

Tavola Strozzi, view of the city of Naples in Italy from the sea, 1470 (Alfonso V of Aragon's naval victory over John of Anjou). Museo di San Martino, Naples, Italy.



Neapolitan Tales of Magic between the 15th and the 17th Centuries: Masuccio Salernitano, Girolamo Morlini and Giovan Battista Basile

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When we turn our gaze to the origin of the fairy tale, it is crucial to precisely identify what the object of the search is. Ruth Bottigheimer has proposed an articulate and functional definition of this genre of storytelling: a fairy tale occurs when the overall trajectory of a short story firmly incorporates fairy-tale motifs, fairy-tale structure, and a happy ending that includes either the restoration of the status of a character who has fallen into disgrace or the rise to prosperity and wealth of a poor character thanks to a magical element.¹ Considering this definition, the birth of the fairy tale coincides with the works of Giovanni Francesco Straparola (1480–post 1557) and Giovan Battista Basile (1583–1632). But these fairy tales did not come from nowhere, as Bottigheimer herself points out in her book *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic: From Ancient Egypt to the Italian Renaissance*. Even though they were not all interconnected, distinct features of fairy tales had already surfaced in medieval and early modern European literature: for example, magic had already been represented in *lais* and chivalric poems.² However, the narrative format adopted by the inventors of the fairy tale, the novella, was not characterised by fairy-tale motifs and structures; on the contrary, traditionally it tended to exclude them. Yet, even prior to the emergence of the first fairy-tale works, between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance there was a gradual process of opening up the novella to new imaginative realms, which laid the groundwork for the creation of the fairy tale. This paper examines two stages of this process in Southern Italy, focusing on the forms of storytelling in Neapolitan literature during the early modern period, before Basile's collection of tales.

When we think of the Italian novella, we primarily refer to the tradition of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), an essential model for the narrators of the following centuries. Having the *Decameron* (post 1348–ante 1360) as a reference point means considering

a predominantly realistic tradition.³ Nevertheless, tales of magic were not foreign to Boccaccio's own cultural horizon. In a famous passage from his Latin treatise *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*, while discussing the veiled meanings of fictional narratives, he outlines what Mario Lavagetto described as a 'snapshot' of oral storytelling,⁴ entailing specifically magical creatures:

for not even the craziest old crone keeping vigil around the hearth
with the young serving girls and telling some tales about the Ogre,
the Fairies, and Witches, which have been recited many times,
thinks that she is not including some serious sentiment – to the
degree that her feeble intellect permits – with which she wants to
frighten small children, or delight young ladies, or make fun of
older folks, or at least show the power of Fortune.⁵

So, even if these contents are not given any space in the *Decameron*, it is certain that at the end of the Middle Ages, by the second half of the 1300s, magic tales were alive and well in the context of oral storytelling.

Masuccio Salernitano and Girolamo Morlini, who lived and wrote more than a century later, fully experienced the changed cultural landscape of Renaissance humanism. Therefore, it is worth dwelling on more textual evidence and investigating whether this framing is still applicable to their historical period. Even among the humanists, known to be refined scholars and imitators of the classics, there was no lack of familiarity with tales of magic. Angelo Poliziano (1454-94) provides us with a remarkable insight into the matter, since he deliberately chose a magical character to prompt his opening oration to his university philosophy course on Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* in 1492,⁶ drawing on the Socratic tradition of using folktales as a tool for philosophy.⁷ What matters the most here is that the opening passage of Poliziano's treatise offers a vivid first-person account of magic storytelling. The humanist recalls a recurring experience in his childhood, that of his grandmother telling him stories about Lamias, witches who sucked blood, or even devoured children: 'Haven't you ever heard the name "Lamia"? Even from the time when I was a little boy, my grandmother used to tell me that there were these Lamias in the wilderness, which devoured crying boys. Back then, the Lamia was the thing I dreaded the most, my greatest fear.'⁸ Shifting our focus to the Kingdom of Naples, the area that interests us most in this context, Giovanni Pontano (1429-1503), too, in his treatise *De sermone*, completed in the 1490s, mentions the folktales that grandmothers would tell their children to make them fall asleep: 'To these [fables] I will add, unless perhaps it displeases, the so-called old wives' tales such as are told at cradles while little children are awake, for these also can bring delight in the right circumstances.'⁹ Although Pontano does not explicitly mention magic, he employs the Latin phrase '*fabulas aniles*', which traditionally refers to narratives containing supernatural elements.¹⁰

