the world that can do that!”(*ibid*): the language is absolute; no gardener, no magic spell and no fairy intervention can reverse the damage. The cure requires a sacrifice:

“The blood from your own heart,” said Love. “You must pierce your heart with a thorn from the tree, and let it flow to the tree's roots. Then, when it touches the snake it will shrivel and die, and the tree will bloom out afresh.” (De Morgan, 1977, p.52)

Throughout the narrative, Blanchelys has consistently exhibited courage and determination in her pursuit of her desires. She has travelled alone across continents and succeeded where others have failed. However, the final trial does not require her to undertake another heroic act; rather, it requires her to suffer. Significantly, the instrument of this suffering originates from the very object that has been central to her life. The thorn is not an arbitrary weapon; it is derived from the rose-tree she has observed, watered, protected and cherished for years. The same tree that symbolized her happiness now transforms into the means of her destruction: Blanchelys is wounded not by an adversary but by the object of her deepest emotional connection.

Her response to Love's command is equally relevant: the narrator notes that: "When Queen Blanchelys heard this she turned very pale"(*ibid*). The reaction conveys fear and hesitation, yet it lasts only a moment. Unlike many fairy-tale heroes who openly deliberate before undertaking a dangerous task, Blanchelys immediately begins the journey home. The decision is presented as unquestionable. Once she understands what must be done, she accepts the sacrifice without negotiation.

The journey back to the palace highlights the significance of this choice. As she nears her home, Blanchelys realizes that preparations for a new wedding are already in progress: "Tomorrow the King marries the Princess Zaire, the late Queen's cousin" (*ibid*). While Blanchelys has spent years searching for a way to restore her marriage, the narrative presents her with evidence that she has already been replaced. Yet even this does not alter her course. Instead, she quietly enters the palace at night and prepares for her death.

Blanchelys visits each member of her family for the last time. Standing beside Zaire's bed, she asks: "Ah, cruel cousin Zaire, I have never hurt you. Why did you hate me so?" (*ibid*, p.53). The question receives no answer. Throughout the tale, Blanchelys repeatedly attempts to understand Zaire's hostility through the logic of cause and effect, yet the narrative refuses to provide a satisfactory explanation. Zaire's resentment exceeds any specific injury or grievance. Blanchelys has shared her home, her fortune, and her affection with her cousin; indeed, she consistently treats her with generosity. The absence of a clear motive therefore shifts attention away from individual conflict and towards the allegorical nature of Zaire's character. Just as Love appears as a personified force, Zaire increasingly becomes associated with Envy itself. Once she summons the hag who identifies herself as Envy, the distinction between emotion and character begins to collapse. Her actions no longer arise from a particular wrong suffered at Blanchelys's hands but from an inability to tolerate another woman's happiness. Yet by refusing

to explain Zaire's hatred, De Morgan leaves Envy as a force that cannot be fully reasoned with or corrected.

Blanchelys then turns to her son:

“Ah, little son, if I had not come home to-night, to-morrow you would have had a cruel step-mother in my place, but now you will never have any step-mother.” (*ibid*, pp.53-54).

Even at the moment immediately preceding her death, Blanchelys does not focus on herself. Her concern is directed towards her son's future and, more specifically, towards protecting him from Zaire. The language of the passage frames her decision through care rather than heroism. Although she has successfully completed a quest traditionally reserved for the fairy-tale hero, the narrative ultimately interprets her final action through motherhood. Her achievement lies not in what she gains for herself but in what she is willing to surrender for others.

Finally, she approaches the King:

“Alas! dear husband, to-night I am looking at you, and you do not see me, but to-morrow morning you will be looking at me, when I shall not see you.” (*ibid*, p.54)

The sentence is built around a symmetry: the two clauses mirror one another almost perfectly. This chiasmic structure creates a sense of inevitability, transforming the exchange of gazes into a final and irreversible separation. Throughout the tale, vision has functioned as a privileged language of desire and attachment. Blanchelys first falls in love by watching the King's son from a distance; later she watches over the rose-tree “both night and day”; during the quest she repeatedly searches for Love through acts of observation. Looking has consistently been associated with longing, care, and emotional investment. In this final scene, however, the act

of looking no longer produces connection but a failure of reciprocity. Blanchelys can see her husband, but he cannot see her; when he finally sees her again, she will be dead. The two gazes never coincide. Linguistically, the sentence is structured around a series of oppositions - “to-night” and “to-morrow morning,” “I” and “you,” “looking” and “see,” presence and absence - which reinforce the sense that husband and wife occupy irreconcilable temporal positions. Even though they are physically close, they can never share the same moment of recognition. At the same time, the sentence functions as a form of dramatic irony. Blanchelys knows what is about to happen; the King does not. The line therefore encapsulates one of the central tensions of the tale. Blanchelys succeeds in restoring love, yet she cannot participate in the restoration she makes possible.

The finale of the tale occurs beneath the rose-tree itself:

“So Queen Blanchelys lay down on the ground, and put her arms round the trunk, and from the dead branch she tore a long smooth thorn, and pierced her heart with it, and the drops of blood trickled to the roots of the tree, and at once the serpent at the roots shrivelled and died, and there again began to bud and sprout” (*ibid*:54)

The imagery recalls both an embrace and an execution. Blanchelys dies holding the object she has spent the entire narrative protecting. The restoration of the tree immediately restores the social order. The King recovers his love for Blanchelys, Zaire is punished and the kingdom returns to stability. Yet Blanchelys herself cannot participate in that restoration. The heroine succeeds, but only through her own disappearance.

Lauren Berlant's (2011, pp.1-22) idea of cruel optimism clarifies this ending. She argues that an attachment becomes cruel when it promises fulfillment but also causes suffering. Blanchely's relationship with the rose-tree illustrates this perfectly. The tree has shaped her

happiness, marriage, and sense of purpose throughout the story. However, it ultimately demands the greatest sacrifice. The object she has nurtured for years becomes the reason for her death. This mechanism shows how *The Seeds of Love* complicates the typical image of the fairy-tale princess much more than initially apparent. Blanchelys begins as a figure driven by longing and observation, learns to organize her life around caring for and preserving love, and eventually leaves the domestic sphere to pursue a quest usually reserved for fairy-tale heroes. In doing so, De Morgan challenges the idea that princesses are just passive recipients of love or rescue.

Yet the tale does not simply replace passivity with emancipation. Although Blanchelys proves herself capable of heroic action, the narrative ultimately redirects that agency towards sacrifice. The restoration of love depends not upon her triumph but upon her willingness to give up her own life. De Morgan therefore expands the possibilities available to the princess figure while simultaneously exposing the limitations that continue to shape female fulfilment. The tale's most radical gesture lies not in allowing Blanchelys to undertake a quest, but in revealing the cost that such heroism still demands from a female protagonist. In this way, *The Seeds of Love* reimagines the princess as both heroine and martyr, exposing the tensions between agency and self-sacrifice that lie at the heart of Victorian constructions of femininity.

3.2 Oscar Wilde, *The Birthday of the Infanta*: Subversion Through Aestheticism

Oscar Wilde holds a unique place in the late Victorian fairy-tale tradition: formally part of it, yet ideologically opposed to most of its beliefs. Although Irish by birth, his work circulated within late nineteenth-century British literary circles, influencing aesthetic debates on beauty versus morality, art versus social purpose, and surface appearances versus underlying meaning. The fact that Wilde turned to the fairy tale is, on one level, not unexpected. His father, William Wilde, was a recognised authority on Irish archaeology and folklore. Simultaneously, his mother, Jane Francesca Wilde, who wrote under the pseudonym Speranza, was a nationalist

poet and a dedicated scholar of Celtic myth and legend (Ellmann, 1997, pp. 6–12). The Wilde family's residence on Merrion Square in Dublin, where Oscar grew up, was a vibrant centre of intellectual and artistic activity. It was frequented by scholars, nationalists, and writers, making folklore and storytelling more than just cultural pursuits within the household. Instead, they created the environment that nurtured his literary imagination. (*ibid*, pp. 13-15).

Yet Wilde, while certainly aware of Irish folklore as a result of his parents' writings, did not intend his stories to be part of that tradition; his fairy tales are better understood as self-conscious literary fictions drawing on a variety of narrative, literary and artistic sources, transforming tradition into a springboard for innovation rather than a legacy to be preserved (Markey, 2011, pp. 2–13). Where his father approached folklore with something close to anthropological seriousness, and his mother treated it as an expression of spiritual and nationalist identity, Wilde regarded it as raw material: valuable not for what it preserved but for what it made possible (*ibid*, pp. 51–52). This distinction is significant for the current analysis because Wilde adopts the fairy tale not merely as a cultural repository but as a formal structure to be examined critically and, ultimately, deconstructed.

Aestheticism, closely linked with Wilde, partly arose as a rejection of Victorian utilitarianism and its demand that art must justify itself through teaching or moral improvement (Gagnier, 1991, p. 17). However, Wilde's relationship with this idea was not merely antagonistic or escapist. "Art for art's sake" was not a retreat from society but a more subtle way of engaging with it - highlighting contradictions and revealing instability beneath seemingly harmonious surfaces (*ibid*, pp. 4–7). In his work, beauty seldom manifests as purely innocent; rather, it conceals, excludes, performs, and often exhibits the greatest violence precisely when it appears most dazzling (*ibid*, p. 80).

A House of Pomegranates, published in 1891, exemplifies this transformation most fully, as the collection repeatedly explores the nexus of beauty and cruelty. As Markey notes,

even the title carries this instability: its allusion to the myth of Proserpine²², suspended between incompatible worlds, belonging fully to neither, anticipates the condition of Wilde's protagonists, who repeatedly find themselves trapped between innocence and experience, idealisation and disillusionment (Markey, 2011, p. 139). Contemporary critics found it challenging to categorise the collection accurately. Its ornate style and refusal of redemptive closure conflicted with the comforting moral standards typically associated with the genre. Furthermore, many regarded it as excessively elaborate, rendering it unsuitable for inclusion within children's literature (*ibid*, pp. 143–144). Wilde completely rejected the idea that discomfort was essential, emphasising the independence of artistic creation from moral directives and affirming the artist's right to pursue personal temperament rather than external ethical norms (*ibid*). This leads to a body of work that, like a fairy tale, exists as an uninvited guest in a formal setting: clearly there, disrupting the structure and refusing to conform to expected behaviour.

