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The (Difficult) Rehabilitation of the Fairy-tale Villain*

Abstract I: Questo articolo esplora quello che succede da un punto di vista cognitivo quando i lettori affrontano riscritture di fiabe in cui ‘il cattivo’ è un personaggio a tutto tondo rispetto al testo originale. I testi qui presentati – i romanzi di Donna Jo Napoli, *The Magic Circle* e *Zel* e il film di Disney *Maleficent* – sono incentrati su uno dei cattivi per eccellenza – la strega. L’articolo sostiene che queste streghe innescano un coinvolgimento del lettore che va al di là dell’attivazione degli schemi generici tipici del personaggio strega, creando un’esperienza di lettura più profonda, che mobilita il repertorio esperienziale dei lettori. Tale mobilitazione si esplicita in una riorganizzazione cognitiva che implica l’attribuzione di una coscienza e la sua simulazione – ingredienti, questi, necessari per un coinvolgimento etico da parte del lettore.

Abstract II:

This article explores what happens – cognitively speaking – when readers are confronted with those rewritings of folktales that provide the villain with a roundness which was not present in the source text. The cases here analyzed – Donna Jo Napoli’s novels *The Magic Circle* and *Zel* and the Disney film *Maleficent* – concern one of the staple folktale villains – the witch – once it is reshaped in fractured folktales. The article argues that the newly characterized villains activate the readers’ subjective experience not simply due to a recognition of generic repertoires, but due to the involvement of their broader experiential background. This involvement takes the form of a deep cognitive reorganisation that depends on attributing and enacting consciousness and allows for a more rounded ethical engagement.

Folk-tale characters are famously flat and static, with no psychological or physical depth. Unprompted by emotions or feelings, but exclusively by external impulses, in Propp’s famous analysis of Russian folktales characters are reframed as functional roles in which different functions can be taken on by different figures (such as animals, supernatural beings, or even magical objects). Evil characters can play the role of “opponent/villain” or “false hero”; the ethics of folktale distributes character types around the polarities of good and

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evil: “folktale breaks down the rich complexity of human beings” (Lüthi 1982: 15) into one determining trait which is often represented as a label: Prince Charming, the Beautiful Princess, the Wicked Witch. Both Propp’s functions and (later on) Greimas’s actants responded to the structuralist urge to provide a taxonomy predictive of narrative sequences, which were, according to a take typical of classical narratology, the manifestation on the level of action of the features inherent in the functional (and actantial) orientation of each single character. It is not surprising that, unlike classical narratology, recent cognitive approaches have neglected fairy-tale characters, although Maria Nikolajeva’s article on empathy and ethics in Afanasiev’s “The Frog Princess” has questioned this traditional view and provided a more nuanced perspective on the way readers engage with fairy-tale characters’ interiority “even though, or perhaps especially because, there are no visible expressions of their thought or emotion in the text” (Nikolajeva 2015: 135).

Following in the steps of Nikolajeva’s invitation to redress this neglect, this article explores what happens – cognitively speaking – when readers are confronted with those rewritings of folktales that put the villain center-stage and provide him/her with a roundness that was typically not present in the source text. To address this issue, we focus our attention on one of the staple folktale villains – the witch – and we explore the cognitive activities that are plausibly at work when coping with the differences in characterization that these fractured folktales present. We are of course referring to specifically Anglo-Saxon (in particular Western European and North American) fairy-tale, oral, as well as retelling traditions; we are aware that the witch is a historically and geographically determined concept and symbol – what we write about witches in this essay would be hardly relevant to, for example, Yoruba beliefs in Africa, or the Slavic Baba Yaga (Zipes 2012), which arise from and interact with remarkably different cultural, religious and linguistic contexts.

We specifically argue that the newly characterized villains in the anglosaxon fairy-tale tradition allow for and invite a readerly involvement which goes beyond the mere activation of generic frames and scripts and mobilize an imaginative experience that involves readers more profoundly. We contend that villains belonging to fractured tales activate the readers’ subjective experience not simply due to a recognition of generic repertoires, but due to the involvement of their broader experiential background.