These intellectuals bear witness to the ongoing popularity of tales of magic in cultural circles during this historical period. However, a caveat must be made: all these accounts relate to a strictly oral tradition, which is markedly different from the literary collections analysed here. In her historical study of the fairy tale, Bottigheimer aptly points out:

all references to old women or other people's telling tales or stories before 1550 are just that – references to old women or other people telling stories, and the most we learn about the stories themselves is that some of them had witches or monsters. Inadequate to prove that fairy tales existed in the ancient and medieval worlds, those reports merely validate the existence of storytelling in the ancient world, a fact that has, however, never been in doubt.¹¹

Moreover, all these humanistic texts highlight an inextricable link between this type of narration and female narrators, especially older women. And ever since Cicero, the old wives' tales (*aniles fabellae*) had had the reputation of being silly and unfounded tales, handed down from person to person thanks to collective – and, particularly, womanly – credulity.¹² This is in stark contrast to the status of individual authorship and high literary value attributed to the Italian novella, written by male authors from Boccaccio onwards.¹³ Additionally, this representation also implies an audience limited to children, or even infants. Instead, I want to focus on literature, and specifically on the tradition of the Italian novella, that is the milieu in which the fairy tale took shape, to assess what kind of influence this magical storytelling background had within the works of Renaissance professional writers before Basile openly incorporated its elements in his fairy tales. This is not to endorse the notion that fairy tales were pre-existing oral narrations subsequently transcribed into written form, a theory that Bottigheimer has already cast doubt upon.¹⁴ Rather, I intend to examine the process by which specific components inherent to oral folk narratives, such as magical motifs and stories about fairies, were assimilated into literary short stories. We can find evidence of such a process in a letter by Francesco Petrarca to the cardinal Giovanni Colonna, in which he recounts how, during a journey to Aachen in 1333, he came to learn of a magical adventure that occurred to Charlemagne:

I saw the abode of Charles, Aix, as well as his tomb in a marble shrine, frightening to the barbarians. There from the clergy appointed to the shrine I heard a rather amusing story which they showed me as it had been written and which afterward I read in a more discreet form as recounted by modern writers. I should now like to tell it to you ...¹⁵

Petrarca was told the tale of Charlemagne by clergymen living in Aachen, but they were also able to provide a written version of such tale, which was later reworked by professional writers, among whom we now find Petrarca himself. This passage illuminates the permeable boundaries between oral and written storytelling, showing how magical tales shifted between written texts and spoken word over time.

There are several elements of compatibility between magical folktales in the Italian literary genre and the novella, which allowed for mutual exchanges.¹⁶ Both are short narrative forms, which often deal with common themes and motifs, such as the adventure of a hero, difficult tasks, perilous journeys through forests, recognition of the hero, the final achievement of a marriage, and so on. Moreover, even though the novella is a literary product, it pivots on an insistent fiction of orality: the fictional framework of these collections of stories always depicts one or more narrators in the act of telling the stories to an audience of listeners.¹⁷ Therefore, the novella adopts many oral storytelling devices, which liken it to the folktale. Finally, the novella is famously very versatile, a protean literary genre with no strict codification, therefore prone to experimentation and intermingling with other textual types.¹⁸

In addition to these inherent factors of compatibility, I argue that between the 15th and 16th centuries the novella's openness to contamination with folklore magic might have also been favoured by a cultural shift. Alongside the blooming of Renaissance courts and their refined customs, this historical period is also known for the emergence of modern demonology and the new role of the Inquisition.¹⁹ From the 15th century onward, Christian theologians shifted away from the belief in the unreal nature of magic, and began to view it as a tangible threat, associated with heretical movements and demonic influence.²⁰ Boccaccio's imitators in the early modern period wrote their stories in a changed intellectual context, in which the supernatural entered the previously sceptical educated discourse.²¹ An intriguing testimony of this widespread perception can be found in a text from the circle of Masuccio Salernitano: the *Ricordi*, a memoir written by Loise De Rosa (1385–post 1475), head servant in the Neapolitan court through successive generations of Angevin and Aragonese rulers.²² In his account of historical events, De Rosa recounts numerous supernatural incidents, but what stands out most is his portrayal of how even high-ranking ecclesiastical figures believed in magic. In one passage, he claims that the pope himself, worried about King Alfonso V of Aragon's intense affection for the Neapolitan Lucrezia d'Alagno, suggested to the king that the young woman must have bewitched (*'affatturato'*) him, given her acquaintance with the city's witches (*'vecchie fattuchiare'*).²³ While not being a reliable historical source, De Rosa is representative of a widespread mindset and imagination that attributes to the Church of the time a concrete concern for magic.