The Birthday of the Infanta is the most focused part of the collection on spectacle, hierarchy, and femininity, all centred on display. Drawing partly on Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (Fig. 2), it constructs the princess through surfaces as fabrics, jewels, ceremonial gestures, until she appears less a psychologically understandable child than an embodiment of a single organising principle: that a woman's presence is constituted entirely through how she appears to others. As Berger observes, a woman "is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger, 1972, p.46), surveying her own appearance as others survey it. The Infanta, however, has not yet internalised this surveying gaze: she *is* the spectacle, without consciousness of being so.

²² In classical mythology, Proserpine (Persephone) was the daughter of Ceres, goddess of agriculture and fertility. Abducted by Pluto, ruler of the underworld, she became his wife after consuming pomegranate seeds, which condemned her to spend part of each year in the underworld and part on earth. Her cyclical return to her mother traditionally explains the changing seasons and made her a recurring symbol of beauty, loss, captivity and transition in nineteenth-century literature and art. See Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, trans. by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), s.v. 'Persephone'.



Figure 4- Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (1656), oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Although the painting predates Wilde's tale by more than two centuries, both works draw attention to a young princess whose social significance is derived more from her position within a meticulously orchestrated spectacle than from her individual agency. The Infanta Margarita occupies the central visual position in Velázquez's composition; however, the painting also highlights the interconnected network of gazes, attendants, rituals, and hierarchies that establish her visibility. Similarly, Wilde's Infanta is not merely a child. She functions as

the focal point of an intricate system of observation in which aesthetic display and political authority are inseparably intertwined. This comparison is particularly illuminating, revealing that princesshood functions not solely as an identity but as a performative act.

Against her, Wilde places the dwarf, who is physically outside the court's aesthetic standards but emotionally immersed in a world of feeling that the court has long ignored. Their confrontation acts as a diagnostic tool, revealing the underlying frameworks of spectatorship and exclusion embedded in the fairy-tale princess, who both embodies and hides these structures at her most idealised.

3.2.1 The Infanta and the Aesthetic World of the Court

Before the Dwarf enters the narrative, Wilde devotes a substantial portion of the tale to the world that surrounds the Infanta. The opening pages move through a sequence of descriptions and entertainments that gradually establish the values governing the Spanish court. This focus on description is central to Wilde's aesthetic perspective. As Gagnier contends, the aesthetic movement of the 1890s was rooted in the emergence of modern spectacle and mass society, relying heavily on imagery and advertising (Gagnier, 1986, p. 10): a world in which a man may have "nothing, but look everything" (Bracknell cited in Gagnier, 1986, p. 10). *The Birthday of the Infanta* transposes this logic to the royal court, constructing a social world in which image consistently precedes and displaces substance, and value is produced through display rather than through action or feeling. Long before the princess speaks or acts, the narrative directs attention towards surfaces, costumes and performances, constructing a social world in which image repeatedly precedes interiority.

The tale opens with the palace gardens. The tulips stand "straight up upon their stalks, like long rows of soldiers" (Wilde, 1891, p. 27). The simile introduces a vocabulary of order and arrangement into the natural world. Flowers are imagined through military discipline rather than organic growth. Nearby, butterflies flutter "with gold dust on their wings" (*ibid*), while

magnolia trees display “their great glove-like blossoms of folded ivory” (*ibid*). The nouns shift the description from nature to ornament. “Gold dust” suggests decoration rather than biology, while “ivory” is associated with luxury goods. This makes the garden seem less like an untouched landscape and more like a carefully crafted visual display.

The Infanta only appears after a detailed description of the surroundings of the palace. Her entrance is described similarly. Wilde starts not with the character itself but with her costume, following the same pattern.

Her robe was of grey satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls (*ibid*, p.29).

The sentence unfolds through a succession of materials. “Grey satin” is followed by “silver,” “silver” by “pearls.” The verb “studded” suggests embellishment and display, transforming the corset into a decorative object. A few lines later, “tiny slippers,” “pink rosettes,” a “great gauze fan,” and a “beautiful white rose” complete the portrait (*ibid*). The child herself remains elusive beneath the accumulation of accessories. The eye moves across fabrics, jewels and flowers before arriving at any sense of personhood.

This process closely resembles what Gagnier identifies as the aestheticist privileging of image over substance. Drawing on Debord, she notes that within the spectacle “one part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it” (Gagnier, 1986, p. 10). Wilde's description materialises this principle: the Infanta's social distinction becomes clear through satin, pearls, silver embroidery and coordinated colours. Her superiority is not conveyed through deeds or qualities; it is evident from her appearance. Gagnier also observes Wilde's tendency to use an “ornate description of material conditions” (1986, p. 57), and this opening passage illustrates that approach.

The syntax also enhances this effect. Coordinated clauses joined by repeated conjunctions make the gaze linger longer. The narrative pace slows as the description shifts from the robe to the sleeves, then to the corset, and finally to the slippers. The only noticeable movement happens when the slippers “peeped out beneath her dress” (Wilde, 1891, p.29). However, the verb does not emphasise an action, but it subtly highlights another decorative element.

The birthday celebration extends this logic into the court’s social organisation. The Infanta is ordinarily permitted to play only with “children of her own rank” (*ibid*, p.28), a phrase that places hierarchy at the centre of childhood experience. The children proceed “in strict order of precedence” (*ibid*, p.30), with “those who had the longest names going first” (*ibid*). The absurdity of the criterion reveals how much aristocratic identity has been ritualised: a surname dictates status more than friendship, personality, or age, turning lineage into a performance.

The procession ends in the princess's arrival at “a little gilt and ivory chair” positioned “on a raised dais above the arena” (*ibid*, p. 30). The geometry of the scene converts social distinction into visual form once again: elevation separates the Infanta from the space of performance, while the arena below becomes a site in which bodies, costumes and spectacles are arranged for her consumption. As successive entertainments occupy the stage - bullfighters, acrobats, dancers, musicians, puppets, and exotic animals - the same configuration is repeatedly reinscribed. The princess remains stationary, while others enter the field of vision created around her. Wilde thus constructs the Infanta less as an active participant than as the privileged spectator through whom the court’s aesthetic world acquires coherence and meaning.

The puppet production of *Sophonisba*, staged for the Infanta, deserves particular attention. The figures are described as being “made simply out of wood and coloured wax, and worked mechanically by wires” (*ibid*, p.32). Wilde repeatedly foregrounds the materiality of the puppets; the nouns “wood,” “wax,” and “wires” emphasise their artificial construction,

while the adverb “simply” further diminishes any illusion of lifelikeness. The audience is therefore never allowed to forget that what unfolds before them is a carefully manufactured performance rather than a real tragedy. Yet this awareness does not lessen their emotional response. The Infanta's eyes become “quite dim with tears” (*ibid*), several children “really cried” (*ibid*), and even the Grand Inquisitor finds it “intolerable” that such figures should suffer (*ibid*). This episode creates a connection between artificiality and emotion, demonstrating that emotional engagement arises not despite the performance mechanisms but alongside them. Spectators respond most strongly to suffering when it is rendered as an aesthetic object.

By the time the Dwarf enters the arena, the principles governing the court have already been established. Flowers have been transformed into ornaments, hierarchy into ceremony, and entertainment into the dominant mode of social interaction. Beauty occupies the centre of attention, while value is repeatedly attributed to visibility and display. Gagnier notes that in *The Birthday of the Infanta*, “all those who are physically beautiful are cruel” (1986, p.64). This observation takes on particular significance at this juncture in the narrative, as the Dwarf's arrival introduces a character who cannot be accommodated within this visual order.

3.2.2 Recognition and Misrecognition in the Aesthetic Order

The Dwarf enters the Infanta's world according to a logic fundamentally different from the one governing the court. Whereas the opening section of the tale constructs a culture organised around spectacle, the Dwarf approaches social relations through the expectation of reciprocity. He does not seek admiration but connection, not understanding attention as entertainment but as acknowledgement.

At the moment of the Dwarf's arrival, even before he speaks, dances, or interacts with anyone, the narrative presents him through a catalogue of bodily features. He “stumbled into the arena,” “waddling on his crooked legs” and “wagging his huge misshapen head from side to side while the children immediately “went off into a loud shout of delight”(Wilde, 1891,

p.40). The description emphasizes physical appearance before personality, adhering to the established pattern and employing adjectives such as “crooked,” “huge,” and “misshapen” to encourage the reader gaze on the body first. The audience's reaction follows instantly: the children laugh before the performance has even begun. Their amusement is generated not by what the Dwarf does but by what he is made to represent within the court.

The narrator repeatedly defines the Dwarf through the perspective of spectators. He is described as “a little monster” and “a little misshapen thing” that Nature had fashioned “for others to mock at”(*ibid*, p.41). The passive construction is relevant because the phrase does not merely describe how others treat him; it presents mockery as the very purpose of his existence. Garland-Thomson observes that visible bodily difference often “compels our attention, often obscuring the personhood of its bearer” (2009, p. 13). Wilde's language follows this mechanism precisely: the Dwarf's body becomes the object around which attention gathers, while his individuality remains largely invisible to those who watch him.

Yet the narrative introduces a competing perspective. The “most amusing thing about him” is said to be “his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance”(Wilde, 1891, p.31). The adjective “grotesque” belongs to the court's vocabulary, not to the Dwarf's; he does not perceive himself as an object of ridicule. “When the children laughed, he laughed as freely and as joyously as any of them”(*ibid*). The repeated use of the verb “laughed” creates a contrast, as the same action appears on both sides of the sentence but with entirely different meanings. The children laugh at him; he laughs with them. What is mockery for the onlookers becomes a sense of camaraderie in his mind.

This misunderstanding extends into his behaviour. At the end of each dance, he makes “the funniest of bows,” “smiling and nodding at them just as if he was really one of themselves” (*ibid*, p.42). Since the Dwarf is unaware of his assigned role in the spectacle, he perceives the surrounding laughter as a sign of acceptance and friendliness. Meanwhile, the court only

observes without engaging. What he sees as the start of a relationship is simply a source of entertainment for the spectators.