According to a cognitive model, characters are

text-based mental models of possible individuals, built up in the mind of the reader in the course of textual processing.[...] Reading for character is triggered or initiated by the reader identifying in the text a referring expression and opening a mental file bearing this name in which all further information about the corresponding individual will be continuously accumulated, structured, and updated as one reads on, until the final product or character profile is reached at the end of the reading act (Margolin 2007: 76).

It is highly probable that a fairy-tale textual/mental ‘database’ is established pretty early in life when children are first exposed to fairy-tales: a basic frame for the witch with a core set of traits, as well as a basic frame for the prince (or the like) find an easy enough collocation in that database. Postclassical narratology has focused on the processing mech-

anisms that are at play when we read, and the interrelated notions of frame and script that first-generation cognitive psychology has proposed appear particularly relevant and effective in mapping the reading processes at work in such a generic context as fairy tales, which revolve around strong character typologies. Frames and scripts are knowledge structures, experiential repertoires that, generally speaking, help us navigate the world around us by making the most of what we already know and have experienced¹ and they are certainly drawn upon by young readers when they are exposed to a new fairy tale. The basic frame of the witch is constituted by very few and rather general properties – this is, it appears, the way our brain makes sense of people – whether they are real or fictional.

The “back and forth movement between specific textual data and general knowledge structures stored in the reader’s long term memory” (Margolin 2007: 78) is reinforced by continuous exposure to tales with the witch as a central character (“Hansel and Gretel”, “Rapunzel”, “Snow White”, etc.). This reinforcement loop soon establishes a specific ‘witch’ frame in the young reader’s literary/mental encyclopedia, whose strength depends on the absence of any individualized name (the Witch, the Princess). This is well in keeping with folk psychology according to which a given role and its associations are sufficient to acquire a characterizing function (Eder, Jannidis & Schneider 2010: 37). The witch frame, thus, amounts to a mental representation of type, a traditional configuration in which the mimetic sphere (old age, crooked nose, warts, decaying teeth etc.) and the thematic sphere (the opposer, the villain) are connected through a top-down processing, from generic, typological expectations to textual data.

In retellings of tales that rehabilitate the villain, the frame that the reader has construed as a reader of fairy tales and has stored in his/her repertoires is activated as soon as s/he is exposed to a textual cue that sets it in motion. The simple spelling out of the word ‘witch’ is enough to retrieve the frame stored together with its relevant scripts. In keeping with any reader-response theory, the script both waits for textual data to be actualized and is already directing the reader’s attention in terms of expectation of sequential development. What happens in fractured tales can be profitably read through the defamiliarisation model of response: a frame is activated only to be unsettled by so called “recalcitrant materials” (Perry 1979: 53). Our working hypothesis is that the cognitive pay off of fractured tales depends on a more profound readerly engagement that is triggered by the inevitable activation of the witch frame. This requires, in the new context, a readjustment of the scripts concerning the witch². It is precisely in the cognitive clashing of apparently antagonistic/incompatible materials that a new ‘moral’ for the new tale may thrive; we would argue that the spawning of this new hybrid narrative both results in and depends on attributing and enacting consciousness, as we will discuss in a moment³.

¹ Schank and Abelson define a script as “A structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context [...]. Scripts handle stylized everyday situations [...]. [A] script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation” (Schank & Abelson 1977: 141).

² We are aware that scripts and frames belong in the vocabulary of first generation cognitive sciences; we believe, however, that the two terms maintain a significant heuristic potentiality in the generic context we are here addressing.