In this context, since the novella mostly portrays the society and culture of its time, it would not be surprising to see the incorporation of commonly held magical elements within its plots. Nonetheless, it still strived to adhere to the model of Boccaccio and

remained a predominantly realistic genre. This is just the first of several factors that, conversely, seem to make this genre incompatible with magical motifs, coming both from folklore and other literary traditions which employed magic in their plots, such as chivalric poems. Generally speaking, the setting of the novellas remained historically and geographically defined, portraying characters with a verisimilar individual psychology and social background. Additionally, the imitation of the Boccaccian model also included the adoption of certain plots from the *Decameron*, in which belief in magic was associated with the lower sociocultural strata and mocked. These formal and thematic characteristics of the genre meant that magical narrative materials were not integrally and openly included in the novella from the get-go. In order to be incorporated into this literary genre, they needed to be adapted to suit the narrative framework characteristic of the novella.

The dynamics of this process are consistent with the conduit theory, developed by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi to explain the stability in oral transmission of folkloric materials such as legends or folktales over time. Contrary to the way other types of messages often degrade from person to person, a message like a folktale tends to remain relatively unchanged throughout its transmission, even over extended periods of time, as long as it stays within its 'conduit'. In this context, by conduit, we mean 'individuals united by similar mind-sets – people who react similarly to similar messages ... within given systems of communication'.²⁴ As Dégh argues,

If a message – a folklore text – travels through its proper conduit, it goes unchanged from one person to another; however, if the message, on its course, reaches an inappropriate individual, it will either reach a dead end or survive by undergoing modifications, and thereby, the message deviates from its original trail and lands in another conduit whose members respond to the modified message.²⁵

In some respects this theory can also apply to written narratives. Consider a scenario where a message such as a tale of magic or a magical theme circulates orally: its transition from oral circulation to the hands of a novella author undertaking their literary composition results in its departure from its original conduit, leading to alterations. To some extent, the same can also apply to the transition of a tale of magic or a magical theme from one literary genre to another: as proposed by Francesco Orlando, drawing from Roman Jakobson's framework,²⁶ even a literary work can be conceived as a message emitted from a sender (the author) to a receiver (the intended audience) within a specific context and through a code constituted by the conventions of the literary genre to which it belongs.²⁷ Therefore, a tale of magic or a magical theme may circulate nearly unchanged, for instance, from one

poem on the Matter of Britain to another, but if it were read there and subsequently reworked by a novella author for their own target audience, it would undergo modifications, in accordance with the formal and thematic norms of this literary genre. Initially, magic entered the new conduit of the novella as if in disguise; but slowly it began to break through the conventions of the literary genre, and with their alteration, this conduit became more suitable for accommodating it.

An example of this process is a novella by Tommaso Guardati, better known as Masuccio Salernitano, who was born at the beginning of the 15th century in a respected, landowning family originally from Sorrento. His father served as a secretary for Raimondo Orsini, prince of Salerno, and therefore moved the family to the city that identifies Masuccio to this day. After the complex succession events to the Neapolitan throne among the houses of Durazzo, Anjou, and Aragon, Tommaso also found employment in the noble courts of Salerno and Naples, ending up as the personal secretary of Roberto di Sanseverino, prince of Salerno from 1463. Between the 1450s and the early 1470s, Masuccio composed a collection of 50 novellas called *Il novellino*, which overtly takes after Boccaccio's *Decameron* in its structure and themes.²⁸ It was published in 1476, shortly after the author's death.

Let us consider the 26th novella. In this story, a young woman from Naples finds herself smitten with a boy she glimpses while passing in the street. Despite the intensity of her passion, she knows lovers to be loose-lipped, so she exercises self-restraint and devises a clever plan to enjoy his company while safeguarding her reputation. She asks a relative of hers to disguise himself and meet the young man and instruct him to come to the front of the church of San Giovanni Maggiore that evening. There, the beloved meets the woman's relative again, who informs him of his fortunate fate: a young and beautiful lady desires his love, but to win it, he must allow himself to be led to her while blindfolded, to prevent him from recognising her identity. The young man agrees to these conditions of privacy and meets the mysterious lady in a dark room in her house, where they spend the night together. In order to officially become her lover and be able to see her again, he must swear to keep their relationship utterly secret.

The protagonist consents, but immediately breaks his promise by telling his closest friend all about his new, mysterious lover. Unfortunately, this confidant happens to be a courtier, who wastes no time in recounting the incident at the palace, pretending it occurred in the land of France. Unbeknownst to the friend, one of the listeners happens to be the same relative of the young woman who had facilitated the nighttime meeting: he promptly tells her of her lover's breach of secrecy. Disappointed yet resolute, the woman concludes that the affair is not worth the trouble. With no desire to become the subject of Neapolitan gossip, she decides it is wiser to avoid any further encounters with the young man and seek a more discreet lover for herself.²⁹

What may appear at first glance to be a spicy tale set against the backdrop of contemporary Naples, amidst courtly gossip and rumours, is an extremely original

