Disenchanting the Fairy Tale: 
Retellings of “Snow White” between 
Magic and Realism

Traditional fairy tales, as we know them from the collections of Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, and Andrew Lang, consist of a mixture of magical and realistic elements. As the fairy tale is recycled in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many of the traditional stories are adapted to current literary models. The novel, as one of the dominant literary genres, becomes the model to which the fairy tale is frequently assimilated, especially when adolescents or adults are the intended audience. The influence of realistic literature and magic realism is perceptible in fairy-tale retellings for all ages. Magic is one of the typical fairy-tale features that disappear or take on new guises in late twentieth-century retellings, inconsistencies are resolved, historical contextualization, and character description increase. A decline of the magical is perceptible, but the supernatural does not disappear completely. Authors exploit the coincidence as an ambiguous space between magic and realism, or make ample use of stylistic and narrative devices such as metaphors, similes, or unreliable narrators to give a new dimension to elements that formerly belonged unambiguously to the realm of the supernatural.

Questioning the realistic nature of fairy-tale elements seems to miss the point of the genre. That is because when we read fairy tales we enter what Anne Wilson calls “magical thought,” a magic mode: “Magical thought is the level of thought we all engage in when we are not making the effort to think rationally and imaginatively so as to deal effectively with the external world. It is effort-

less, spontaneous and solipsistic, wholly free from the laws and realities of the external world" (139). The very phrase “once upon a time” signals to readers that they are entering a different world, a world where criteria of realism are irrelevant: “The absurdities in so many of our stories do not worry adults any more than they worry children” (138). However, many authors who reinterpret fairy tales in contemporary retellings consciously depart from this magical thought and confront well-known fairy-tale material with a more realistic setting. They thus set up a literary play with the reader’s expectations of magic and realism, making the question of what is real and what is not very relevant. This article seeks to offer an introduction on how contemporary authors, such as Regina Doman, Emma Donoghue, Adele Geras, Tracy Lynn, Róisín Sheerin, and the Flemish writer Tom Naegels, as well as illustrators such as Fiona French and Trina Schart Hyman, interpret and reinterpret magical features in their retellings of the tale of “Snow White.” To conclude, I will offer three hypotheses on why the fairy tale is subject to a process of disenchantment in some recent adaptations of the genre.

What Is “Realism”?

Comparative studies on concepts of realism, such as Luc Herman’s (1996) and Dario Villanueva’s (1997), have shown that there is no consensus on the meaning of the term: “Realism in literature can mean a great many things” (Herman, preface, n. pag.). Generally “realism” has been used to denote a text that is “true to life.” The relativity of this verisimilitude is at least twofold. First, because of differences in cultural and historical background, as well as individual tastes and convictions, authors, readers, and critics may have different views on what reality is. Second, they may disagree on what forms a true representation of this reality.

In the discussion of fairy tales and their use of magic and realistic elements, few critics make explicit their definition of what they consider realistic. From their application of the terms, one can discern several implicit definitions of “realism.” Some critics, such as Bruno Bettelheim, use it for stylistic descriptions: for the use of details, for instance, or for the occurrence of references to everyday events. Others, such as Bernd Wollenweber, use it on a level of content: “fairy tales are not fantastic or unrealistic, on the contrary, they are highly realistic. They represent experiences, they show actual conflicts, they describe private and social relationships” (62).

When critics use the term “realism” on a level of content, it can mean both what is “possible” or what is “probable,” and these do not necessarily overlap. It is possible that a woman is so jealous of her (step)daughter that she orders a huntsman to have her killed, for instance, but it is not very probable. Several
critics apply standards of realism to the fairy tale, without making their approach explicit. Feminist critic Andrea Dworkin's irony, for instance, signals incredulity toward Rapunzel's mother and her craving for rampion: "Mama didn't think twice—she traded Rapunzel for a vegetable" (40). Likewise, she uses a standard of realism to measure the characterization of the prince, and her ironic tone is loaded with skepticism: "One can point out in fact that he is not very bright. For instance, he cannot distinguish Cinderella from her two sisters though he danced with her and presumably conversed with her" (43–44). The improbability of these two fairy-tale elements clashes with the realistic expectations that are implicit in Dworkin's critique.