At the end of the performance, the Infanta removes a “beautiful white rose” from her hair and throws it towards him “partly for a jest and partly to tease the Camerera”(ibid). In this way Wilde leaves no ambiguity regarding her intentions. The gesture belongs to the playful cruelty that characterises the court throughout the tale; nothing in the scene suggests affection. The Dwarf, however, misunderstands the princess’s gesture: “He took the whole matter quite seriously”(ibid). The adverb “quite” excludes hesitation or doubt. Still, then he proceeds pressing the flower “to his rough coarse lips,” placing “his hand upon his heart,” and sinking “on one knee before her”(ibid), each movement of the Dwarf belongs to the language of courtly admiration, transforming in this way the joke into a declaration of devotion.

Garland-Thomson's discussion of recognition helps explain why the episode acquires such emotional force: “Being seen,” she argues, may function as “a validation of our existence,” a sign that “we matter to another” (2009,p. 50). The Dwarf interprets the Infanta's gesture exactly in these terms. The rose seems to confirm that he has been recognised as an individual and singled out from the crowd, but the attention given to him does not validate his personhood; instead, it turns him into an object of entertainment. The concept of enfreakment²³ is useful here; it emerges from cultural rituals that stylise, silence, differentiate and distance the persons whose bodies are colonised and commercialised for display and that the freak show's central cultural work is to render the extraordinary body hypervisible, a text against which the viewer's own body fades into seeming neutrality and invulnerability (ibid).

After the Dwarf leaves the arena, the princess continues “laughing long after”(Wilde, 1891, p.42). His sincerity becomes part of the entertainment and, rather than correcting the

²³ Garland-Thomson uses the term “*enfreakment*” to describe the cultural process through which bodily difference is transformed into spectacle. Rather than being an inherent characteristic of the body itself, freakishness emerges through practices of display, interpretation and social categorisation (Garland-Thomson, 1996: 10–12).

misunderstanding, the court encourages it. Indeed, the Infanta immediately requests that the performance be repeated, thereby showing how deeply the Dwarf has been integrated into the aesthetic economy discussed in the opening chapter. Like Sophonisba's puppets, he becomes an object to be observed, enjoyed, and replicated as part of leisure and desire.

Convinced that the Infanta has genuine affection for him, the Dwarf runs into the garden while “kissing the white rose in an absurd ecstasy of pleasure” (ibid, p.43). The adjective “absurd” introduces a perspective unavailable to the Dwarf himself: from his point of view, the intensity of his happiness follows naturally from what he believes the rose signifies. The term instead belongs to a narrative voice that recognises the discrepancy between his interpretation and the reality of the situation. Yet this moment also invites a broader reflection on the narrator's treatment of the Dwarf throughout the tale. Wilde repeatedly describes him in terms such as “monster,” “grotesque,” “misshapen,” and, here, his behaviour as “absurd,” adopting a vocabulary that often recalls the court's perception of him. At other moments, however, the narration foregrounds his generosity, innocence, and capacity for affection, encouraging the reader's sympathy. The result is a voice that does not remain entirely detached from the language through which the Dwarf is judged, but neither does it simply endorse it. Rather, the repetition of such terms frequently acquires an ironic function. By filtering the Dwarf through the categories that structure the court's worldview while simultaneously granting access to his emotional sincerity, the narration exposes the inadequacy of those categories themselves.

The garden episode develops this conflict through a division within nature itself. The flowers adopt the court's values. They describe the Dwarf as “too ugly,” “a perfect horror,” “twisted,” “stumpy” and “out of proportion”(ibid, 44). Their vocabulary remains entirely focused on appearance. Beauty operates as a norm from which deviation becomes grounds for exclusion. The flowers therefore reproduce, in miniature, the same aesthetic hierarchy analysed in the previous section that structures the court.

Although the birds respond differently, unlike the flowers, they remember the Dwarf's actions rather than his appearance:

[...] during that terribly bitter winter, when there were no berries on the trees, and the ground was as hard as iron, and the wolves had come down to the very gates of the city to look for food, he had never once forgotten them. Still, he had always given them crumbs out of his little hunch of black bread, and divided with them whatever poor breakfast he had. (*ibid*,47)

The long sequence of clauses accumulates images of scarcity and hardship, and each detail intensifies the severity of the winter and, consequently, the significance of the Dwarf's generosity. His kindness is not exercised under conditions of abundance but in a context of poverty.

Particularly important is the contrast between what the Dwarf possesses and what he gives away: the birds do not recall lavish gifts but "crumbs" taken from "his little hunch of black bread." The adjective "little" emphasises the modest scale of his resources, while "black bread" evokes poverty and necessity rather than comfort. What matters, however, is not the quantity of the gift but the consistency of the gesture. The opposition between "never once forgotten" and "always given" transforms generosity into a defining characteristic rather than an isolated act. Memory itself becomes a form of recognition. Unlike the court, which responds only to what it sees, the birds value what they know about the Dwarf through repeated encounters over time.

By the end of this section, Wilde has juxtaposed two conflicting value systems. The court reduces bodies to objects for observation, while the Dwarf craves emotional connection. Throughout the story, the Dwarf stays highly visible, yet true acknowledgement never happens.

The following section on the mirror scene won't foster this recognition; it will merely expose the existing visual hierarchy that has always been at play.

3.2.3 The Mirror and the Internalisation of the Court's Gaze

The pivotal moment in the narrative occurs not at the point when the Dwarf enters the court, but rather when he first perceives his reflection in a mirror. In the initial segments, his perception of the world remains largely unaffected by the palace's aesthetic standards. He understands that his appearance is not just about how he looks physically, but also about the significance that appearance holds within the court's system.

Before the encounter itself takes place, Wilde delays the disclosure by leading the Dwarf through a sequence of increasingly elaborate rooms. The movement is significant. Room after room overwhelms both the character and the reader with displays of aristocratic magnificence: “richly embroidered” curtains, “black velvet, powdered with suns and stars,” “green arras of needle-wrought tapestry,” “gilt Cordovan leather,” “a great canopy of gold cloth,” “seed pearls,” “silver tulips,” and “a black ebony cabinet, inlaid with plates of ivory”(ibid, pp. 54-55). The accumulation of precious materials recalls the descriptions that introduced the Infanta in the opening chapter. Velvet, gold, pearls, silver, ivory, embroidery: the same vocabulary that once constructed the princess as an aesthetic object now surrounds the Dwarf. Yet his response differs from the court's; he looks at these objects “in wonder,” but remains indifferent to their value: “the little Dwarf cared nothing for all this magnificence”(ibid, p.55). This statement interrupts several paragraphs devoted to luxury and redirects attention towards the character's priorities.

He would not have given his rose for all the pearls on the canopy, nor one white pearl of his rose for the throne itself. What he wanted was to see the infanta[...] (ibid)

The comparison is strikingly disproportionate: a throne, pearls, and the splendour of royal life are set against a single white flower. Yet, for the Dwarf, the choice requires no deliberation. His emotional attachment to the rose outweighs the court's material and aesthetic allure, revealing a value system at odds with aristocratic priorities.

This opposition continues through the contrasting spatial imaginaries of palace and forest. The palace is repeatedly associated with confinement and excess. Its atmosphere is described as “close and heavy” (*ibid*), while its interiors are crowded with portraits, tapestries, ceremonial furnishings, and ornamental objects. By contrast, the Dwarf thinks of the forest, which emerges as a space of openness and sensory vitality. Here, “the wind blew free”, and sunlight filters through the leaves with “wandering hands of gold” (*ibid*, pp. 55- 56), transforming nature into a living, dynamic presence.

Flowers, significantly, appear in both settings, but their value is framed in radically different terms. While the cultivated blossoms of the palace are admired for their visual magnificence, the flowers of the forest are appreciated for their fragrance: “not so splendid, perhaps, as the flowers in the garden, but more sweetly scented for all that” (*ibid*). This seemingly casual comparison quietly overturns the court's logic: appearance yields to sensation, spectacle to experience, and external display to embodied feeling.

The revelation arrives only when he enters “the brightest and the most beautiful”(*ibid*, p.56) room in the palace. The description immediately recalls the aesthetic world established at the beginning of the tale: “pink-flowered Lucca damask,” “massive silver,” “swinging Cupids,” “parrots and peacocks,” and a floor of “sea-green onyx”(*ibid*). Here once again Beauty saturates every surface. Yet unlike the earlier rooms, this space contains something more dangerous than luxury. Standing “under the shadow of the doorway,” the Dwarf sees “a little figure watching him.”(*ibid*, p.57). Before the figure acquires an identity, it appears merely as a presence, glimpsed through the

Dwarf's perspective and therefore filtered through his expectations. His reaction is immediate and involuntary: "His heart trembled, a cry of joy broke from his lips"(*ibid*). Emotion comes before perception because the focus stays fully aligned with the Dwarf's consciousness, leading the reader to initially share his belief that the much-anticipated encounter has finally occurred. The exclamation, "The Infanta!" (*ibid*), captures a certainty born more from desire than from knowledge.

What follows dismantles that: "It was a monster, the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld"(*ibid*). The force of the sentence lies not only in its sudden reversal but also in Wilde's insistent repetition of "monster." Throughout the tale, the word has circulated in the court's discourse, serving as a label imposed on the Dwarf by others. Here, however, it enters his own consciousness for the first time. The violence of the moment therefore exceeds physical self-recognition. What begins to emerge is the internalisation of an external gaze: the language through which the court has always defined him gradually becomes the language through which he understands himself.

The reflected figure frowns, laughs, bows; the Dwarf responds in turn, while the mirror reproduces each gesture with precision. "He made it a mocking bow, and it returned him a low reverence." "He went towards it, and it came to meet him." "Stopping when he stopped himself" (*ibid*). As the sequence progresses, Wilde transitions from visual observation to physical contact, heightening the scene's emotional tension. The Dwarf reaches out his hand; the creature's hand responds. He moves; it mirrors his movement. He tucks his hair back; the reflection copies this action precisely. Each gesture eliminates potential explanations, closing the distance between self and image until only one truth remains. Recognition doesn't come as a sudden revelation but as the accumulation of repeated exposures to the same distressing reality.

Significantly, the mirror itself is never immediately identified as such. Instead, it is described as an “invisible wall of clear water” (*ibid.*, p. 58), a phrase that preserves the fairy-tale ambiguity governing the entire episode. Since mirrors belong to the world of the palace rather than to the Dwarf’s experience, he interprets the phenomenon through a framework available to him: perhaps it is “Echo”; perhaps it is “a mimic world”; perhaps “the shadows of things” have somehow acquired “colour and life and movement” (*ibid.*).