TERTIA PARTE

un coltello se haurebe uoluntaria d'uita puata put
mentre che colui hauea plato lei senza respòdere a
una sola parola nò era mai rimasta de amaramente
pianger. Ma fine p fare il suo uolere dal lecto tolta se
d'occamente chiamato il moro & còe il iouane uol
se tutti doi posse fori di casa & serano luscio dolente
a morte & cò tate lachryme che una fote ne haue-
ua rimasta uota ala sua camera sene resteno oue
còe colante capote d' còtinao dimorato o che do-
lote o uenieno lo hauesse canuto i beui di morte il
nobile giouane hauendo il facto disuolgato & del
castigo de de la morte haunto mirabile piacere re-
còparato il moro & posto i libera lui a cho libero
& sciolto damore grà tēpo cò felicità uisse godē-
do la sua fiorita giouēta.

Ma faccio.

lu di dugi feta o mai incredulo ascolta-
do qle si uolia cònta ribaldaria de fem-
mine le recitate p la mēte remolgendose
che mogli para con gli occhi haueua ue-
duta. lo da la uergogna de me medemo raffena-
to che puto còe li altri da femina sono mēto me-
rimato che dire qdo loro assalte dala grā foia &
strenata zaba p meno errare fecòdo il loro credere
adoperano lo saluo honorifice tu che legi me in-
tēdi nò te bisogna cosa & sene dubiti troua un al-
tro che d' chiana tali oculi termini pu chio còqsto
ancora me restò de scriuere de molte altre piu de
focosa luxuria occore q' temēdo de effeme pale-
fate o p nò aduuliti a homini de bassa sorte se so-
to pongono a gli aiali beui si còe p uenissimo ho-
fentito & cò pui expenēte toccato cò manoscra
le nescido opare le pui d' lenolte e mādato ad esse-
sto da coloro che son ote tēgono piu che laltre fa-
ue dale cui ragiōe mōtia una fagace dōna che ap-
pōsto racòtare itēdo qle effēdo iprouista fiera men-
te pōia de uno ligiadio giouane seppe tātō se me-
desimo rassenate che ancora suo deliderio satisfi-
cesse mai ad giouane fo concesso cognoscerla de
che le laltre da costei togliessero expio pochi ne
ferebēdo da gli homini uutilate. Argomēto.

Vna dōna d' un ligiadio giouane innamorata p
un suo puato trascelto sel fa uelato i camera cò
diare gode cò lui una notte dagli il modo còe &
qdo da lei ha aromare al giouane sene fida a uno
fuo amico ala dōna il fete & mai piu remāda p lui
Ala magnifica Praxiscilla de monico. Nouella.
uigilissima.

Exordio.

lu uolte ragionando teco magnifica &
colēdissima mia cōmar me ricordo ha-
ueme trasfecofo che qriche rasilime se-
mine se possano de prudētia comēdare
pēfido cò qei māmēti se haue la natura pōute
put tene trouare alcūe qle còe meno iprudēti de
laltre nò possēdon alla libidine separare & p qsto
cercano cò ame noua cautela alloro defendēti satisfi-
fice se posseno meno che laltre blasfmate qle solo
cò lo effēdere le legi dno uiolētare la debile loro
natura occultamēte faciano illor appetiti. Si còe da
la fegēte nouella sceremo partimēte i sul nostro
credere cōfirmati acho che cò lasciolate isfemi me

scoldo possi cò teco medesimo uero iudicio da-
re se oltre il peccato la dōna ne deue effier i per al-
cua cōmēdazio se al numero de le altre scelerate
la possi & meritamēte accòpagnare. Vale.



Narratione.

