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PERFORMING WONDERS:
POSTMODERN REVISIONS OF FAIRY TALES
We tell stories because, in order to cope with the present and to face the future, we have to create the past, both as time and space, through narrating it.

—W.F.H. NICOLAISEN

Story demands sadism, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end.

—TERESA DE LAURETIS (revising Laura Mulvey)

ABUNDANCE, RATHER THAN LACK, motivates this study. Reproduced in a variety of discourses, fairy tales in the second half of the twentieth century have enjoyed an explosive popularity in North America and Western Europe. While many adults may not remember, and many children may not have been exposed to versions of “Snow White” or “Beauty and the Beast” other than Disney’s, we nevertheless respond to stereotyped and institutionalized fragments of these narratives sufficiently for them to be good bait in jokes, commercials, songs, cartoons, and other elements of popular and consumer culture. Most visible as entertainment for children, whether in the form of bedtime-stories or of games and props marketed in conjunction with a movie or TV series, fairy tales also play a role in education. Not only are children encouraged to retell or dramatize them in schools, but college students encounter them again in across-the-curriculum readers and in courses on children’s literature and folklore. This legitimizing of the genre has extended to several psychotherapeutical approaches and contexts. Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian study The Uses of Enchantment is still a landmark, though critically revisited; professional storytellers have been instrumental in helping abused children move beyond a burdened-by-guilt stage; and Jungian popularizers, as Gertrud Mueller Nelson in her hopeful Here All Dwell Free and Robert Bly in his mythifying Iron John: A Book About Men, have enlisted fairy tales in their best-seller projects of healing the wounded feminine and masculine. Creative writers seem
equally inspired by the fairy tale, which provides them with well-known material pliable to political, erotic, or narrative manipulation. Belittled, yet pervasive and institutionalized, fairy tales are thus produced and consumed to accomplish a variety of social functions in multiple contexts and in more or less explicitly ideological ways.

Thinking of the fairy tale predominantly as children’s literature, or even as “literature of childhood,” cannot accommodate this proliferation of uses and meanings. The fairy tale “cannot be defined one-dimensionally,” and in any case, “adults have always read, censored, approved, and distributed the so-called fairy tales for children” (Zipes, “Changing Function” 28 and 23). While keeping in mind the history of the fairy tale as literature for children, it is within the adjacent realms of folklore and literature that I intend to seek a clearer understanding of contemporary transformations of fairy tales. Though not the only legitimate mode of inquiry, this approach is historically and generically sound. Why? Because the “classic” fairy tale is a literary appropriation of the older folk tale, an appropriation which nevertheless continues to exhibit and reproduce some folkloric features. As a “borderline” or transitional genre, it bears the traces of orality, folkloric tradition, and socio-cultural performance, even when it is edited as literature for children or it is marketed with little respect for its history and materiality. And conversely, even when it claims to be folklore, the fairy tale is shaped by literary traditions with different social uses and users.

The context of folklore and literature, and more specifically the more limited field of folk and literary narrative, is also especially productive to the analysis of those transformations found in the privileged, though not isolated, concern of this book—postmodern literary texts for adults. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, literary authors have exploited the fairy tale in a variety of ways. To cite only a few of the most prominent examples, the fairy tale serves as structuring device for Charlotte Brontë in Jane Eyre and William Faulkner in Absalom, Absalom! as an explicitly ideological theme for Charles Dickens in Hard Times and Anne Sexton in Transformations, or as an expectation-setting allusion for Henry James in What Maisie Knew and for Italo Calvino in his early works, starting with Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno. Literary authors such
as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in “The Fairy Tale” or George MacDonald in “The Day Boy and the Night Girl” have also written their own “original” fairy tales or Kunstmärchen, not necessarily for children. In works like Anatole France’s “The Seven Wives of Bluebeard,” they have rewritten specific classic fairy tales to advance individual interpretations of them. And modern feminist writers from Olga Broumas to Fay Weldon have engaged the “inherited” tradition of fairy tales to “refuse to obey their authority by revising and appropriating them” (Walker 83). Recent studies like Theorizing Folklore: Toward New Perspectives on the Politics of Culture (Western Folklore’s 1993 special issue edited by Charles Briggs and Amy Shuman) and Folklore, Literature, and Cultural Theory: Collected Essays (edited by Cathy Lynn Preston, 1995) have provided theoretical frameworks for folklorists to rethink not only the multiple roles of tradition within culture today, but to view transformations within an interdisciplinary context which does not necessarily require a defense of the integrity and autonomy of scholarly fields. An informed knowledge of both folklore and literature can help us to question and redefine their borders, to articulate how narrative rules are (re)produced; such an approach also has wide-ranging implications for an understanding of literary texts within a broader cultural dynamics—an understanding which I would define as semiotic.