The process concludes with the white rose. Earlier in the narrative, as discussed, the flower functioned as a token of affection and recognition, the material proof of the Dwarf’s belief that the Infanta had singled him out from the crowd. Now it becomes the instrument through which that belief collapses.

He started, and taking from his breast the beautiful white rose, he turned round, and kissed it. The monster had a rose of its own, petal for petal the same. It kissed it with like kisses, and pressed it to its heart with horrible gesture. (*ibid.*)

Wilde’s phrase, “petal for petal the same,” eradicates any remaining distinction between original and reflection, making the logic of doubling complete. It is worth noting that the reflected figure presses the flower against its heart “with horrible gestures.” The adjective is ironic because the action itself has not changed. Moments earlier, the same gesture would have seemed tender, innocent, even touching. Its shift into something “horrible” is not because it is inherently ridiculous, but because it is now attached to a body he has learned to regard as monstrous.

In this respect, the scene exemplifies what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes as the cultural production of monstrosity. According to Cohen, the monster is not a fixed or objective category but a cultural body onto which societies project their anxieties and boundaries (Cohen, 1996: 4–6). The mirror does not reveal an intrinsic truth about the Dwarf; rather, it reveals the

framework through which the court has always viewed him. What the Dwarf encounters is therefore not simply his reflection but the court's definition of him.

The destruction of the rose that follows gives material form to this process. As the Dwarf tears “the white rose to pieces”(Wilde, 1891, p.59), the reflection repeats the gesture, reproducing even his grief. The flower that once embodied affection survives only as a reminder of their impossibility. Simultaneously, the language used to describe the Dwarf undergoes a profound transformation. Earlier, he moved through forests, danced among leaves, and imagined companionship; now he “crept away,” “covered his eyes,” “crawled, like some wounded thing,” and lay “moaning” in the shadows (*ibid*). The change is not physical but perceptual. His body remains unchanged; what changes is the lens through which that body is understood.

Cohen's theory clarifies the importance of this change. The Dwarf does not become grotesque in the mirror scene; instead, he realises he has always been in that grotesque role within the court's symbolic order. His body serves as the necessary contrast to aristocratic beauty, refinement, and harmony, which define themselves through this difference. As Cohen states, monsters enforce cultural boundaries by embodying what a society excludes to maintain its identity (1996: 12). By the scene's end, the Dwarf sees himself as the palace has always perceived him, and it is this new understanding, rather than the reflection itself, that becomes deadly for him.

3.2.4 The Princess Without a Heart: The Failure of Recognition

The final scene of *The Birthday of the Infanta* brings together the tensions that have structured the narrative from the beginning. On the one hand stands the court, organised around spectacle; on the other stands the Dwarf, whose understanding of experience is grounded in affection. The ending does not simply complete the Dwarf's tragedy, but it defines the princess herself. By placing the Infanta at the centre of the final exchange, Wilde transforms a conventional fairy-

tale heroine into the embodiment of an aesthetic order incapable of recognising emotional reality.

The final scene opens after the mirror episode. The Dwarf's discovery has shattered the fantasy through which he interpreted the world. Yet the suffering produced by this recognition remains invisible to those around him:

[...] when they saw the ugly little Dwarf lying on the ground and beating the floor with his clenched hands, most fantastically and exaggeratedly, they went off into shouts of happy laughter (ibid, pp.59-60)

The sentence juxtaposes two incompatible interpretative frameworks. The physical details - "lying on the ground," "beating the floor," "clenched hands" - belong to the language of bodily distress and against this, Wilde places the court's perception of the scene as "fantastic and exaggerated." These adjectives instead belong not to the semantic field of suffering but to that of performance. The Dwarf's grief is therefore translated into spectacle the moment it enters the courtly gaze. What the reader recognises as emotional collapse becomes, for the spectators, another amusing display. The Infanta's first response continues this process: "His dancing was funny, [...] but his acting is funnier still" What was once "funny" becomes "funnier"; entertainment here intensifies rather than diminishes. No distinction is made between performance and emotion, between theatrical display and genuine suffering. The Dwarf remains trapped within the role assigned to him at the beginning of the tale.

"Indeed, he is almost as good as the puppets, only, of course, not quite so natural"(ibid, p.60). The irony in the statement lies in Wilde's reversal of usual hierarchies. Typically, a puppet mimics life, but in this case, the living body is deemed inferior to an artificial one. The princess

deals with suffering by viewing it as a spectator, because spectatorship is her only way of relating to others. The recurring commands that structure the episode reinforce this dynamic: “but now you must dance for me.” “you must get up and dance”(ibid). Here the modal verb “must” transforms amusement into obligation. The Dwarf's value resides entirely in his ability to perform. Even his silence is interpreted as a temporary refusal; the possibility that another person might possess an inner life independent of the role assigned to him never enters the court's imagination.

When Don Pedro appears, the language of monstrosity reemerges: “You must dance,” he said, “petit monstre” (ibid, p.61). This phrase echoes the vocabulary from the mirror episode. However, a key difference exists. Previously, monstrosity arose from the Dwarf's internalisation of the court's gaze. Now, the label originates from an external source. The court continues to use the same language that shaped the Dwarf's self-perception. Although the mirror changed his self-understanding, it simply reinforced a judgment already present within the palace's social environment.

Only the Chamberlain offers a different interpretation:

“Mi bella princesa, your funny little Dwarf will never dance again. It is a pity, for he is so ugly that he might have made the king smile.” [...] “But why will he not dance again?” Asked the Infanta, laughing. “Because his heart is broken”, answered the Chamberlain (ibid)

Even here, the Dwarf remains grammatically subordinate to the princess. The possessive pronoun “your” identifies him as an object belonging to her world, while “funny” describes him based on his entertainment value. More importantly, it introduces a term almost absent from court discourse: “heart.” This word shifts the focus from appearance to feeling, from spectacle

to inner emotion. For a moment, the story expresses the emotional reality that aesthetic judgment has often hidden.

The Infanta's reply challenges this idea: "For the future, let those who come to play with me have no hearts" (*ibid*). This line shifts an implied rule into a direct command, implying that "hearts" are unwanted because they bring emotional dangers. Emotions disrupt the spectacle, and mutual feelings complicate the pleasure, creating a desire for someone without a heart who can entertain endlessly without feeling pain. The sentence also redefines the princess herself: while traditional fairy tales often link princesses to moral development, Wilde's Infanta does not follow these paths. She neither misunderstands the Dwarf nor learns from her mistake. She does not feel remorse or gain self-awareness. Instead, she stays the same, confined within the aesthetic values that have defined her from the start.

The tale therefore concludes by distinguishing categories often seen as inseparable in the fairy-tale tradition: the princess is beautiful, but beauty no longer signifies virtue. The court is magnificent, but splendour no longer ensures civilisation. The Dwarf is physically repulsive, yet he is the most capable of showing affection. This reversal enables Wilde to reimagine the fairy-tale princess fundamentally; his subversion goes beyond merely criticising aristocratic cruelty. The tale suggests that princesshood is not just an identity based on beauty but also a social system rooted in exclusion. The Infanta's position as the embodiment of aesthetic perfection is sustained by the existence of bodies that can be identified as its opposite. Beauty becomes legible through ugliness; refinement through grotesqueness; visibility through marginalisation. The Dwarf is not excluded despite the existence of the aesthetic order but because that order requires figures against which its ideals can be defined.

The tragedy of the mirror scene lies in the Dwarf internalising this perspective. His despair does not merely stem from recognising his reflection; rather, it arises from recognising

his position within the court's social hierarchy. The mirror indicates that the palace's aesthetic hierarchy has already assigned him a role that falls outside traditional ideas of beauty.

Wilde's fairy tale focuses on the social forces that influence the princess rather than her personal qualities. The Infanta remains attractive because the story portrays the Dwarf as grotesque; she stays prominent because he is marginalised. This illustrates that beauty is linked to social status and exclusion, not merely innocence. The princess symbolises a hierarchical system, whose real effects are only evident when considering the Dwarf's plight. Consequently, *The Birthday of the Infanta* exposes the shortcomings of an idealised princess based only on appearance and reveals the human suffering behind it.

3.3 Edith Nesbit, *The Last of the Dragons*: Subversion Through Metafiction

Edith Nesbit shouldn't be seen as a typical feminist writer; doing so would be a mistake. She represented a more complex and fascinating perspective: a woman whose loyalties were always personal connections rather than strict ideology. Her fiction often employed strategies of displacement and distancing concerning feminist topics and could leverage one ideology, socialism, as a shield against another, women's suffrage. (Rutledge, 1999, p. 225). When invited to address the newly formed Fabian Women's Group²⁴ in 1908 on the subject of women and work, she instead lectured on the natural disabilities of women, a provocation to which the group responded with a series of counter-lectures by medical professionals (Briggs, 1987, pp. 333–334). She declined to sign petitions in support of the Conciliation Bill²⁵, and she satirised militant suffragettes in *The Magic City* through the figure of the *Pretenderette*, a character

²⁴ Founded in 1908 as an organisation affiliated with the Fabian Society, the Fabian Women's Group sought to address issues relating to women's employment, welfare, education and political participation from a socialist perspective. Nesbit's uneasy relationship with the group reflects her broader ambivalence towards organised feminism despite her involvement in socialist politics (Briggs, 1987: 333–35).

²⁵ The Conciliation Bill proposed granting the vote to women householders - that is, women who occupied property independently - rather than to women as a class. The bill was explicitly moderate in design, intended to attract cross-party support by limiting enfranchisement to a narrow, propertied constituency. Nesbit's refusal to sign petitions in its favour is therefore not straightforwardly anti-suffragist: her socialism gave her grounds to object to a measure that would have benefited middle-class women disproportionately while leaving working-class women entirely excluded. See Rover (1967), pp. 59–72;

whose title is designed to ridicule the term suffragette (ibid, pp.334–335; Rutledge, 1999, p.223). Whatever subversive energies circulate in Nesbit's work, they are not the product of programmatic feminist conviction.

Yet the fairy tale offered Nesbit something she could not access through other modes: a socially acceptable and formally flexible space in which narrative structures could be bent, tested, and then quietly reorganised without the risks that more explicitly political writing would have entailed (Rutledge, 1999, p. 227). Briggs (1987, p. 433) describes Nesbit's best work as governed by a comedy of deflation, subversion, and demystification, always ready to erupt, and it is precisely this tendency that makes her approach to the narrative function of the princess so distinct from both De Morgan's and Wilde's.