El tēpo còl pūtolice trasfecofo p lo no-
stro regno tātū miracoli facca nella cita
de napoli il sotto scripto itano caso de
uero itenemēte fu che un fabbar da
feto nel mēse de marzo che le brigate andāo alle
ca māmūta sietra d' ligiadie dōne hanēdo fecò-
do loro credere la pdomita guadagnatolo ue-
ne nel disio de ritornarse a casa p fori la cita: & ef-
fēdo a qlla itata che uā da tranfero alle padule se
abbatterono i una brigata d' gioueni nò meno d'
belleza ch' d' nobilita cian ch' p loro piaceuole ex-
ercitio iocumino ala palla del maglio oue accade
che una del le dūte dōne de grā belleze & de sero
magior pōsto gli occhi adofio ad uno delli dicti
gioueni che s'gopparello d' damasco uende itana
& i maneta piaciutoi che tutta se iteta uenise me-
no puto cò la prudētia uēta i per la fēsalita fēra
nōstrame alcio segno cò laltre ibēti cò grādissi-
ma passioe del piaciuto giouane a casa sene re-
uocòtromo a tal amore còe hauesse possuto haue-
re itiero effecto cōincio molte & diuerse uie a tra-
fcomere & qntūq' amore hauesse omēuto il sōmo
loco d' il suo coeput nò era tātō fori d' se uscita ch'
nò cognoscesse cò pōch uolte uolēdo alla amoro-
sa passioe satisfare itēto secreto fa la tela tramata
nò se po p lōgo spacio occulto tener p che nò e-
niūo al mōdo che nò habia uno pfecto amico cò
loqle se cōmōica tutti isoi bōi & rei aduenimēti
& quello tale ne haueua un altro alloquale niuno
fuo ne daltui secreto tēnea occultato: & cōfi da
uno in altro fuimo molto spēto le coite felicitate
de gli amanti con longēmi serie terminate & p q'
lo se deue credere che lei pigliasse per ultimo par-
tito o tale amore con un mirabile & itano pen-
siero haueo compimento o remanēse del tut-
to itanto fosse dal disio uinta & a morte recu-
ta & per dare al facto con la celenita expediēto
hauendo uno suo parente del quale fidare si pos-
sea & alui discoperta la sua passioe i in breue
parole gli ordino a fare cio che hauea demō cò
lui che obsequioso gli era ando spaciatamen-

adaptation of a tale of magic,³⁰ which Laurence Harf-Lancner named the Melusinian plot.³¹ The *Lai de Lanval* (written around 1170) by Marie de France³² was the most famous literary version of this narrative structure during Masuccio's time.³³ In these narratives, a supernatural female character, often a fairy, falls in love with a mortal young man.³⁴ Her identity is unknown: she is only described as being beautiful and rich.³⁵ In the plot of the *Lanval*, the woman is unable to reveal herself directly and uses an intermediary to lead the beloved to her and enjoy his love.³⁶ The central core of the plot revolves around an interdiction imposed on the man: if he respects this condition, he can receive love and fortune.³⁷ However, the prohibition is unfailingly broken, and the man loses the favour of the woman.³⁸ In the end, the fairy may forgive the man, as in the case of *Lanval*, or she may abandon him to his fate for not keeping his promise.³⁹

The crucial point of the Melusinian plot concerns the prohibition connected to the relationship arising from a fundamental taboo, which animates various tales of magic and fairy tales: the supernatural world cannot mix with the human one.⁴⁰ This is precisely what makes Masuccio's operation so interesting, as he includes the fairy-tale plot in his collection of novellas only on the condition of immersing it in complete realism, thereby adhering to the Boccaccian convention of the genre, but at the same time nullifying the supernatural element. Unlike *Lanval's* mysterious lady, in this tale the woman has no magical powers: what makes her extraordinary is her sense and prudence.⁴¹ It should be specified that Masuccio's collection of novellas is fueled by a strongly misogynistic vein, so, for the author, a wise woman is something bordering on the supernatural – we have proof of this in the proemial epistle which introduces the novella, stating that 'although very few women can be commended for their prudence, taking into account how very defective Nature has made them, some however can be found who are less imprudent than the rest'.⁴² However, in the absence of the taboo related to the tale of magic, Masuccio must find a new motivation for the interdiction to keep it in his plot. His solution is based on the ideal of the so-called perfect friendship, a very popular theme in Renaissance humanism, rooted in principles inherited from Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy.⁴³ Masuccio, nonetheless, seems rather sceptical of the actual realisation of such ideal friendship in his days.⁴⁴ In that era, as the protagonist of Masuccio's story claims, no one lacked a 'perfect friend', that is, a best friend to whom they can tell everything. However, this friend, in turn, might have another best friend to whom they can tell everything respectively, and so on. Therefore, the woman wants to keep her affair hidden, to protect herself from this chain of open-hearted confessions between friend and friend, which inevitably degenerates into collective gossip.⁴⁵ Thus, Masuccio's novella maintains the magic tale structure, but not the original magical element coming from the traditional version of the tale.