³ Our proposal enters in conversation with studies concerning the phenomenology of reading that aim at

As Vivian Vande Velde has crudely put it, in order to fracture a fairy tale, you need to “1. Make the villain a hero, 2. Make the hero a villain, 3. Tell what really happened, 4. All of the above” (Vande Velde 1995, back cover). This role reversal is a technique that we occasionally find in illustrated fairy tales for children, often accompanied by the narrative unreliability of the first person. This basic inversion may allow the reader to appreciate a different perspective, and therefore adds new information to the literary character frame, but we think this is not enough for the frame to be sensibly updated. The structure of the illustrated fractured fairy tale, in fact, establishes a playful exchange of character traits that does not lead to a radically new evaluation of the character – it is a simple game of inversion that triggers the pleasure of recognition or the confirmation of the stereotype, rather than an empathic realignment with the evil character.

A couple of examples of this process are Scieszka’s *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, in which Mr Wolf attempts to rehabilitate his good name but sounds unconvincing, and Karina Law’s *The Truth about Hansel and Gretel*, in which a harmless if unreliable elderly lady gives her side of the story about the children’s insulting behavior. We may go as far as to say that the wolf and the witch frames here emerge unscathed by these reversals: they end up eliciting comic effects much more than a deep cognitive reorganisation.

A rather different cognitive situation presents itself when the reader is confronted with rewritings that expand the original story in the form of a longer narrative. Fairy-tale novels (intended for a teenage or YA or crossover audience) may, in fact, offer us a prequel to the story of the fairy-tale character which is structured in a similar way to that of the *bildungsroman*, and may include motivations, descriptions and new events and characters. As is well known, compulsion to subvert historically determined ideological meanings and character frames is inscribed in the genre, from Victorian questioning of gender patterns to the political-ideological appropriations of the Grimms’ tales in the Nazi era (Kamenetsky 1992), to more recent feminist adaptations which subvert and deconstruct female cultural identities.

When a traditional fairy tale is reframed as a Young Adult novel, the author addresses older readers with more developed cognitive and affective skills than a child (Nikolajeva 2018: 94). Let us consider the example of Donna Jo Napoli’s YA novel *The Magic Circle* (1983) in which the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” – the quintessential witch that is evil *because she is a witch* – is given a backstory, a prequel, so to speak. Cognitively speaking, Napoli’s book presents an interesting case. The witch frame is activated by the paratext that announces “She was turned into a witch against her will. Can she resist the temptation of evil?” (Napoli 1996) on the front cover and mentions Hansel and Gretel on the back cover. However, we cannot take for granted that the reader is aware of this information, especially the one on the back cover. We examine two cognitive scenarios in Napoli’s novel, depending on the fact that the reader 1) is aware only of the paratextual indication on the *front* cover 2) is aware of the paratextual indication on the *back* cover as well.

In the first cognitive scenario, the reader crosses the threshold of the text bearing in

providing a theoretical model to describe the engagement with narratives along cognitive lines. Empirical studies lie beyond the scope of this work but they may enter in fruitful synergy with the model our proposal presents.

mind the line on the front cover “She was turned into a witch against her will”. Here the witch frame is already active once we begin reading the novel, although the reader may not possess the knowledge of the specific witch here represented. “The Journey Begins”, as the title of the first chapter promises, on a double track: 1) a narrator employing a simultaneous present tense who offers an apparently unfiltered (by retrospection) perspective on the events as they unfold and 2) a reader whose (generic) knowledge directs (and thus potentially alters) his/her perception of what the story ‘should’ be about.

The narrator is referred to as “the Ugly One” on page 2 and will remain the only character in the whole novel without a proper name. The association between the Ugly One and the witch that the front cover has just announced is far from being unthinkable, both because of the kind of trait the name crystallises and because of the protagonist’s namelessness itself. And yet, in spite of this ready-made match, the book opens on the protagonist, who, before being called the Ugly One, presents herself as a caring mother of a beloved daughter, Asa:

Summer comes over the hill like a hairy blanket. [...] Asa rolls onto her side, and her light brown hair falls away from her pink cheek. [...] I run my fingertips across the fine fuzz of hair on her temple. “Ahhhh”, says Asa. “Good morning, mother”. [...] I reach over to the basket in the corner near our bed. “Look”, I say, holding up the treasure. Asa opens her mouth in awe. The amber ribbon matches the highlights in her hair. She plucks it from my hand eagerly. [...] Asa wraps the ribbon around her fingers. “It’s beautiful, Mother”.