Nesbit was notably perceptive of her genre's narrative techniques. Unlike many of her contemporaries who viewed fairy-tale conventions as natural, she approached them with a knowing irony, assuming her readers' familiarity with them. She openly discusses her plot manipulations as if they are obvious to both herself and her audience, highlighting the rules of fairy tales while also bending them. This creates a layered, intertextual web that maintains humour's subversive power. The metafictional tendency, meant as the habit of making the fairy-tale machinery visible, is central to *The Last of the Dragons*, and it is what distinguishes Nesbit's mode of subversion from those examined in the preceding sections. Nesbit does something different and, in some ways, more radical: she makes the script's arbitrariness legible by naming it out loud, and, in doing so, discovers that the conventions that appeared binding were never quite as inevitable as they seemed.

The publication history of *The Last of the Dragons* reflects its slightly anomalous position within Nesbit's output. Originally omitted from *The Book of Dragons*, the collection of fairy stories she began publishing in *The Strand*²⁶ in 1899, the tale appeared only

²⁶ *The Strand Magazine* (1891–1950) was among the most widely circulated popular fiction periodicals of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, publishing work by Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells, and P.G.

posthumously, in the 1925 collection *Five of Us and Madeline*, edited by her daughter Rosamund after Nesbit's death (Briggs, 1987: pp. 219). This delayed publication places the tale at the edges of her recognised body of work. Yet, it is, in some respects, the most concentrated expression of the metafictional impulse that runs through her best fantasy writing. Where the dragon stories published during her lifetime tended to exploit the comic incongruities of enchantment meeting modernity, playing magic against the domestic and the mundane for purely comic effect (*ibid*), *The Last of the Dragons* turns its attention to the narrative conventions governing the dragon story itself, examining not the magic but the narrative position that organises the magic's meaning.

From its opening sentences, the tale establishes a tone of ironic familiarity. The narrator speaks as though the reader already knows how dragon stories are supposed to work, invoking the full weight of the tradition only to begin quietly dismantling it. Dragons, motor-cars and Prime Ministers coexist without apology; the timeless atmosphere ordinarily associated with fairy tales collapses into something recognisably modern, slightly absurd, and self-aware. The princess openly questions why she should wait passively for rescue; the dragon turns out to be gentle rather than terrible; and the prince, finding his heroic function unexpectedly redundant, is required to renegotiate his role in relation to a princess who has already decided what she wants to do. None of this is presented as scandalous. It is presented as obvious, as the simple, practical response of two sensible people, the prince and the princess, to a set of inherited narrative expectations that no longer serve any useful purpose.

Wodehouse alongside illustrations and general interest features. Its readership was broad and predominantly middle-class. Publication there conferred both commercial reach and a degree of cultural respectability. That Nesbit placed her dragon stories in *The Strand* rather than in explicitly literary venues reflects her self-positioning as a popular rather than a prestige writer, a distinction that also shaped how her more subversive material could circulate without attracting the scrutiny it might have received elsewhere. See Briggs (1987), p. 219.

3.3.1 “It’s Always Done”: Making the Script Visible

Before rewriting the princess, the dragon, or the fairy tale itself, Nesbit first performs a more fundamental operation: she makes the narrative machinery visible. Whereas traditional fairy tales generally present their conventions as natural and unquestionable, *The Last of the Dragons* repeatedly draws attention to the fact that these conventions are conventions. Characters know the stories they inhabit, openly discuss the roles assigned to them, and question the assumptions that govern their behaviour. As a result, the tale transforms what would ordinarily remain an invisible narrative structure into an object of scrutiny.

This process begins in the opening sentence. Rather than establishing a distant fairy-tale world, the narrator adopts a tone of familiar conversation:

Of course you know that dragons were once as common as motor-omnibuses are now, and almost as dangerous. (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.204)

The phrase “of course” immediately creates an unusual connection between the narrator and the reader. Dragons, which are typically linked to wonder and impossibility, are presented as if their existence is well-known. Simultaneously, the comparison to “motor-omnibuses” abruptly blurs the line between fairy tale and modern life. Ancient monsters and contemporary technology appear in the same sentence without explanation, creating a tone that's both humorous and self-aware.

The same strategy continues in the description of dragon-slaying. Instead of presenting the dragon as a natural threat, the narrator explains its disappearance through the repetitive demands of fairy-tale narrative itself:

[...] as every well-brought-up prince was expected to kill a dragon, and rescue a princess, the dragons grew fewer and fewer till it was often quite hard for a princess to find a dragon to be rescued from. (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.204)

The passage challenges traditional cause-and-effect relationships because, unlike in typical fairy tales where dragons trigger adventures, here adventures lead to the dragons' extinction. The comic exaggeration highlights the artificiality of the familiar plot. Dragons do not exist; princes need dragons to defeat, and princesses need dragons to be rescued from. Here, the princess's introduction further develops this idea. Upon reaching the appropriate age, she knows exactly what awaits her: “when she was sixteen, of course she would have to go and face the dragon” (*ibid*, p.206). Again, the phrase “of course” performs important work: the future appears predetermined by narrative expectation.

Nesbit immediately explains why: “such tales are always told in royal nurseries at twilight, so the Princess knew what she had to expect.”(*ibid*). This alters the relationship between character and story. The Princess has grown up listening to the very narratives that now seek to organise her life. Fairy-tale convention functions as a form of cultural inheritance, transmitted from one generation to the next through storytelling. Unlike the heroines of traditional fairy tales, who inhabit their narratives, Nesbit's Princess is aware of the script before she performs it.

At this point, the story introduces a crucial rupture: “Why must I be rescued by a prince?” (*ibid*). The significance of this moment is its straightforwardness. The Princess does not reject marriage, oppose monarchy, or make a political statement. She seeks a reason. However, this request for clarification immediately reveals the convention's fragility. Once expressed, the rule no longer seems obvious.

The King's reply is equally important: "It's always done, my dear" (*ibid*). The tradition persists simply because it has always been there. While it may seem like a statement of authority, it actually reveals arbitrariness. The King's reasoning is based solely on precedent. The fairy-tale narrative derives its power from being repeated for so long that its origins fade into invisibility.

Linda Hutcheon identifies this kind of exposure as the defining gesture of self-conscious narrative. Traditional realist fiction, she argues, depends on conventions that remain unacknowledged: the reader registers a resemblance to lived experience without ever being asked to notice the rules producing that resemblance. Metafiction reverses this. Rather than letting narrative convention operate invisibly, it bears the convention itself, disrupting the codes a reader would normally take for granted and forcing them into conscious recognition of how the story is built (Hutcheon, 2013, p.39). Convention ceases to be a vehicle for meaning and becomes the object of representation.

Nesbit's tale enacts this reversal from its opening pages. The dragon-slaying passage is the clearest case: rather than treating the dragon as a real threat the prince must overcome, the narrator attributes its disappearance to genre logic itself, since princes are "expected" to kill dragons, dragons simply run out. Cause and effect are inverted; instead of the dragon generating the adventure, the adventure exhausts the dragon supply.

The conversation continues with an even more direct challenge to narrative expectation:

[...]couldn't we tie up one of the silly little princes for the dragon to look at – and then I could go and kill the dragon and rescue the prince? (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.206)

The proposal is humorous, but its implications are serious. The Princess does not reject the narrative structure itself; this means that a dragon remains necessary, a rescue still occurs, and a captive still requires saving. What changes is that the participants occupy the positions. By

contemplating the idea of role exchange, the Princess shows that these roles are not innate qualities but narrative constructs. The humour or absurdity comes not from the idea itself but from the reader's recognition of how strongly fairy tales link heroism with princes and vulnerability with princesses.

The King's response highlights the ideological aspect of these expectations: "What an unladylike idea!" (ibid). His objection isn't based on practicality, as he doesn't say the Princess lacks courage or ability. Instead, he references gender norms. Heroic acts seem inappropriate not because they are impossible, but because they clash with traditional femininity. However, the story quickly challenges this view. The Princess then dedicates herself to her studies and fencing, becoming "the strongest and boldest and most skilful and most sensible princess in Europe" (ibid, 208). The accumulation of superlatives is noteworthy. "Strongest," "boldest," "most skilful," and "most sensible" are traditionally associated with heroes rather than fairy-tale princesses. Nesbit therefore creates a discrepancy between the role the Princess is expected to perform and the abilities she actually possesses.

Trying to uphold tradition, the King tells his daughter: "I rescued your mother from a dragon" (ibid, p.206), demonstrating how this fairy-tale pattern repeats across generations and how the story has already happened before and is likely to happen again. However, the Princess quickly spots a flaw in this reasoning: "But this is the last dragon. It is different from all other dragons" (ibid). When the King asks how, her answer is deceptively simple: "Because he *is* the last" (ibid). The Princess realises that the situation has changed. If only one dragon remains, the old rules might no longer be valid. Her subtle observation challenges the authority of tradition by implying that inherited stories are not always applicable to new circumstances.

By the end of the opening section, the tale has not yet rewritten the princess script. Instead, it has achieved something that makes such rewriting possible: roles that initially appeared inevitable are revealed to be products of repetition and expectations that seemed

natural emerge as narrative conventions. Once the script becomes visible, it ceases to function as destiny, and it becomes something that can be questioned and ultimately transformed.

3.3.2 Rewriting the Princess Script

Once the Princess has recognised that the rescue narrative rests upon custom rather than necessity, the tale begins to explore what happens when she refuses to occupy the position assigned to her. Significantly, Nesbit does not dismantle the fairy-tale framework itself. The dragon remains, the prince arrives and the ritual of sacrifice proceeds as tradition dictates. What changes is the Princess's relationship to these conventions: instead of accepting passivity as an inevitable component of princesshood, she approaches the situation with a practical, cooperative register, transforming what had previously appeared as fixed narrative roles into positions open to negotiation. As Tosi observes, the tale stages "the firm refusal of the princess protagonist to be cast in the role of victim, to participate actively in her destiny" (Tosi, 2009, p. 39), a refusal that reorganises rather than dismantles the fairy-tale framework.

The contrast between the two protagonists is established before their encounter. The prince is described as "a pale prince, with large eyes and a head full of mathematics and philosophy" (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.208), but he has "unfortunately neglected his fencing lessons." The adjective "pale" distinguishes him from the typical strong warrior associated with dragon-slaying. At the same time, the phrase "a head full of mathematics and philosophy" suggests that the prince excels in intellectual matters rather than combat ability. The narrator's use of "unfortunately" softly conveys irony. His shortcoming is not in his character but in the gap between his skills and the heroic role anticipated of him, noting that fencing is also a skill the princess excels in.