The second type of interdiction present in the novella is not found in the *Lanval*-like narrations, but is present in other renditions of the Melusinian plot: not only it is forbidden

to speak to anyone about the relationship, but the magical lover cannot even be seen.⁴⁶ The protagonist encounters the young Neapolitan woman in a completely dark room, where he has been led while blindfolded. This motif has its most famous embodiment in the story of Cupid and Psyche.⁴⁷ The underlying principle is always the censorship of the supernatural element, even to the human lovers themselves. It is precisely this element that brings Masuccio's novella closer to the rendition of this plot by Giovan Battista Basile, specifically the ninth *trattenimento* (entertainment) of the second day, entitled 'The Padlock' ('Lo catenaccio').⁴⁸

In Basile's fairy tale, the genders are reversed and match the Cupid-Psyche dynamic. Luciella, a very poor girl, while going to fetch water from a fountain, is stopped by a slave who invites her to follow him through a cave to a beautiful palace. Here, Luciella receives lavish banquets and beautiful clothes.⁴⁹ At night, a mysterious young man hidden in darkness lies down in bed with her; only to vanish as soon as day breaks.⁵⁰ When Luciella wishes to return home, she is forbidden to speak about the palace and the origin of her newfound wealth: 'he reminded her ... to tell no one where she was coming from or where she was staying'⁵¹. One night, prompted by her jealous sisters, Luciella decides to break the prohibition and stay awake to light up the room and finally see her lover's face.⁵² She discovers that he is a handsome young man, but is subsequently stripped of her riches and expelled from the palace for her disobedience.⁵³ In the last sequence of the story, it is revealed that the man is actually a prince forced to live in hiding and wandering due to a curse.⁵⁴ Once the spell is broken, the handsome prince and Luciella can live happily ever after together.⁵⁵

Both Masuccio's novella and Basile's *cunto* are two different, yet closely related variants of the Melusinian plot. The tales of these two authors testify to the persistence of this type of magic tale in Naples between the 15th and 17th centuries. However, Masuccio resorts to a realistic camouflage, still far from the 'rise fairy tale'⁵⁶ crafted by Basile.

In the timespan between Masuccio Salernitano and Giovan Battista Basile, another, perhaps lesser-known, Neapolitan author took a step closer to the fairy tale by retaining the magical elements in his short stories. There is scant information available about him: Girolamo Morlini was born in the last quarter of the 15th century, and he is presumed to have died after 1528. He was a law professor at the Studium of Naples.⁵⁷ He wrote a peculiar collection of 81 novellas, 20 Aesopic fables in Latin, and a comedy, which was published in 1520 with the simple title of *Novellae*.⁵⁸

In Morlini's *Novellae*, genuine magical elements coexist with realistic concealments. We still find instances in which the supernatural turns out to be fake and is subject to scepticism: this is the case with the *novelle di beffa* (that is to say prank tales),⁵⁹ in which, according to a well-established tradition, only the gullible can truly believe in magic and otherworldly creatures. A prime illustration of this is Morlini's 28th novella: every night, a woman cheats on her husband with a lover, right in their own bridal bed;⁶⁰ one night,

the husband notices the presence of the other man, but the woman makes him believe that it is a ghost haunting the house.⁶¹ Critics have pointed out a similar story in the *Cene* (1549), the collection of novellas by Anton Francesco Grazzini (1505-84).⁶² A close, albeit less racy, precedent might be already found in the first novella of the seventh day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

However, Morlini proves to be truly innovative in including cases of authentic magic among the novellas, foreshadowing Basile's later developments. Often, however, magical themes are cast in a grotesque and desecrating narrative, contrary to what we find in fairy tales.⁶³ An example of this is the treatment of the recurring motif of talking animals helping the hero: in the 60th novella, birds reveal the presence of a hidden treasure to a man, but the communication is made possible thanks to a magical herb that the man is accidentally using to clean himself.⁶⁴

On the other hand, the magic in the 25th novella is all but laughable. A young man hears a voice coming from a tomb and goes to the rescue of a blind man who had fallen into it. Then, he heads towards the house of Phillis, the girl he loves, but stops on the way again to help a hanged man, who asks for assistance. This corpse turns out to be possessed ('*larvatus*')⁶⁵ by a demonic spirit ('*calconida*').⁶⁶ Due to the hero's good deeds, this supernatural being spares his soul and even becomes his helper, as he uses his powers to kill the girl's relatives who were waiting for the young man in an ambush.⁶⁷ In this uncanny tale of magic, Morlini unironically incorporates typical magical motifs such as the unquiet grave, demonic possessions and, most notably, otherworldly help as a reward for acts of kindness. Gianni Villani referred to Tale Types E300-399, generically designated as 'Friendly return of the dead', in Rotunda's motif index;⁶⁸ however, it is possible to link this tale to a much more relevant entry in Thompson's Tale Type E366.2: 'Hanged man warns youth against visiting sweetheart. Takes youth's place and receives shot meant for him.'⁶⁹ Magical motifs alone do not make a fairy tale, but they are a fundamental ingredient in its construction: their full integration into Neapolitan novellas marks a significant advancement towards Basile's creation.

It is no coincidence that Morlini himself was a model of primary importance for Straparola, who a few decades later included some actual rewritings of these Latin novellas in his *Piacevoli notti* (1550-3).⁷⁰ The fact that even the Northern Italian Straparola was influenced by a Neapolitan author shows that Renaissance Naples was a sort of propulsive centre of magic novellas, leaving an indelible mark in the history of the narrative genre of the fairy tale.