“No more beautiful than you”.

I weave the ribbon into Asa’s hair, and she runs from the cabin to show the world (Napoli 1996: 1-2).

It is interesting to note that both *The Magic Circle* and Napoli’s later novel *Zel* (1993), a retelling of “Rapunzel”, feature witches who are also nurturing mother figures. Motherhood appears to be incompatible with the witch frame: the witches of folklore are normally represented as lonely women who live at the margins of a community, dangerous, aggressive and cannibalistic: in Bettelheim’s essentialistic reading, the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” is “a personification of the destructive aspects of orality” (Bettelheim 1991: 162), while Purkiss describes her as “the opposite of the nurturer, [...] a devourer, not a substitute mother but an antimother” (Purkiss 1996: 278). Both novels require the reader to substitute the original cannibalistic schema with the maternal nurturing one, which appears to be the great repressed of the traditional versions that is ‘uncovered’ in these retellings. As in the traditional version of “Rapunzel”, the girl is taken away from her natural mother, grows, and, on her 12th birthday, is locked in a tower and controlled by the witch. Napoli inserts the backstory, the missing motivation for this negotiated abduction, but not until chapter 19, in which *Zel*’s mother provides a prequel of the folktale in which the narrator describes her longing for a baby: “oh, how she needed, to be Mother. She needed it with every drop of blood, every bit of flesh, every hair, every breath of her body” (Napoli 1993: 125-126). It is in this chapter that the reader is alerted to the fact that *Zel*’s affectionate mother could be

a new revised schema of the witch of the traditional tale. However, her story of loneliness and longing is told in third person, as if at this particular moment the witch needed to distance herself from her past pain, and this distance could be achieved only by employing the usual narrating device of folk or fairy tales. As Crew has noted, “Napoli uses first person narrative to subvert the authoritative and impersonal narrative of the fairy tale” (Crew 2002: 78), but in this instance she abandons her most typical narrative style. In a way, the original “Rapunzel” becomes a sort of embedded narrative within the revised “Zel” narrative. Zel’s mother makes a Faustian pact with the devil in order to become a mother – she sells her soul in return for a relatively common experience in a woman’s life (she even manages to breastfeed through a combination of magic and herbal concoction). It is interesting that this change occurs within the frame of the witch configuration of the folktale – both the Ugly One in *The Magic Circle* and Zel’s mother are neither a humorous parody of the witch (as Granny Weatherwax or Nanny Ogg in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld novels) nor resemble the wise-witch schema (Stephens 2003: 199). They basically play the same part (or, in Proppian terms, they inhabit the same sphere of action) in Napoli’s novels as in the Grimms’ tales – there is no change of plot or ending – but the witches’ actions/functions are given very different meanings in the novels. Both *The Magic Circle* and *Zel* add the cultural narrative of the hostility of institutionalised religion towards the witch (*Zel* appears to be set in a particularly severe iconoclastic phase of the Reformation) so that the mother-daughter bond becomes a short-lived utopian space of feminine and domestic solidarity against a patriarchal and merciless world. As Crew has argued:

Napoli affirms the bonds between daughter and mother that are severed in the Grimm tale – bonds that have also been de-centred in traditional accounts of adolescent pathology. Napoli writes about the power of this bond: the power of a mother’s love and a mother’s sacrifice (Crew 2010: 41).