Literary and non-literary contemporary narratives which rewrite and revise “classic” fairy tales are the specific objects of this study, whether Margaret Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg” or the TV-series Beauty and the Beast. When reading these texts I want to address—within a critically semiotic understanding of folklore and literature, and culture in general—several problems related to how fairy tale materials are selected, appropriated, and transformed. Three questions direct my efforts. What kinds of images of woman and story do these rewritings/ revisions project? What narrative mechanisms support these images? And finally which ideologies of the subject underlie these images? In short, this book explores the production of gender, in relation to narrativity and subjectivity, in classic fairy tales as re-envisioned in late twentieth-century literature and media for adults.

To pursue this feminist and narratological project, I will have to struggle at times with still larger questions. How can we distinguish
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among the many ideological and narrative manipulations these transformations operate? How are the objectives and functions of contemporary transformations different, if at all, from earlier ones? And can we establish a typology of contemporary fairy tale transformations which would move towards a critical systematizing of their proliferation and yet resist closed classification? Since this interdisciplinary perspective draws on the study of the fairy tale, folklore and literature, and of feminism and postmodernism, the rest of this chapter will outline my perspective on these fields and their debates, thus supplying a frame for my ensuing discussion of contemporary tales of magic. In the process, I will also explain how I am using such terms as “tale of magic” or “fairy tale”; narrativity, performance, and performativity; and subjectivity and postmodernism.

THE TALE OF MAGIC AND ITS MIRRORS

So it is my turn to tell stories—stories about stories, or “theories,” as we call them. And since nobody, from psychologists and historians to parents and artists, feels any qualms about defining and discussing fairy tales, I will follow tradition here and tell my own version of the “fairy tale” story.

The fairy tale’s magic fulfills multiple desires. As literature for children, fairy tales offer symbolically powerful scenarios and options, in which seemingly unpromising heroes succeed in solving some problems for modern children. These narratives set the socially acceptable boundaries for such scenarios and options, thus serving, more often than not, the civilizing aspirations of adults. Dulce et utile: fiction at its most successful, at the height of its magic. As a hybrid or transitional genre, the fairy tale also magically grants writers/tellers and readers/listeners access to the collective, if fictionalized past of social communing, an access that allows for an apparently limitless, highly idiosyncratic re-creation of that “once there was.” Though it calls up old-time wisdom, the fairy tale grants individuals the freedom to play with this gift, to dismiss it as children’s fantasy. And for girls and women, in particular, the fairy tale’s magic has assumed the contradictory form of being both a spiritual enclave supported by old wives’ wisdom and an exquisitely glittery feminine kingdom. Regardless of the group,
though, the fairy tale still proves to be everyone’s story, making magic for all.\(^5\)

Jack Zipes, Ruth B. Bottigheimer, Maria Tatar, and other critics have taught us the value of breaking this magic spell. Looking with Dorothy behind the curtain at Oz to investigate the mechanisms of enchantment, their research has revealed how the workings of this magic, however benevolent, rely on privilege and repression. Clever and industrious boys, dependent and hard-working girls, and well-behaved “normal” children in general—such products demonstrate how the fairy tale’s magic act requires not only social violence and appropriation but a careful balance of threats and rewards.\(^6\)

My own thinking about this critical disenchantment has taken two directions: an attempt to place this double-edged magic more firmly within a folklore and literature frame; and a study of the fairy tale’s narrative construction of magic as “natural,” with an emphasis on the gendered implications for women.