For this article, I will limit myself to a definition that opposes "realism" to "magic" or "fantastic" mainly on the level of content. Realistic is everything that can be explained by empirical science. In this view, it is perfectly realistic that a servant girl marries a prince, that a mother trades her daughter for a vegetable, or that a poor farmer finds a treasure and buys a castle. Not realistic are animals or objects that communicate in human speech, horses that fly, or fairies that can turn a pumpkin into a coach. As Jean Georges cites the Dictionnaire de Littér: "The art of magic is that which produces effects against the order of nature" (64; my translation). As examples, Georges discusses, among others, metamorphoses, invisibility, and talking animals. Typical of magic is also that the use of language (certain formulas, wishes, or curses) has a direct impact on reality: when Beauty tells the Beast that she loves him, for instance, this immediately leads to his transformation into a prince; when the evil fairy curses the young Sleeping Beauty, nobody doubts that her words will come true.

The opposition of magic and realism still leaves open some room for speculation: a number of typical fairy-tale events cannot be simply categorized as "magical" or "nonmagical." Rapunzel's healing tears may be magical, but what about her hair? Is it scientifically possible that a girl grows hair so long that it reaches down a tower, and that an adult person is able to climb the tower with it? Snow White's biological mother provides another good example here: at the beginning of the tale, the queen is sewing at her window when she wishes for a girl with skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony wood. Her wish is granted. Is this magic? A direct causal relationship between wish and fact would unambiguously point to the realm of the magical. In the Grimm tale this relationship is suggested by the sequential description of wish and child. However, it is not made explicit that the child has these features because the mother wished for them. A child with black hair, white skin, and red lips can be perfectly explained by empirical science.

To explain some of their shifts, I suggest that we visualize the opposition between magic and realism as a continuum. Traditional fairy tales that appeal to what Anne Wilson calls "magical thought" can be located on one side of the
spectrum, in the realm of the magical. I will show that many contemporary fairy-tale retellings make ample use of the space between the two ends of the spectrum. To illustrate this hypothesis with concrete examples from recent texts, I will focus on the tale of “Snow White” and three magical events that occur in the Grimm version: the mother’s wish, the magic mirror, and Snow White’s “revival” from death.

**A Mother’s Wish**

As was stated before, the Grimms’ tale suggests (but does not make explicit) a causal relationship between the queen’s wish and the child’s features when it is born. If one considers the magical and the realistic as two ends of one spectrum, the opening scene of the Grimms’ “Snow White” may not lie entirely in the magical, but it does approach it. In several contemporary versions of this tale additions or alterations are made that shift the opening of “Snow White” more to the other end of the spectrum, into the realm of the realistic.

In the first illustration of Trina Schart Hyman’s 1974 picture-book version of the Grimms’ “Snow White,” the young queen is portrayed at the moment when she expresses the wish for a child with black hair, white skin, and red lips. Attentive readers will notice that the young queen herself has these features: the way she is pictured is actually not that different from the traditional image of Snow White. The queen’s own physical appearance sheds new light on her wish and marks a shift on the spectrum from magic toward realism. A causal relationship between a wish and its outcome is usually perceived as an instance of magic, especially if it is situated in the context of a fairy tale, where the reader can expect the supernatural to intervene. In real life the outcome of a wish can often be predicted—it depends on the chance of the wish coming true. The more specific a wish is, the more unlikely it is for it to come true. If Snow White’s mother had only wished for a girl, she had about a fifty-percent chance that her wish would be granted. However, she not only wishes for a girl, but also for a girl with very specific exterior qualities. Biological laws determine that the chances are quite high for a child to share his or her parent’s physical features. Several retellings and illustrated versions add this element to the mother’s wish. Hyman is not the only one to draw the link between Snow White and her biological mother. Other examples, where Snow White doubles the external features of her mother (red-white-black) can be found in Werner Klemke’s illustration to *Die Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm* (1963), Svend Otto S.’s illustrations to *Schneewittchen* (1974), and Anastassija Archipowa’s to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1990).