We find the same duality at the core of *The Magic Circle*. Well before the ending of the novel and the suggestion of a new moral and the possible activation of a maternal frame, the author sows the paradoxical seed of the juxtaposition of two opposing traits, ugliness and lovingness. No script within the witch frame allows for this narrative trajectory. Page after page we follow the Ugly One as she records her story as a loving mother and a blessed healer and the circumstances in which she is claimed and possessed by devils against her will, while all these events unfold. The cognitive processing of this kind of narrative development requires all along to keep (witch) scripts in abeyance while maintaining the witch frame active. When Hansel and Gretel eventually enter the scene, a reinvigoration of a very specific script (the cannibalistic witch) surfaces again. In this section, textual triggers abound because here Napoli realigns herself with the original tale. The key items of the story we have stored in our repertoires remain unvaried, but traits give way to motives. This is, indeed, a crucial difference.

The term motivation is inextricably connected with drives and desires, objectives and values; it couples a given state of affairs to a desired state of affairs and the resultant moves to attain it. Becoming privy to the motivation that leads a character to take certain deci-

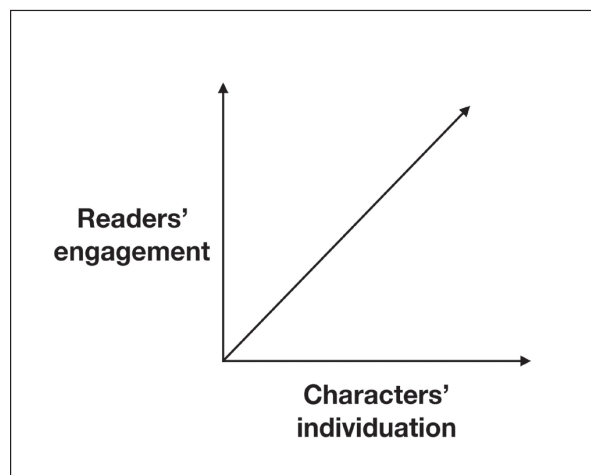


Fig. 1.

sions and to act in a certain way provides the foundation for the reader's emotional engagement and empathetic alignment. In spite of the still limited evidence available to demonstrate data concerning the one-to-one relationship between specific narrative strategies and empathetic engagement (Keen 2007), a correlation between our access to a character's mind and our potential involvement in his/her predicaments seems to be certain.

The two most obvious narrative situations that provide access to a character's mind are first-person homodiegetic narration and third person focalised narration. The latter even more than the former

would seem to foster trust because it is not associated with the potential unreliability inherent in first-person contexts. Napoli's narratological choice for *The Magic Circle* – a first person pronoun combined with the present tense – would seem to fend off potential unreliability because of the absence of a narrating, more knowledgeable (and thus manipulative) 'I'. The establishment of trust makes it easier to accept materials difficult to digest such as evil deeds. The building up of trust alters the absoluteness with which we evaluate evil in a given action – this is, as we shall discuss in a moment, precisely what happens in the film *Maleficent*. Once motives have been called into play, typological flatness gives way to a more rounded characterization. At this point a different cognitive dynamic is activated.

The more the witch becomes an individualised person, the more the reader is potentially engaged according to a directly proportional relationship (Figure 1). By engagement, we both mean the reader's emotional and experiential involvement and his/her evaluative, that is, ethical activity. In the case of traditional fairy tales the experiential background to be mobilized concerns essentially generic ingredients and the expectations emerging from them: generic scripts absorb and exhaust the emotions the plot activates because in fairy tales values attributed to characters tend to be polarised (good vs. bad). Fractured tales, on the other hand, activate experiential items more rooted in our individualized existential set-up. From an enactivist perspective⁴, not only is it much easier for a reader of a fractured tale to attribute consciousness, that is to say, to treat the witch as someone possessing a conscious mind (like a real person); the reader may go as far as to immerse himself/herself

⁴ The enactivist project dates back to Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch's *The Embodied Mind* (1991) in which a new way to understand cognition was launched. As the title itself suggests, enactivism is rooted in an embodied and situated conception of cognition. According to the enactivist approach, readers' engagement with stories has a "situated and embodied quality" and meaning "emerges from the experiential interaction between texts and readers" (Caracciolo 2017: 4). As Di Paolo, Rohde and De Jaegher demonstrate, this approach inaugurates second-generation cognitive sciences moving away from first-generation computational models.

so much in the character's existential predicament as to enact the witch's consciousness, a move we have previously termed empathetic alignment.