From Breaking the Magic Spell (1979) to Spells of Enchantment (1992) and, most recently, in Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale (1994), Jack Zipes has relentlessly focused our critical attention on the changing social functions of fairy tales in Europe and the United States, identifying the ideologically narrow and repressive uses the fairy tale has been put to, but also stressing its emancipatory impulses. I have no quarrels with Zipes’s much needed genealogy or social history of the European fairy tale; however, I would like to take his discussion of the relationship between folk and fairy tales in a somewhat different direction. In Breaking the Magic Spell, where Zipes affirms the continuity between folk and fairy tales, he complains that the two are often confused nowadays. This is not a contradiction, but an historically grounded distinction which demands that narrative be understood within specific social contexts. A tale told by peasants in Medieval Europe simply does not express the same desires or values as the “same” tale written by a Romantic German poet, and since narratives often symbolize different needs and aspirations for different social groups, Zipes follows in August Nitschke’s steps, by arguing that, at different times and in different contexts, the “same” fairy tales support dominant ideologies or articulate a desire for change. In his more recent “The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale” (1988), Zipes focuses more closely on the continuity between the “wonder folk
tale, often called the Zaubermaerchen or the magic tale” (7) and the fairy tale, to reveal their multiple and elaborate ideological functions. While both genres “awaken our regard for the miraculous condition of life” (11), both have also served conservative and emancipatory purposes.

Yes, folk and fairy tales are ideologically variable desire machines.7 And certainly Zipes’s social history provides the necessary backdrop for my own inquiry. When I reflect on the continuity between the “wonder folk tale” and the fairy tale, I find I want to emphasize the ideological paradox or “trick” which in its multiple performances informs both: that magic which seeks to conceal the struggling interests which produce it. Zipes’s social history of the fairy tale contains a somewhat devolutionary premise, arising at least in part from his strong sympathy for the needs of the socially oppressed. In the middle ages, folk tales served more of an emancipatory function because they expressed the problems and desires of the underprivileged; in modern times, the fairy tale has more often than not been “instrumentalized” to support bourgeois and/or conservative interests. My point is that the tale of magic within a folk context was not and cannot be simply liberatory because within its specific community it would also, to some degree, rely on and reinforce social norms. In describing this process, Zipes rightly points out that the printing and privatization of the fairy tale “violated the communal aspects of the folk tale” (Fairy Tales as Myth 13), since in an oral context “the voice of the narrator was known. The tale came directly from common experiences and beliefs. Told in person, directly, face to face, [tales] were altered as the beliefs and behaviors of the members of a particular group changed” (10). Even such face to face, community-centered interaction, however, can hardly be imagined as operating outside of established hierarchies, systems of authority, or common assumptions. Though we may not think of them as folkloric “preliminary censorship,” tradition and consensus go together, and it is their dynamic interaction with an “innovative” or subversive impulse that constitutes folk narratives. As folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its normative function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its subversive wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation.8
What interests me, then, is how the narrative construction and manipulation of the tale of magic contribute to making different ideological effects possible within specific historical and social contexts.

Of course, most narratives seek to resolve their contradictions. Even those literary narratives which celebrate paradox in the name of the avantgarde still rely on some norms and reproduce some minimal consensus simply to be intelligible. What distinguishes the tale of magic or fairy tale as a genre, however, is its effort to conceal its “work” systematically—to naturalize its artifice, to make everything so clear that it works magic, no questions asked. As Jack Zipes notes, the fairy tale operates as “myth” par excellence. This quality itself provokes different responses. Max Lüthi’s stylistic portrait of the European fairy tale describes its magic precisely in these terms, but from within an essentialist framework that projects a set of unchangeable humanistic values onto these narratives. Lüthi’s celebration of the fairy tale’s enchantment as an artistic achievement is, however, precisely the spell that Zipes and others have, in an anti-universalizing and historicizing move, struggled to break. My own wish is to make visible the narrative construction of this magic through a narratological effort to name its paradoxes and articulate its variable ideological effects. To break the magic spell, we must learn to recognize it as a spell that can be unmade.