A similar reasoning cannot only be found on a visual level, but on a textual level as well. In a recent retelling of “Snow White,” Tracy Lynn’s Snow, the queen wishes for a child “[w]ith skin as fair as snow, lips as red as blood, and
hair as black as shadow" (7), a slight variation on the Grimms' version. Her wish comes true, but the magical character of this outcome is modified in two ways. First, it is not a coincidence that she wishes for a child with the features that she describes. The mother herself has similar looks: “She herself was slender, with pale cheeks to her husband’s rosy ones, and dark hair” (7). Her skin, too, is pale, or white (as snow), and her hair dark or black as shadows. Later in the book it is affirmed several times that Snow White (or Jessica as she is also called) bears a strong resemblance to her mother: “He [her father] would lean over and see her black hair and black eyes, so reminiscent of her mother” (9). Elements like these shift the outcome of the mother’s wish a bit more toward the realistic part of the spectrum and away from the magic. Hoping that your baby will look like you is a “safe” wish, with a high chance of coming true. The outcome is thus fairly realistic.

Second, the magical aspect is further made ambiguous because Lynn adds extra elements to the mother’s wish: “Identical twins, boy and girl, played in her head” (7). She also formulates wishes in case the child is a boy: “I hope he will be handsome . . . I hope he is brave like my husband” (7). As some of these wishes do not come true, the queen (duchess) in Lynn’s Snow does not have visionary powers to predict the exact outcome of her pregnancy, and the tale loses a bit of its magic. Moreover, the typical inevitable character of fairy-tale magic (whatever you wish for must come true) is lost.

Lynn is not the only author to use this strategy; it is also present in the Flemish author Tom Naegels’s “Spiegelliegeeltje.” The mother formulates her wish, but it does not come true at all: the little girl has “cheeks as round as chestnuts, fair brown hair and eyes as blue as . . . well, as blue eyes” (94; my translation). The wish is kept as an intertextual link to the Grimms’ “Snow White,” but the different outcome puts this story entirely in a realistic frame. Moreover, Naegels mocks the Grimms’ threefold comparison—the solemn tone of Snow White’s mother no longer seems apt in the description of a child in a contemporary, realistic setting.

The Magic Mirror

A second instance during which magic intervenes in the Grimms’ tale of “Snow White” is the occurrence of the magic mirror, a speaking object that has an overview of all the lands over which Snow White’s father rules, and that knows things that the queen herself does not—for instance, that Snow White is living with the seven dwarfs. In several contemporary retellings the mirror loses its magic meaning but is retained as an image, an intertextual link to the Grimm tale. Several strategies can be discerned, through which the mirror is transformed into a nonmagical object. The mirror can be used as a metaphor, whose function is taken over by another, nonmagical medium that fulfills the same
function. As such, the newspaper “The New York Mirror” in Fiona French’s *Snow White in New York* first tells the queen that she is “the classiest dame in New York,” and later that Snow White is still alive and well (“Next day Snow White was on the front page of the New York Mirror,” n. pag.). In the latter instance the text is framed as a mirror, and thus the link between newspaper and mirror is established on both a textual and a visual level.

In several contemporary “Snow White” retellings the voice of the mirror is embodied by a character in the story, once again an instance of disenchantment. In Adele Geras’s *Pictures of the Night* it is the stepmother’s hairdresser, Monsieur Armand, who tells her that she is the most beautiful in the world, and who blabbers Snow White’s secret when she has left home to live in Paris. Here, too, the image of the mirror is kept as an intertextual reference: as is typical of hairdressers, Monsieur Armand talks to his clients while looking at them in the mirror. Geras does retain the element of a talking mirror, but with the possibility of a realistic explanation. Likewise, in Lynn’s *Snow* the mirror is held up by a boy servant, and it is his voice behind the mirror that tells the queen she is the most beautiful in the world.

In Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Apple” it is Snow White’s father who compares his new wife and his daughter’s beauty:

> Once when he came to [my stepmother’s] room at night he found us both there, cross-legged on her bed under a sea of velvets and laces, trying how each earring looked against the other’s ear. He put his head back and laughed to see us. Two such fair ladies, he remarked, have never been seen in one bed. But *which of you is the fairest of them all?* We looked at each other, she and 1, and chimed in the chorus of his laughter. Am I imagining in retrospect that our voices rang a little out of tune? . . .

> He let out another guffaw. Tell me, he asked, how am I to judge between two such beauties? I looked at my stepmother, and she stared back at me, and our eyes were like mirrors set opposite each other, making a corridor of reflections, infinitely hollow. (47–48, emphasis added)

By asking them “how am I to judge between two such beauties?” the king takes over the function of the mirror, which decides who is the fairest of all. This is in line with Sarah Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s interpretation of the tale (see also below): in *The Madwoman in the Attic* they argue that the mirror represents the voice of the patriarch, of the king. By telling the queen that Snow White is more beautiful than she, the mirror instigates jealousy between the two women so that they start competing for his affection. The king does the same in Donoghue’s tale.
In several other realistic retellings the mirror is present only as an instrument for self-reflection (physically and mentally). Questions and answers are provided by the people who look in the mirror, the object itself remains silent. In Roisin Sheerin’s retelling this is stated literally: “I get the most satisfaction out of my mirror even though it just reflects my own opinions. I consulted it about Snow White, told it how I had decided to wash my hands of her, had resolved to have nothing more to do with her. I asked the mirror if it thought I was being too harsh. I was reminded that I too had been awkward and rebellious when I was young” (49, emphasis added). The “I was reminded” leaves ambiguity with regard to the actor: is it the mirror that reminds the queen, or does she remind herself? The fact that the rest of the retelling is devoid of magic suggests that it may be the queen.

**Snow White’s Revival**

Of all the magic features in the tale, Snow White’s sleep after she bites her stepmother’s apple is the passage that is most often left unchanged. In several realist retellings, such as, for instance, Fiona French’s *Snow White in New York*, it is the only magical occurrence that is in fact retained.

In the Grimm version of 1857 the magical nature of Snow White’s revival is stressed. It is stated explicitly that “no breath came out of her mouth,” and that she “lay a long, long time in the coffin, and she did not change” (my translation).³ It is striking that these textual elements disappear from several retellings: the duration of Snow White’s sleep is not specified in Emma Donoghue’s “Tale of the Apple,” for instance, nor is the fact that she does not breathe. In Francesca Lia Block’s “Snow” she still has a faint pulse. This makes room for a more realistic interpretation—that Snow White fainted, for instance, or that she was in a coma for a short period of time.

In Adèle Geras’s *Pictures of the Night* Snow White’s acceptance of the apple, her sleep, and her revival are condensed in a few hours: at a party, Bella eats apple crumble that “kept sticking to the roof of [her] mouth, and nearly choking [her]” (144). Then she drinks Calvados, a drink made of apples, and starts coughing: “I took another sip, but it went down the wrong way, and I began to cough and splutter” (148). The link to the passage in “Snow White” is made clear, and the references to apples can be read as intertextual markers that draw attention to this link. However, unlike in the tale of “Snow White,” Bella does not die or fall asleep after she eats the apple crumble and drinks the Calvados. When she is put up in a glass cage at the same party, she feels claustrophobic and faints. What is in Disney’s version the kiss of the prince is transformed in this story to the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by a handsome doctor (153): a clear shift of the magic into what can be scientifically and medically explained. The absence of the poisoned apple and Snow White’s long, deathlike sleep sig-

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nal that this story takes place in the real world, not in the fairy-tale setting of the Grimms’ tale.