In the case we are analysing, the Ugly One becomes a healer because she is motivated by a desire to become God's helper; the fatal mistake that wins her to the Demons' cause and transforms her into a witch is a typical sin of *hubris*, a momentary lapse of humility. She is the first one to recognize her own arrogance and devises all possible tricks to avoid the initiation rite of eating a human child. She knows that "this [rite] is what separates a witch from all her past for the rest of eternity" (Napoli 1996: 66). Significantly, she understands that only her past – remembering it and cherishing it – can help her maintain her humanity in spite of the features she shares with traditional witches. These traits render the witch existentially recognizable beyond the witch frame and prepare the reader to negotiate (and accept) a new script depending on the specificities of this witch, who *has*, after all, a past. As with *Maleficent*, this rewriting does not revolve so much around a witch, but around *becoming* a witch and/or resisting being a real one. This resistance transforms the Ugly One's tale into a parable of liberation and purification from evil which can be related to the reader's own (not simply bookish) experiential background. This level of engagement, as Marco Caracciolo suggests, "brings into play – and allows [readers] to negotiate – real-world values" (Caracciolo 2013: 33) and inhabit fiction as the moral laboratory it is.

I lean farther into the oven. I must not think of the devil's question. [...] I lean farther, I am almost crawling into the oven. [...] And now I feel a tug at my cloak. Is the child trying to pull me back? Has she failed to comprehend, after all? [...] The heat, true to form, brings me no pain. I watch as my skirt and blouse catch fire. [...] "You are damned! Don't you dare burn up! Change into the salamander! Change right now!" [...] I can cry. And now I am crying for joy. Hallowed be hope, after all. I am crying with rapture. I am dying. Dying into the waiting hands of God. I am dying. Oh, glorious death. I am dying. Dying. Free (Napoli 1996: 116-117).

So, she *voluntarily* leans into the oven and dies "into the waiting hands of God", free from the Demons. The witch's sacrifice of her life in order to save the children and herself from evil mobilizes a more sophisticated consciousness attribution than just inverting traditionally good with traditionally bad characters. Napoli's rewriting goes a long way in preparing the reader to rethink a very specific witch: the cognitive implications of this rethinking in fact, are set against the typically polarised background of fairy tales: good/God/healing/life/nurturing vs. evil/demons/destroying/death/cannibalism, a binary that dominates the Ugly One's backstory as well. This causes the reader's mental categorizing to deviate from the original frame or even start a process of 'decategorization' which nonetheless belongs in the same structural, fairy-tale, pattern.

Let's move now to the second cognitive scenario. The second cognitive scenario assumes that the reader begins reading the novel after s/he has read the back cover. This presents a slightly different situation as the reader begins to read knowing that this is the retelling of the Hansel and Gretel story. In this second case, the reader will be much more alert to the details that connect this retelling to the 'original' one, while s/he expects the

familiar story to emerge fully. In this case, the effect of knowing that this is a specific witch who inhabits a specific tale is subtly reinforced by details such as the references to a prospective candy house or the protagonist's love for jewels. It is worth noticing that the back cover concentrates exclusively on the part of the story that is more readily connected to the original tale – "Deep in the woods lives the old witch called Ugly One". But the editorial paratext indicates a strange direction: "all she wants is to forget – that she was once a loving mother and a healer, blessed and powerful within her magic circle". This is contradicted by the text itself, which, as we have seen, presents *not forgetting* as the key for the Ugly One to redeem herself and save the children and for the reader to envision a new script for an old frame, a script that is rooted in a recognizably embodied experience of the world.