Their first private conversation reinforces this mismatch. Emerging "among the shadows of the trees like water in starlight" (*ibid.*), the Princess is initially framed in a traditional, visually elegant manner, with similes that evoke beauty and romance, hinting at a

declaration of love. However, the dialogue quickly challenges this expectation: “Do you think that you will be able to kill the dragon?”(*ibid*). This sudden question shifts the scene's tone from courtship to strategy. The prince responds heroically: “I will kill the dragon, or perish in the attempt” (*ibid*), but the Princess dismisses the heroic logic with a succinct reply: “It's no use your perishing” (*ibid*). Her brief response contrasts with the prince's lofty vow, reducing noble sacrifice to tactical inefficiency. When the Prince claims death is “the least I can do”(*ibid*), the Princess counters: “What I'm afraid of is that it'll be the most you can do”(*ibid*, p. 210). This balance between “least” and “most” reveals the limitations of conventional heroism, casting the scene as a debate between traditional formulas and practical judgment: the Prince speaks of romance and duty, while the Princess considers real outcomes, thereby transforming heroism from noble sacrifice into a matter of effectiveness.

The scene transforms as the Prince confesses love: “You must know that I love you better than anything in the world” (*ibid*): unlike many fairy tales, where such declarations immediately resolve emotional tensions, the narrator observes that “when he said that he looked so kind that the Princess began to like him a little”(*ibid*). The phrase “a little” signals emotional moderation in a genre usually characterised by instantaneous devotion, meaning that affection develops gradually rather than erupting in overwhelming passion. The Prince is appreciated not for his ability to conform to the heroic ideal but for his kindness.

The Princess then proceeds to describe the rescue ceremony itself:

“they tie me to a rock and leave me — and then everybody scurries home and puts up the shutters and keeps them shut till you ride through the town in triumph shouting that you've killed the dragon, and I ride on the horse behind you weeping for joy.”(*ibid*)

The long sentence reproduces the sequence of events through accumulation. One action follows another mechanically, as though the Princess were reciting a familiar script. Verbs such as “tie,”

“leave,” “scurries,” “puts up,” and “keeps” convey a sense of routine. Even the image of the triumphant procession appears less as an emotional climax than as a sequence of predetermined gestures. Most significant of all is the image of herself “weeping for joy.” The Princess describes her own happiness not as a genuine feeling but as another element of the expected performance.

The same reliance on convention emerges in the Prince's answer: “I've heard that that is how it is done” (*ibid*). The passive voice removes any sense of agency: no person is held accountable for the tradition. Similar to the King's earlier “It's always done,” this phrase suggests that repeated action alone justifies the practice. Once more, precedent takes the place of explanation.

The Princess, however, suggests an alternative by introducing a completely different model of heroism.

“Well, do you love me well enough to come very quickly and set me free - and we'll fight the dragon together?” (*ibid*)

Tosi describes this scene as the Princess “giving directions to the helpless prince on how to handle the dragon” (Tosi, 2009, p.39). This highlights a shift not just from passivity to action but from a solitary heroic model to a collaborative approach. The Princess does not aim to replace or diminish the Prince’s role, nor does she dismiss the dragon episode. She reinforces her point with rational reasoning: “Much safer for both of us for me to be free, with a sword in my hand, than tied up and helpless” (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.210). The contrast between “free” and “tied up,” “with a sword” and “helpless,” ridicules the traditional depiction of the captured princess, in which vulnerability becomes a practical weakness, and passivity is viewed as inefficient rather than virtuous.

After freeing the Princess, the Prince pauses and comments: “It seems to me [...] that this ceremony could have been arranged without the dragon.” (ibid) The word “ceremony” is significant because it transforms the idea of rescue from a risky, heroic deed to a ritualistic act: the dragon is no longer viewed as necessary but as a facilitator of traditional rituals. This suggests that the Prince is beginning to realise the story he is involved in is somewhat constructed.

However, the Princess's response shows she has gone from questioning to adapting: “Yes, but since it has been arranged with the dragon—”(ibid). The unfinished sentence captures her attitude towards convention. She does not seek to destroy the story but to work within its existing framework. The same principle informs the Prince's next observation: “It seems such a pity to kill the dragon - the last in the world”(ibid). Here, instead of treating violence as inevitable, both characters begin to imagine alternatives. The Princess immediately proposes: “Well then, don't let's. Let's tame it not to eat princesses but to eat out of their hands. They say everything can be tamed by kindness” (ibid). The repeated use of “let's” creates a sense of collective action, and the transition from violence to domestication allows kindness to stand out as an alternative organising principle to conquest.

At this point in the story, the Princess neither abandons the fairy tale nor rejects love, princes, or dragons. Instead, she redefines the relationships among them. Heroism is redistributed, vulnerability is no longer linked to femininity, and affection emerges through cooperation. Therefore, her refusal does not destroy the script but reorganises it. When roles are seen as conventions rather than innate truths, they become open to change, allowing the fairy tale to explore new possibilities that were previously hidden within its traditional forms.

3.3.3 Reshaping the Dragon

In *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that monsters are cultural constructions whose bodies embody social anxieties and maintain the boundaries upon which systems of meaning depend. As he observes, “the monster stands at the threshold [...] of becoming” (1996: p.20), occupying unstable spaces between categories while simultaneously defining them. Within the traditional dragon tale, the monster performs precisely this function: its presence secures the opposition between hero and villain, masculinity and femininity, civilisation and savagery. The dragon's violence legitimises the prince's heroism and justifies the princess's helplessness. Yet Cohen also insists that “the monster always escapes” (1996: p.4). If monsters resist fixed meanings and exceed the narratives designed to contain them, it naturally raises the question of what happens when the monster itself refuses the role that gives the story its structure.

Before the dragon even appears, however, the Prince and Princess have already begun to imagine an alternative to the traditional combat. After the Prince admits:

“It seems such a pity to kill the dragon — the last in the world,’ said the Prince. ‘Well then, don’t” said the Princess; “let’s tame it not to eat princesses but to eat out of their hands. They say everything can be tamed by kindness.” (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.212)

The repeated use of “let's” creates a rhythm of teamwork similar to what was discussed earlier. However, the Princess's language also exposes some boundaries. While she dismisses violence, she still believes that dragons inherently “eat princesses”. Her goal isn't to redefine the creature but to tame it. The contrast between “eat princesses” and “eat out of their hands” shifts from barbarism to domesticating obedience. At this stage, the dragon remains an object to be managed rather than a subject with desires of its own.

The Prince immediately translates the rather abstract notion of kindness into something concrete: “Taming by kindness means giving them things to eat. Have you got anything to eat?”(*ibid*). His answer reduces sentiment to practicality. Significantly, he has “a few biscuits”, explaining with characteristic thoughtfulness: “Breakfast was so very early, and I thought you might have felt faint after the fight”(*ibid*). The scene is surprisingly domestic: instead of swords, armour, or magical weapons, future dragon-slayers arrive with biscuits, turning violence into an act of hospitality.

As they search for the dragon, the narrative preserves traces of traditional monstrosity. The Prince points to the marks left by the creature: “Look, that's where it's dragged its brass tail and planted its steel claws”(*ibid*). The metallic imagery evokes power and hardness, yet these threatening details are immediately counterbalanced by the Princess's own awareness of fear:

“Don't let's think how hard its tail and its claws are, or I shall begin to be frightened – and I know you can't tame anything, even by kindness, if you're frightened of it. Come on. Now or never.” (*ibid*)

The syntax mirrors her effort to control anxiety. The conditional clause “or I shall begin to be frightened” interrupts the sentence before she quickly reasserts determination. “Come on. Now or never.” The short, imperative phrases create a sudden acceleration after the preceding longer sentence. Courage here does not consist in the absence of fear but in acting despite it. Significantly, it is the Princess who initiates movement: “She caught the Prince's hand in hers, and they ran along the path towards the dark mouth of the cave.” (*ibid*) The reversal is subtle but unmistakable. Instead of being led, she leads. The image of the “dark mouth of the cave” preserves the atmosphere of the traditional dragon tale. Yet, the following sentence unexpectedly interrupts any heroic momentum: “But they did not run into it. It really was so

very dark” (*ibid*). The remark's simplicity creates an almost humorous realism, where Romantic bravado shifts to everyday hesitation. This is because the cave is frightening due to its darkness, not because it houses some monster.

Outside, the Prince calls out: “What ho! Dragon there! What ho within!” (*ibid*). His archaic phrase sounds theatrical, as if performing the language of heroes. In contrast, the Princess speaks to the creature quite differently:

“Dragon – I say, dragon! Do come out and talk to us. We've brought you a present.”(*ibid*, p.214). The change from “What ho!” to “Do come out and talk to us” indicates a shift from confrontation to dialogue. The dragon is approached not as an enemy to defeat but as a potential partner. Even before the creature responds, the story begins to shift from combat language to relationship language.

“Oh yes – I know your presents. One of those precious princesses, I suppose? And I've got to come out and fight for her. Well, I tell you straight, I'm not going to do it. A fair fight I wouldn't say no to – a fair fight and no favour – but one of these put-up fights where you've got to lose – no!” (*ibid*)

The dragon's tone carries irritation rather than threat. The sarcastic phrase “those precious princesses” dispels any noble aura surrounding the rescue target. At the same time, the repeated “a fair fight” lends the speech a rhythm reminiscent of a long-practised argument. Even more telling is the use of “put-up fights,” a colloquial term that suggests theatrical performance rather than epic romance. Here, combat is not depicted as a genuine battle between good and evil but as a staged event with a predetermined ending, in which the dragon recognises that the story calls not just for conflict but for his defeat.

Unlike the Prince and Princess, who are only beginning to question convention, the dragon already understands the mechanism sustaining the narrative. Its objection is not to fighting itself but to participating in a role whose outcome has been predetermined. In this sense, the creature embodies precisely the instability Cohen attributes to monsters. Rather than enforcing boundaries, it exposes their artificiality.