Regina Doman’s Black as Night is a catholic detective story for young adults with references to “Snow White.” Again, all magic elements are given a scientific explanation. Blanche, the “Snow White” figure, lapses into a coma after eating a poisoned slice of apple strudel. In the preface the author thanks several doctors who have helped her to verify all the scientific details in the story—again the link to reality is made clear. Moreover, the harsh realities of a coma are stressed. Unlike the seven dwarfs, the seven friars that are taking care of Blanche are having a hard time maintaining her deathlike sleep:

[Brother Jim] paused, turned back to Father Bernard, and said, “So, forgive me for saying this at such a hard time, Bernie, but you surely don’t expect that the diocese is going to pay for this?”

“Well, we hadn’t exactly considered . . . ,” he admitted. “Why are you asking?”

“Well, you should start thinking about that. You and I both know that comas can last for years. Does this girl have any family that you know of?”

“There’s such a thing as Christian charity, but we all know there’s harsh reality too. Suppose you find her family, and they turn out to be poor? They’re not going to be able to pay for lifelong hospice care, maybe not even her hospital bill.” (410–11)

Luckily for Blanche, her prince shows up before anyone pulls the plug.

The Flemish author Tom Naegels leaves the ending of Snow White ambiguous, as he incorporates the girl’s sleep into a storytelling moment between a mother and her daughter. Snow White, here called Spiegelliegeltje (spiegel meaning mirror in Dutch), is still a little girl in Naegel’s tale, and she asks her mother to tell her the story of Snow White. The mother suffers from depression and cannot support her child’s happiness and carelessness. Her love turns into hatred, and she wants her daughter to die. While she tells the little girl the story of Snow White, she hands her a poisoned apple and believes that her child has died. After a hallucination, she regrets this act and kisses the little girl, who jumps back to life—a happy end to an apparently simple story. Read in connection with the Grimms’ tale of “Snow White,” readers may assume that Spiegelliegeltje has indeed slipped into a deathlike sleep and that her revival is magical. However, several elements in the tale allow another, more realistic reading of this passage. First, the reader gets only the limited perspective of the mother, who is positioned as an unreliable narrator because of her mental illness. It is not because she believes that a magic event has happened, that the reader should do the same. Second, during the storytelling moment the
little girl Spiegelgeltje strongly identifies with the character of Snow White. She shows that she has a good knowledge of the story and tells part of the tale herself. This means that she also knows what happens when Snow White is offered the poisoned apple, and that she may incorporate the deathlike sleep in her play, fooling her mother. The fact that the little girl already starts smiling before she coughs up the apple supports this interpretation. The little girl's "revival," then, is no longer magical, because she never died but only pretended to be dead.

**Why Disenchantment?**

"The fairy tale's magic depends on our suspension of disbelief," Cristina Bacchilega writes in *Postmodern Fairy Tales* (28), referring to the famous quote by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As the genre of the fairy tale has moved into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many readers and critics no longer seem willing to temporarily "suspend their disbelief." Moreover, when authors retell traditional fairy tales in contemporary adaptations, a decline in magical features becomes apparent, either in favor of a greater realism or in favor of greater ambiguity. As the setting changes from the unspecified "once upon a time in a land far far away" to a late twentieth-century Western environment, the genre characteristics of the fairy tale change as well.

The process of disenchantment in contemporary fairy-tale retellings is not a new phenomenon. In *Reisen in erdachtes Land* (1998) the German critic Klaus Doderer argues that disenchantment was already noticeable with the Grimms. Doderer compared different editions of the *Children's and Household Tales*, including the Ölenberger manuscript from 1810, and concluded that "in the course of time, while collecting and editing the tales, the magical-mythic dimension in the tales decreased, in favor of a more comfortable reality" (Doderer 120; my translation). As an example, Doderer mentions the tale of "Dümmling" (Dumb Hans), a tale similar to "Hans im Glück" (Hans in Luck). Whereas the magical tale of "Dümmling" was included only in the manuscript but not in the first edition of the *Children's and Household Tales*, "Hans in Luck," which contains no supernatural intervention, did appear in print.