A similar example of an established fairy-tale villain whose schema is challenged by a revised narrative structure is the protagonist of the Disney film *Maleficent* (2014), which also refashions Perrault's tale as well as the Disney's earlier version of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). It provides the back story of Maleficent's evil deeds: a story of mutilation, betrayal and revenge – from winged fairy to queen of a dark world. The very first words of the female narrating voice set the stage for what follows:

Let us tell an old story anew and we'll see how well you know it. Once upon a time, there were two kingdoms that were the worst of neighbors. So vast was the discord between them that it was said that only a great hero or a terrible villain might bring them together.

Which old story will be told anew has already been announced by the title – Maleficent. Here as well, the paratext plays a crucial role in activating the audience's pre-existing knowledge. Whereas in *The Magic Circle*, the reader was asked (in the first cognitive scenario we explored) to mobilize a generic witch frame, here the audience mobilizes the witch frame and a specific script conjointly. And yet the very first words of the narrating voice challenge the viewers' knowledge of the old story – possibly, the suggestion seems to be, the audience knows the old story but only superficially, that is, as far as generic frames and scripts go. The cognitive dissonance on which these kinds of rewritings appear to thrive is immediately aroused. And – equally important – the complexity of the ethical component is also activated. Mentioning "a great hero or a terrible villain" amplifies the polarity typical of fairy tales while challenging the possibility to resort to the old tale as we know it.

The truth about Maleficent is that the villain of the present was a victim in the past⁵. As Hogan has argued, empathy is triggered by suffering – by showing the (detailed, salient) suffering of characters who deserve punishment for their actions, we are pulled to identify with them: "the enemy soldier in pain looks just like the comrade in pain. It is difficult to sustain a distinction between them" (Hogan 2003: 214). In *Maleficent* we are offered motiva-

⁵ However, the choice of retaining the protagonist's name is problematic. If this is a story that explains how Maleficent's heart is turned from pure to stone (as explained in the DVD back corner), how comes Maleficent had this name even when she was a good, kind and trusting child with supernatural – even healing and nurturing – powers? Shouldn't her name have been "Beneficent"? More often than not, it appears that marketing strategies prevail over narrative logic.

tion, in the form of self-preservation and revenge. And once again the audience is invited to problematize ready-made, clear-cut evaluations. The new materials definitely require a redefinition of the initial frame, but it is exactly the very existence of this pre-existing frame that may pave the way for the recognition of stereotypes and for fostering skepticism about Manichean distinctions.

Our conclusion is that the new character variants that have been examined, in order to be acquired by the reader, must produce an expanded version of the original witch frame to include new traits as well as feelings and emotions that were never present in the original model. Often the witch is given a name, which points to individuality rather than a type, and often first-person narration encourages, if not, obviously, total reliability and trust, “a decrease in the imaginative distance between the narrator and readers” (Van Lissa *et al.* 2016: 48). Fairy-tale novels may require from their readers a capacity to employ empathic moves even towards the evil character. According to Leake, empathy “does not require that we share the same feelings of another person’s situation but instead that we use our emotional experiences to understand the feelings of another” (Leake 2014: 177). Sometimes empathising with the villain can be difficult. But “difficult empathy” – to employ Leake’s term – does not mean that we support Maleficent’s desire for revenge. It means that we entertain a form of double vision that allows us to reach out in order to make sense of the character’s choices and feelings: in other words, we move from consciousness attribution to (at least potentially) consciousness enactment. The case of the Ugly One goes in a similar direction as we can easily connect with the kind of *hubris* that turns out to be fatal for her.