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Notes

1. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 8-13; see also Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002)..
2. See Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic: From Ancient Egypt to the Italian Renaissance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
3. Erich Auerbach, *Zur Technik der Frührenaissancenovelle in Italien und Frankreich*, 2nd edition (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1971), 1; Cesare Segre, 'La novella e i generi letterari', in *La novella italiana: Atti del Convegno di Caprarola; 19-24 settembre 1988*, ed. Enrico Malato (Rome: Salerno, 1989), vol. 1, 48; Bottigheimer, *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic*, 148-9.
4. Mario Lavagetto, 'Dal buio delle notti invernali', in *Racconti di orchi, di fate e di streghe: La fiaba letteraria in Italia*, ed. Mario Lavagetto (Milan: Mondadori, 2008), xi.
5. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogiae deorum gentilium* 14.10.7, trans. Suzanne Magnanini as 'Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (begun circa 1350)', in *Fairy Tales Framed: Early Forewords, Afterwords, and Critical Words*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 21.
6. Christopher S. Celenza, 'Poliziano's *Lamia* in Context', in *Angelo Poliziano's 'Lamia': Text, Translation, and Introductory Studies*, ed. Christopher S. Celenza (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1-45.
7. Plato, *Gorgias*, 527a.
8. Angelo Poliziano, *Lamia*, trans. and ed. Christopher S. Celenza, in *Angelo Poliziano's 'Lamia': Text, Translation, and Introductory Studies*, ed. Christopher S. Celenza (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 195.
9. Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, *The Virtues and Vices of Speech*, trans. and ed. G.W. Pigman III, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 243.
10. For a history of this phrase in Latin up to the Middle Ages, see Matteo Massaro, '*Aniles fabellae*', *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 49 (1977): 104-35.
11. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 2.
12. Massaro, '*Aniles fabellae*'; Marina Montesano, *Fantasma, fantasma che di notte vai: La cultura magica delle novelle toscane del Trecento* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2000), 33-4.
13. Michelangelo Picone, 'L'invenzione della novella italiana: Tradizione e innovazione', in *La novella italiana*, vol. 1, 119-27; Gabriella Albanese, 'Da Petrarca a Piccolomini: Codificazione della novella umanistica', in *Favole paraboliche: Le forme della scrittura novellistica dal Medioevo al Rinascimento; Atti del Convegno di Pisa; 26-28 ottobre 1998*, eds. Gabriella Albanese, Lucia Battaglia Ricci, and Rossella Bessi (Rome: Salerno, 2000), 257-308.
14. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 1-26.
15. Francesco Petrarca, *Letters on Familiar Matters (Rerum Familiarium Libri)*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo (New York: Italica Press, 2005), 26.
16. Lavagetto, 'Dal buio delle notti invernali'; Laura Diafani, Fabrizio Scrivano, and Debora Vitali (eds), introduction to *La fiaba prima della fiaba nella novella italiana dal Due al Seicento: Antologia* (Perugia, Morlacchi, 2018), 9-18. It is important to note that these authors conflate folktale and fairy tale, in contrast with Ruth Bottigheimer: their contribution remains valid regarding the permeability of the novella to elements of oral storytelling, such as magical folklore.
17. Giancarlo Alfano, *Nelle maglie della voce: Oralità e testualità da Boccaccio a Basile* (Naples: Liguori, 2006).
18. With regard to the blending of literary genres at the birth of the novella, see Hans Robert Jauss, 'The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature', trans. Timothy Bahti, *New Literary History* 10, no. 2 (1979): 208-22; Segre, 'La novella e i generi letterari'; Picone, 'L'invenzione della novella italiana'; with regard to its constant tendency to merge with other literary genres, especially in the 16th century, see Sandra Carapezza, *Novelle e novellieri: Forme della narrazione breve nel Cinquecento* (Milan: LED Edizioni Universitarie, 2011), 11-13.
19. See Franco Cardini, *Magia, stregoneria, superstizioni nell'Occidente medievale* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979); Sergio Abbiati, Attilio Agnoletto, and Maria Rosario Lazzati (eds), *La stregoneria: Diavoli, streghe,*