A second explanation for disenchantment is that the retellings described earlier follow a trend that can also be perceived in criticism: fairy tales are judged by realistic standards, magical objects or events are revealed as symbols for realistic occurrences. This form of disenchantment takes place within several critical paradigms, from sociopolitical criticism to sociohistorical criticism and psychoanalytic criticism. The mirror is a clear example here: its function has been disenchanted and rationalized by several critics. As explained above, feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write that the mirror represents the
voice of the patriarch, of the king. He sets up his wife and daughter against each other, as Snow White’s father also does in Emma Donoghue’s “Tale of the Apple.” German critic Theodor Ruf believes that the tale of “Snow White” is based on the family history of the Rieneck dynasty. He explains the occurrence of the mirror by the fact that mirrors were the specialty of the Lohr region, where the Rienecks lived. Lacanian critic Shuli Barzilai argues that the mirror represents the internal voice of Snow White’s mother, who has a hard time accepting the fact that she is getting older and that her daughter is growing independent of her. In The Uses of Enchantment the neo-Freudian Bruno Bettelheim sees the mirror as a symbol for the daughter herself, who projects her feelings of Oedipal rivalry on her mother. All of these interpretations shift the voice of the mirror from a magical object to a realistic character in the story. Contemporary retellings are thus in line with tendencies in criticism of the fairy tales, and could even be argued to be influenced by critical analyses (or vice versa).

The influence of the novel as one of the current dominant literary models can offer a third explanation for the disappearance of magic. As M. M. Bakhtin writes in his famous essay on “The Epic and the Novel,” the novel is the genre that is most wrought with contemporary reality, and thus most determined by changes in reality. Moreover, “In an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent ‘novelized’” (5). This process of novelization is described as follows:

What are the salient features of this novelization of other genres . . . ? They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the “novelistic” layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open ended present). (7)

The dialogue that the fairy-tale retellings set up with the traditional fairy tale indeed entices the appearance of the novelistic features that Bakhtin describes in this quotation. We have seen that the disappearance of magic helps to increase the contact with contemporary reality, and that the intertextual references in the retellings bring with them a certain degree of (intentional) indeterminacy, open-endedness, humor, and irony.

The disenchantment that was described in the examples above can be distinguished from a more radical movement against the magic in the pro-grammatic Marxist and feminist retellings of the 1970s and 1980s. There, too, one can perceive a clear disenchantment of the fairy tale, but with a political
agenda: to show that magic is a naïve illusion, and that children and adults
should take action themselves if they want to improve their own life. Such a
political program or critique of magic seems to be absent from the disen-
chanted fairy tales described above—the disappearance of magic is used as a
literary strategy that leads to what Bakhtin calls “openendedness” and ambi-
guity, not to a clear-cut difference between magic and realism or a radical con-
demnation of all that is magical.

As the genre of the fairy tale evolves and some stories lose their magical fea-
tures, the retellings develop an interaction between the traditional texts and a
contemporary environment. The fairy tale drops some of its defining charac-
teristics in the process, and the retellings blur the boundaries between fairy
tales and novels. The literary experience for reader and writer, however, may
benefit from this dialogue between the fairy tale and other literary genres. The
strategies that authors have developed to make ambiguous the occurrence of
magic show that although the contemporary retellings may lose some of the
tales’ magic, they gain, however, a new field for literary creativity, a new kind
of magic.

Notes

1. Bettelheim mentions Charles Perrault’s references to realistic events in the tale of
“Sleeping Beauty.” Perrault’s prince notices, for instance, that Sleeping Beauty’s
clothes date back to the time of his great-grandmother. Bettelheim is disturbed by
these references, which he calls “petty rationality” and which for him “detract
from the fairy-story character” (230).
2. In Klemke’s illustrations, not only do Snow White and her mother have exactly
the same facial features, but they also wear the same dress: a white dress with
black straps around neck and wrists. As such, the two women look identical.
3. German text: “es ging kein Atem mehr aus seinem Mund”; “Nun lag
Schneewittchen lange, lange Zeit in dem Sarg und verweile nicht” (1: 276).

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