The exchange becomes even more curious when the dragon questions the desire traditionally attributed to its species:

“If I wanted a princess I'd come and take her, in my own time – but I don't. What do you suppose I'd do with her, if I'd got her?” (*ibid*)

The question reverses the logic of the dragon tale. Instead of explaining why he abducted the princess, the dragon wonders why anybody would imagine that he should want one. When the Princess answers, in a voice that “trembled a little”, “Eat her, wouldn't you?” (*ibid*), the creature reacts with comic indignation: “Eat a fiddle-stick end. I wouldn't touch the horrid thing”(*ibid*)

The phrase “fiddle-stick end” humorously undermines the usual dignity associated with dragons. Similarly, the adjective “horrid” is typically used for monsters in fairy tales. In this context, however, the princess takes on a more active role, while the dragon remains indifferent - rejecting, rather than wanting or fearing her. He perceives the situation as outright absurd and repeatedly expresses only one wish: “You go away and don't bother me” (*ibid*)

The sentence is almost comically mundane. Meanwhile, his movements produce sounds compared to “a rather large cotton-mill”(*ibid*), waking from sleep, and to “the steam-hammers in the Arsenal at Woolwich”(*ibid*). These similes deprive the creature of mythical grandeur. Instead of ancient mystery, the narrative evokes industrial machinery. The dragon possesses “brass tail” and “steel claws”, yet behind this metallic exterior lies not aggression but weariness.

Despite his enormous power, he behaves less like a predator than like someone annoyed at being disturbed.

The scene reaches its emotional turning point when the Princess persists in her kindness and calls the dragon “dear”. Gradually, the dragon emerges from the cave and finally confesses: “Nobody ever called me dear before” (*ibid*, p.218). The simplicity of the sentence stands in contrast to the vast body and mechanical noises that have accompanied the creature throughout the episode. The adverb “ever” gives the statement the weight of an entire history. Generations have approached the dragon as an enemy, a trophy, or a necessary obstacle. No one has spoken to him with affection. What changes him, therefore, is not violence but recognition.

His next words contain one of the most remarkable moments in the tale: “Your kindness quite undragons me”(*ibid*). The verb “undragons” deserves particular attention. By transforming the noun “dragon” into a verb and immediately undoing it through the privative prefix “un-”, Nesbit turns identity itself into a reversible process. The word performs the action it describes: Dragonhood is no longer presented as an essential condition but as something that can be linguistically dismantled. Significantly, the creature does not claim that kindness makes him “good” or “human”. Such terms would preserve the opposition between monster and humanity. Instead, the sentence implies that being a dragon, at least in the sense required by the fairy tale, has always involved the performance of a role. Kindness does not alter the body; it alters the meaning attached to that body.

Cohen famously argues that “the monster always escapes” (1996: 4). In Nesbit's tale, this escape is not physical but semantic. The dragon escapes the meaning imposed upon it. Once “dragon” becomes something that can be “undragoned”, monstrosity itself ceases to function as a stable category. Without a monster willing to abduct princesses, the prince has no opportunity to perform heroic masculinity, and the princess no longer occupies the position of passive victim. What disappears is not simply the dragon but the system of oppositions upon

which the story depends. The creature does not become good; it simply refuses to remain the kind of monster the narrative requires. Its refusal ultimately reveals that dragon, prince, and princess are not natural identities, but roles sustained through repetition.

3.3.4 Beyond the Fairy-Tale

By this point in the tale, the princess, the prince, and the dragon have all abandoned the functions traditionally assigned to them. Heroism has become collaborative rather than exclusively masculine, monstrosity has ceased to define an essence, and the dragon itself has refused the role that guaranteed the narrative's progression. The question that remains is therefore no longer what happens to individual characters, but what happens to the fairy tale itself once none of its positions appears immutable. Nesbit's answer is neither the destruction of the genre nor the rejection of its conventions. Rather, the tale imagines continuity through transformation. Once its roles become negotiable, the fairy tale proves capable of generating new forms.

The consequences of the dragon's “undragoning” are immediately audible in its speech. Earlier, its voice had been described in mechanical terms, full of “clattering and creaking” and resembling “a rather large cotton-mill” awakening from sleep. Now its tone changes entirely:

“Whar'll I take to drink your health in? [...] Ah, you're something like a gentleman, you are, sir. I don't mind if I do, sir. I'll be proud to drink your and your good lady's health in a tiny drop of—” (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.218)

The repeated “sir” and the ceremonial expression “drink your health” create a comic incongruity between the immense creature and the exaggerated politeness of a Victorian gentleman. Yet the sentence itself breaks down under the pressure of emotion:

“to think of you asking me so friendly like [...] just a tiny drop of
puppuppuppuppupetrol—tha-that’s what does a dragon good, sir.” (*ibid*)

The stammer interrupts the syntax, turning speech itself into an index of feeling. Gratitude literally disorganises language. At the same time, the word “petrol” introduces modernity.

The stammer disrupts the syntax, transforming speech into a reflection of emotion. Gratitude explicitly disrupts language. Meanwhile, the word “petrol” brings modern technology into a realm of dragons and princesses. The ancient creature's life source, once thought mythical, is revealed to be mechanical. Even before the story's end, it blurs the line between enchantment and modernity.

Left alone with the Princess, the dragon timidly asks: “If I might make so bold [...] p'raps just to pass the time you'd be so kind as to call me Dear again.” (*ibid*, p.220) The request reveals the importance of naming the dragon. Earlier, the word “Dear” had initiated the process that “quite undragoned” him. Now the dragon seeks its repetition almost as a form of emotional sustenance. He continues:

“if you'd shake claws with a poor old dragon that's never been anybody's enemy but his own—well, the last of the dragons'll be the proudest dragon that's ever been since the first of them.” (*ibid*)

The sentence moves between humility and pride. The phrase “poor old dragon” strips the creature of epic grandeur, while “the proudest dragon” transforms pride itself into something relational rather than heroic. Most striking of all is the reflexive construction “never been anybody's enemy but his own”. The dragon's greatest struggle has never been with princes or kingdoms, but with himself. Monstrosity is internalised. The enemy turns out not to be

humanity, but isolation. The subsequent physical encounter maintains the dragon's strength but removes any violence:

the great steel hooks that were its claws closed over the Princess's hand as softly as the claws of the Himalayan bear will close over the bit of bun you hand it through the bars at the Zoo. (*ibid*)

The sentence juxtaposes hardness and gentleness. “Steel hooks” evoke danger, but the adverb “softly” immediately neutralises their menace. The simile itself is equally revealing. Rather than invoking legendary beasts or biblical monsters, the narrator likens the dragon to an animal patiently accepting food from zoo visitors.

The return to the palace similarly rewrites the traditional ending of the dragon tale: “the dragon following them like a pet dog.” (*ibid*), reducing the mythical creature to the scale of domestic companionship; the effect is affectionate rather than degrading.

During the wedding celebrations, “no one drank more earnestly to the happiness of the bride and bridegroom than the Princess's pet dragon” (*ibid*). The enemy who should have died becomes the most enthusiastic participant in the festivities. Significantly, the Princess immediately gives him a name: “Fido” The choice is comically prosaic. A name commonly associated with household dogs replaces the anonymity of “the dragon”. Identity itself changes through language. The monster becomes a proper individual.

Transformation, however, does not end with domestication. Once the Prince and Princess are settled in their kingdom, Fido approaches them with modesty:

“There must be some little thing I can do. My wings and claws and so on ought to be turned to some account—to say nothing of my grateful heart.”(*ibid*)

The syntax deserves attention here. The indefinite phrase “some little thing” underplays the extraordinary attributes listed afterwards. “Wings and claws and so on” reduces those features that once defined monstrosity to almost casual afterthoughts. The vague expression “and so on” drains them of epic significance. More importantly, the sentence culminates not in physical power but in “my grateful heart”. The phrase “to say nothing of” reverses expectations. Emotional attachment outweighs bodily strength. Heroism gives way to usefulness.

Consequently, the dragon discovers a new purpose. The narrator observes that his “greatest pleasure was now to give pleasure to others” (*ibid*): the repetition of “pleasure” creates a symmetrical structure in which happiness is produced through reciprocity. Desire itself is redefined. Traditional dragons pursue treasure or princesses; Fido finds fulfilment in service. Instead of carrying knights into battle, he transports children to the seaside and “would lie on the sand patiently waiting till they were ready to return” (*ibid*, p.222)

The children address him with the same word that first transformed him: Dear, a word which never failed to bring tears of affection and gratitude to its eyes” (*ibid*).

The noun “word” occupies the centre of the sentence. What moves the dragon is neither food nor praise, but language itself. Identity is sustained through recognition. The repeated “Dear” creates a circular structure: the same term that “undragoned” the creature now preserves its new existence. Eventually, however, another challenge emerges. Someone remarks, within the dragon's hearing, that “dragons were out-of-date, now so much new machinery had come in”(*ibid*). This type of language belongs to modernity. “Out-of-date” introduces the vocabulary of obsolescence and technological progress. Yet unlike previous transformations, this time change originates from the dragon itself. Distressed by the thought that he belongs to the past,

he asks the King “to change him into something less old-fashioned”(ibid). Even after abandoning monstrosity, the dragon refuses permanence. Identity remains historical rather than essential. Adaptation itself becomes the principle governing his existence.

The tale concludes with a sentence whose matter-of-fact tone renders its absurdity all the more memorable: “The dragon, indeed, became the first aeroplane²⁷” (ibid). The adverb “indeed” lends the transformation an almost documentary quality, as though the transition from dragon to aeroplane required no explanation. At this point, the tale unexpectedly assumes the form of an aetiological narrative, one of those stories designed to explain the origin of things. Yet the explanation is offered with deliberate irony. Modern technology does not replace the fairy tale; it emerges from it. The aeroplane becomes the dragon's latest incarnation.

Once the prince, princess, and dragon stop viewing their identities as fixed, the story becomes flexible. The loss of traditional roles does not produce collapse. Instead, it opens up new opportunities. Magic turns into technology, monsters become vehicles, and the last dragon gives rise to the first aeroplane. What takes off in the final sentence is more than just Fido; it is the fairy tale's ability to adapt, transforming its old forms into modern contexts while still retaining their essence.

²⁷ The last of The Dragons is believed to have been written before 1899, though it was published posthumously in 1925. The Wrigth Brothers achieved the first sustained powered flight in December 1903, which means the tale almost certainly predates the moment when human flight become reality (Briggs, 1987, p.513).