As we exercise empathy for a traditionally undeserving character, the retellings also alert us to social and psychological conditions that may have brought about the evil in these characters thus enhancing our emotional intelligence. In folk tales the reader is required to perform (or repeat) a pre-ordained moral judgment in which cognitive and ethical abilities are not stimulated. In the retold versions, “difficult empathy pushes us not only to see others differently, but also perhaps to see ourselves differently” (Leake 2014: 184). This complex cognitive activity may require a more experienced or older reader – the self-conscious attempt to imagine the condition of the other person relies not just on imagination, but on the reader’s memories (Hogan 2011: 65), and the reader’s tapping into his/her own experiential background and remembering how it feels to be discriminated, unappreciated, disappointed, or betrayed. These texts very cleverly encourage the reader to evaluate the character’s behavior from an ethical point of view, as only one set of possible reactions to their textual past, although not necessarily the most adequate.

The closing schematization (Figure 2) sums up graphically the trajectory from fairy-tale witch to fractured-tale witch, the concomitant change in the reader’s positioning in the two texts that we have examined and the potential experiential activations at stake in the two textual situations.

The analyses of the rewritings here presented demonstrate how the insertion of back stories providing readers with the possibility to learn about the characters’ inner workings not only paves the way for the rehabilitation of witches, but also allows for a richer reading experience. Once generic traits become individualized and motivations enter the frame,

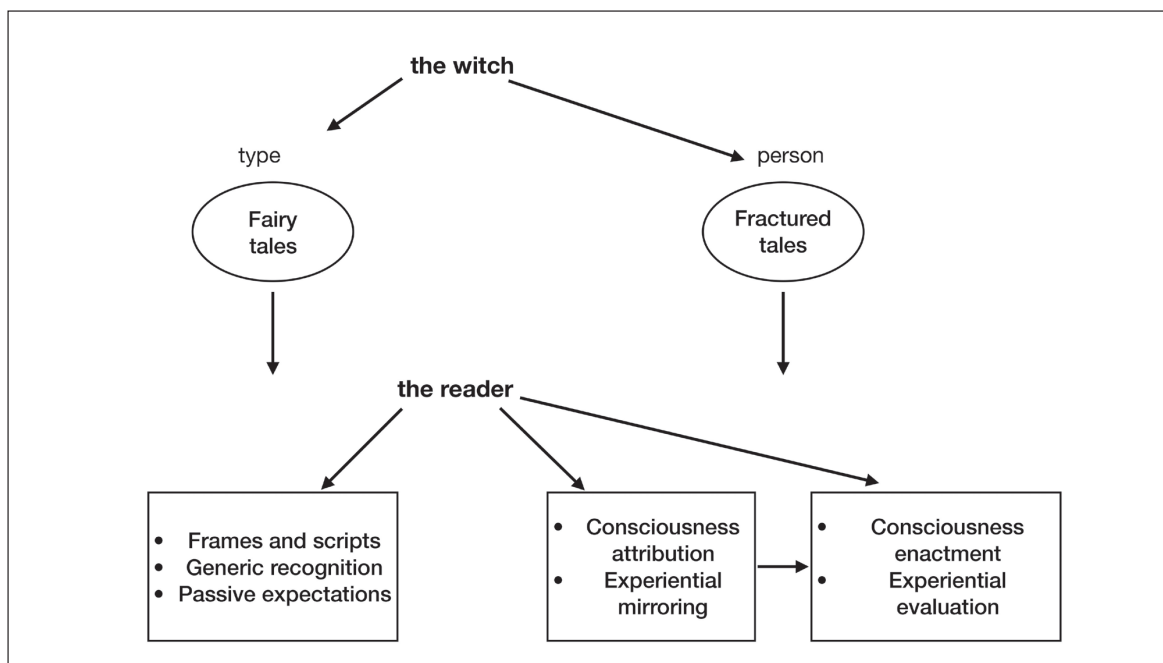


Fig. 2.

readers are caught in the net of potential empathetic responses, which are typically nested in the alignment with recognizable emotional situations. Reading about these fractured witches can provide a much more nuanced cognitive experience which requires readers to take a more complex ethical stance and empathize with these traditionally negative characters: after reading about these characters' 'past lives', one almost wonders whether witches are really that different from us, after all.

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