- inquisitori dal Trecento al Settecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1984); Charles Zika, *Exorcising our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Colette Arnould, *La stregoneria: Storia di una follia profondamente umana* (Bari: Dedalo, 2011); Julian Goodare, Rita Voltmer, and Liv Helene Willumsen (eds), *Demonology and Witch-Hunting in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2020).
20. Montesano, *Fantasima, fantasima che di notte vai*, 27, 38.
 21. Giulia Depoli, "'Un giuoco multo spaventevole': Ars Necromantica in 15th-Century Vernacular Novella", *Notes in Italian Studies* 2 (2023): 5-14.
 22. Loise De Rosa, *Ricordi*, ed. Vittorio Formentin (Rome: Salerno, 1998), 1:13-25.
 23. De Rosa, *Ricordi*, 2:638.
 24. Linda Dégh, 'Conduit theory/multiconduit theory', in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 142.
 25. Dégh, 'Conduit theory', 142.
 26. Jakobson's framework of language distinguishes six factors that are necessary in communication: a context in which communication occurs, a sender (addresser) of the communication, its receiver (addressee), the contact between the two, a common code that allows reciprocal understanding, and the message of the communication itself. See Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960), 350-449.
 27. Francesco Orlando, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), 10-13. Translated by Charmaine Lee as *Toward a Freudian Theory of Literature: With an Analysis of Racine's Phedre* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 125-7.
 28. See Michael Papio, introduction to *A New Translation of the 'Novellino' of Masuccio Salernitano*, trans. Christopher Stace (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2022), xiii-xxix, for a new and updated profile of Masuccio Salernitano in English and the main bibliographical sources on this author.
 29. Stace (trans.), *A New Translation of the 'Novellino'*, 242-5.
 30. For a complete discussion of this case, see Giulia Depoli, 'Il *Lanval* umanistico di Masuccio Salernitano', *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, no. 199 (2022): 522-42.
 31. Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine; La naissance des fées* (Paris: Champion, 1984).
 32. See Glyn S. Burgess, *The 'Lais' of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 1-34.
 33. On the fortune of the *Lai de Lanval* in Italy until the end of the 14th century, see Maria Bendinelli-Predelli, 'Storia delle storie di Lanval', *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, no. 6 (1985): 1-30.
 34. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*, 9-10.
 35. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*, 91-2.
 36. Marie de France, *Poetry: New Translations, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, trans. and ed. Dorothy Gilbert (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 67-8, lines 53-81.
 37. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*, 9-10, 94-101.
 38. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*; 102-8.
 39. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*, 111-12.
 40. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*, 92.
 41. Stace (trans.), *A New Translation of the 'Novellino'*, 242.
 42. Stace (trans.), *A New Translation of the 'Novellino'*, 241.
 43. See Jean Claude Fraisse, *Philia: La Notion D'Amitié Dans La Philosophie Antique* (Paris: Vrin, 1974); Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); Luigi Pizzolato, *L'idea di amicizia nel mondo antico classico e cristiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993); Annalisa Ceron, *Le amicizie degli Antichi e dei Moderni* (Pisa: ETS, 2021), 59-184.
 44. See Depoli, 'Il *Lanval* umanistico di Masuccio', 531-42.
 45. Stace (trans.), *A New Translation of the 'Novellino'*, 242.
 46. Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge*, 97-8.

47. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 4.27-6.24.
48. Giambattista Basile, *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 199.
49. Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 200.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 201.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 201-2.
55. Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, 202.
56. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 11-13.
57. On Morlini's life, see Giovanni Villani, 'Nota biografica', in Girolamo Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, trans. and ed. Giovanni Villani (Rome: Salerno, 1983), xlvii-xlix; and *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, s.v. 'Morlini, Girolamo' by Franco Pignatti, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/girolamo-morlini_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/girolamo-morlini_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (accessed 21 March 2024). I am not aware of any updated essay on the life of Girolamo Morlini in English.
58. Giovanni Villani, introduction to Girolamo Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, trans. and ed. Giovanni Villani (Rome: Salerno, 1983), ix-xlvi.
59. A more exhaustive definition of the *novella di beffa* can be found in William Robins, 'Introduction', in *The 'Decameron' Eighth Day in Perspective*, ed. William Robins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 3-5.
60. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 136.
61. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 138.
62. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 136n1.
63. In a manner similar to that described by Bottigheimer, *Magic Tales and Fairy Tale Magic*, 65.
64. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 272.
65. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 122.
66. This term is only documented within Morlini's text: Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 122n3.
67. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 120, 122.
68. Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, 118n1; Dominic P. Rotunda, *Motif-Index of the Italian Novella in Prose* (Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, 1942), 14.
69. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1956), 2:435.
70. Marziano Guglielminetti, 'Dalle "novellae" del Morlini alle "favole" dello Straparola', in *Medioevo e Rinascimento veneto con altri studi in in onore di Lino Lazzarini*, ed. Guido Billanovich et al. (Padua: Antenore, 1979), 2:69-81; Giovanni Villani, 'Da Morlini a Straparola: Problemi di traduzione e problemi di testo', *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 169 (1982): 66-73.