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how three late Victorian literary fairy tales - Mary De Morgan's *The Seeds of Love*, Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta*, and E. Nesbit's *The Last of the Dragons* - reconfigure the figure of the princess and, in doing so, expose the mechanisms through which femininity had been constructed and naturalised within the fairy-tale tradition. The argument has proceeded from a foundational claim: that the princess is not a timeless archetype but a historically produced narrative position, shaped by specific processes of textualisation, translation, editorial mediation and cultural reproduction. The three case studies are analysed as separate yet interconnected examples of a larger cultural debate at the end of the century, where traditional narrative conventions were simultaneously embraced, challenged, and partly renegotiated. The conclusion that emerges is not that the Victorian literary fairy tale broke decisively with its own conventions, but rather that it rendered those conventions increasingly visible, and that this act of making visible constitutes a form of subversion in its own right, however partial and constrained.

Before presenting the findings from the three chapters, it is worth returning to revisit the core metaphor suggested by the thesis title. The spell, as a key element of the fairy-tale genre, serves more than just a storytelling tool. In the genre's symbolic system, enchantment functions as a way to impose stability: it stops change, suspends free will, and keeps its subject in a forced state that appears natural and unavoidable. The sleeping princess does not choose her sleep; the enchanted beast does not choose his form. The spell primarily portrays a culturally constructed condition arising from a particular act of imposition, making it appear as a permanent and unalterable state. In this respect, the spell serves as a structurally precise analogue for the ideological function of narrative convention itself. The assumptions that govern the fairy-tale princess - that she must be beautiful, passive, patient, morally virtuous, and ultimately rewarded through marriage - operate by this logic: they present themselves as

inevitable features of the genre, as simply the way things are, and they derive their power from remaining unexamined. To expose a spell as a spell, to name it as a construction rather than a natural condition, is already to begin the process of its dissolution. It is this exposure, partial, constrained, and always working from within the inherited structures of the genre rather than against them, that characterises the subversive strategies of the three texts at the centre of this study.

The historical and theoretical groundwork for this argument was established in Chapter One, which traced the formation of the fairy tale as a literary genre from its origins in oral tradition through its successive acts of textualisation, codification, and ideological consolidation. What this genealogy reveals is not a stable or uniform tradition but a deeply contested one. The oral tale's communal fluidity was progressively transformed through the interventions of early modern collectors and authors as Straparola, Basile, Perrault, d'Aulnoy, the *conteuses*, each of whom reshaped the inherited material in accordance with the aesthetic and ideological priorities of their particular cultural contexts. The analysis of Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* demonstrated how the genre's conventions were not inherent properties of the stories themselves but products of the specific literal and social conditions of late seventeenth-century France. The examination of the *conteuses* has revealed the extent to which women writers working within the same cultural framework were able to introduce irony, complexity and oblique critique into a genre ostensibly dedicated to moral pedagogy, even as the constraints of decorum and social propriety ultimately limited the scope of their revisionary ambitions. What Chapter One established, above all, is that the fairy tale's conventions were always the result of choices made by identifiable historical agents operating within specific structures of power, and that this historical contingency is what makes them susceptible to later renegotiation.

Chapter Two extended this analysis into the Victorian period, examining the processes through which the French *conte de fées* was received and gradually transformed within nineteenth-century British culture. The chapter contended that the Victorianization of the fairy tale, understood as a process defined by selective adaptation, moral reinterpretation, and ideological consolidation, operated through several interconnected mechanisms. These included translation practices that restructured narrative causality based on Protestant morals; bowdlerisation efforts that removed elements like female agency, political satire, and sexual intricacy; processes of Anglicanisation that replaced the courtly themes of Perrault's stories with domestic ideals of patience, endurance, and self-control; and the influence of format types such as chapbooks, juvenile magazines, illustrated gift books, and theatrical pantomimes, each shaping the fairy tale's reception in ways specific to their material and institutional contexts. The princess figure that emerged from these successive acts of mediation was not simply inherited from the French tradition but actively constructed within British print culture.

Crucially, however, Chapter Two also demonstrated that this construction was never entirely stable. The processes of translation and adaptation that produced the Victorian fairy-tale princess also generated internal tensions that they could not fully resolve. The uneven recalibration of Perrault's *bonté* into English models of patient endurance, for instance, produced a model of femininity that was simultaneously passive and performative, morally self-effacing and yet dependent on public visibility and recognition for its narrative reward. These unresolved contradictions are significant because they help to explain the particular susceptibility of the princess figure to the kinds of renegotiation examined in Chapter Three. A convention that presents itself as natural while simultaneously generating internal incoherence is already a weakened spell, already, in a sense, beginning to make itself visible.

Chapter Three offered close readings of the three primary texts, analysing in each case the specific formal and ideological strategies through which the princess figure is renegotiated, and assessing the extent to which these strategies achieve genuine subversion or remain constrained by the conventions they seek to challenge. The comparative analysis revealed that subversion in these texts takes strikingly different forms, operating through distinct aesthetic registers and producing distinct, though related, critical effects.

De Morgan's *The Seeds of Love* enacts its subversive potential primarily through temporality. Rather than openly challenging the conventions it inherits, the tale stretches and delays the narrative rhythms upon which the fairy tale traditionally depends. Waiting, sacrifice, postponement, and repeated acts of maintenance replace the swift progression towards recognition and reward. Crucially, Blanchelys is not deprived of agency: she acts, leaves the palace, crosses geographical and symbolic boundaries, and persistently chooses love over wealth and status. Yet action itself proves insufficient to secure the consolatory closure the genre promises. By the conclusion of the story, agency persists, but fulfillment is indefinitely postponed. De Morgan's challenge is not to reject the fairy tale outright, but to reveal, over time, the constraints of a narrative that cannot fully resolve desire, sacrifice, and loss. The spell remains unbroken; instead, it slowly dissolves through the passage of waiting.

Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta* operates by a different logic. Where De Morgan works through feeling, Wilde works through tragedy, using the aestheticist conventions of his tale to expose the violence latent within the fairy-tale idealisation of beauty. The dwarf's death, his fatal recognition of his own reflection in the mirror, is the cost of the genre's conventions made fully explicit: the logic that equates beauty with value and ugliness with exclusion is carried to its inevitable conclusion, stripped of the ameliorating magic that would ordinarily soften its implications. The Infanta's response, dismissing the dwarf's death with the instruction that future playmates should have no hearts, does not represent a

straightforward critique of her character but rather a systematic indictment of the cultural formation that has produced her. Wilde's tale refuses the redemptive resolution that might render its critique comfortable, insisting instead on the irreversibility of what convention has done. In this sense, *The Birthday of the Infanta* represents the most radical of the three subversions: it exposes the spell's violence without offering any alternative to it, leaving the reader with the full weight of what the genre's conventions cost. The enchantment surrounding beauty, hierarchy, and princesshood is neither broken nor replaced by an alternative vision. Instead, its mechanisms are brought into the light, and once seen, their violence can no longer remain invisible.

Nesbit's *The Last of the Dragons* approaches subversion through metafiction and comedy. If De Morgan stretches the spell through time and Wilde exposes the violence concealed within it, Nesbit makes the spell itself visible by rendering the conventions of the fairy tale explicit. Questions such as “Why must I be rescued by a prince?” (Nesbit in Tosi, 2023, p.206) reveal that the structures governing princesshood, heroism and monstrosity are not natural truths but inherited narrative habits. Throughout the tale, roles traditionally taken for granted become open to negotiation: the Princess refuses passivity, the Prince abandons heroic violence, and the dragon ultimately rejects the very identity that defines him. In doing so, the tale transforms fairy-tale conventions themselves into objects of reflection. Nesbit's subversion lies not in destroying the fairy tale, but in revealing that its scripts are sustained through repetition rather than necessity. Once these conventions become visible, they cease to appear inevitable.

Read comparatively, the three texts illuminate a spectrum of subversive possibility available to late Victorian writers working within and against the fairy-tale tradition. De Morgan demonstrates that the genre's conventions can be reorganised from within by quietly redirecting its affective logic. Wilde demonstrates that they can be exposed by a refusal of

resolution, making their violence unmistakable. Nesbit demonstrates that they can be rendered negotiable through the metafictional strategy of making the script itself visible. Each approach produces a different kind of critical purchase on the inherited material, and each arrives at a different conclusion about the relationship between the fairy tale's conventions and the possibilities they contain. Together, they establish that the late Victorian literary fairy tale was not a single or uniform cultural form but a site shaped by the specific aesthetic commitments, social positions and cultural contexts of the individual authors who inhabited it.

It is equally important, however, to acknowledge the limits of the subversion these texts achieve. None of the three fully escapes the structures it interrogates. De Morgan's princess attains a form of agency, but it is an agency expressed through renunciation rather than autonomy, and it remains legible only within the fairy tale's existing framework of sacrifice and moral worth. Wilde's *Infanta* is not herself transformed by the tale's critique; she remains entirely within the conventions that have produced her, and it is the reader rather than the character who is invited to recognise their implications. Nesbit's princess reorganises the fairy-tale framework without dismantling it: the dragon is tamed rather than abolished, the prince remains necessary, and the ending restores domestic harmony even as it redistributes the roles within it. Subversion in these texts is always partial and always constrained, a condition that reflects not the limitations of the individual authors but the structural properties of the genre itself. To work within the fairy tale is to accept certain requirements of legibility and closure; to abandon them entirely would be to produce something that is no longer recognisable as a fairy tale. The subversive energies of these texts are therefore best understood not as attempts to break entirely free from the genre's conventions but as attempts to make those conventions visible, to transform the spell from an invisible mechanism into an object of scrutiny.

This, ultimately, is the argument that this thesis has endeavored to establish. The late Victorian literary fairy tale does not abandon the princess figure; rather, it makes the assumptions supporting her more prominently observable. By exposing the mechanisms through which femininity is constructed and rewarded within the narrative economy of the genre, texts such as *The Seeds of Love*, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, and *The Last of the Dragons* transform the princess from an unquestioned ideal into a contested and self-conscious role. The governing spell - the set of conventions that link passivity to virtue, beauty to worth, and marriage to fulfilment - still largely persists. However, it is now more visible. By using time delays, aesthetic openness, and metafictional self-awareness, these stories gradually expose the cultural and narrative frameworks that uphold it. The significance of the fin de siècle lies precisely in this moment of transition: not because the spell is finally broken, but because its workings become visible enough to be questioned. If the conditions for its complete dissolution had not yet been met, the enchantment could no longer pass as nature. Once made visible, the spell no longer remains quite the same.

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