Adults and children, rich and poor, storytellers and literary artists, boys and girls, social groups and individuals. . . . If the fairy tale seduces all even as it articulates or represses their conflicting interests, how does it do so? And in name of whose desire? As Teresa de Lauretis notes, “the object of narrative theory,” semiotically speaking, “is not . . . narrative but narrativity; not so much the structure of narrative . . . as its works and effects.” For feminist theory, this turn to narrativity means examining the relationship of narrative to desire, and “rereading . . . sacred texts against the passionate urging of a different question, a different practice, and a different desire” (Alice Doesn’t 107). What happens, then, if we articulate what Max Lüthi calls the “one-dimensionality” and the “universal interconnection” of the fairy tale with “a different desire”? We know that in folk and fairy tales the hero is neither frightened nor surprised when encountering the otherworld, receiving magic gifts, holding conversations with animals, or experi-
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The numinous is artfully made to appear natural. Similarly, isolation from a specific community allows the hero to form “all-encompassing interrelationships” (Lüthi, European Folk tale 54), and the narrative to exercise its stylistic unity. What would require explaining in a culturally-grounded legend, for instance, is not mysterious or accidental, but natural in the tale of magic. These and other features of abstract style produce that “effortlessness” which Mircea Eliade notes when defining the folktale as “a lighthearted doublet of myth and initiation rite” (Lüthi, European Folk tale 116). Since consenting to the rules of one’s community is represented as a natural process, the stylistic and thematic projects of the tale of magic, then, are the same: to disguise its artifice and its social project.

This disguise, however, seems doubly persuasive and dangerous when assumed by tales centering upon the experiences of women. That long tradition of representing woman both as nature and as concealed artifice contributes to the success and power of such images in the tale of magic. As much anthropological and historical research has shown, women are commonly “identified as being closer to nature than to culture,” which in a patriarchal system makes them “symbolic of an inferior, intermediate order of being” (Lerner 25). Simone de Beauvoir wrote that as man represents her, woman incarnates his dream: “she is the wished-for intermediary between nature, the stranger to man, and the fellow being who is too closely identical” and therefore competitive and possibly hostile (de Beauvoir 172). This association of woman with nature paradoxically produces the artifice of “femininity,” both as naturalizing make-up and as representations of womanly “essence.” To take an extreme case, when Snow White is presented as a “natural” woman, the artful construction of her image encourages thinking of her and other stereotypical heroines in pre-cultural, unchangeable terms. By showcasing “women” and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/them into man-made constructs of “Woman.”

Considering that questioning the fairy tale’s magic has been a feminist project for several decades at least, with its own several phases and problematics, we fortunately do not need to reject fairy tales as inherently sexist narratives which offer “narrow and damaging role-models for young readers” (Stone 229). Feminists can view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse which produces repre-
sentations of gender—a “technology of gender,” for de Lauretis; and studying the mechanisms of such a production can highlight the dynamic differences and complex interdependence between “Woman” in fairy tales and “women” storytellers/writers and listeners/readers. Marina Warner’s 1994 *From the Beast to the Blonde*, for instance, takes up this challenge by focusing on “images” of women in classic fairy tales, especially the symbols of beauty and blondeness, “in the light of the tellers’ position and interests” as these “practitioners”—and so many have been women—negotiate the strategies of gossip and silence within their specific historical and social contexts (xxiv). Within a feminist frame that critically recognizes the power of “magic,” fairy tales are sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires. These narratives continue to play a privileged role in the production of gender, and as such are deconstructed and reconstructed in a variety of ways which this book seeks to analyze.

In its multiple retellings, the fairy tale is that variable and “in-between” image where folklore and literature, community and individual, consensus and enterprise, children and adults, Woman and women, face and reflect (on) each other. As I see it, the tale of magic’s controlling metaphor is the *magic mirror*, because it conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice). My readings of postmodern tales of magic will focus on how they reproduce these mirror images while at the same time they make the mirroring visible to the point of transforming its effects. Each chapter will address a specific narratological aspect of this doubling strategy: narrative frame for “Snow White,” voice in “Little Red Riding Hood,” localization for “Beauty and the Beast,” and agency in “Bluebeard.”

Given my way of telling this story, it is no accident that in post-Lacanian theories the mirror is the site for the production of the “subject.”

**FOLKLORE, SEMIOTICS, AND THE SUBJECT**

Richard Bauman’s 1982 essay, “Conceptions of Folklore in the Development of Literary Semiotics,” presents itself as a “critical evaluation by an American folklorist of the folkloric foundation” of studies central to the development of semiotic theory—specifically
the works of Vladimir Propp, Petr Bogatyrev, Roman Jakobson, and Mikhail Bakhtin. “What about their work in folklore is likely to be productive for folklorists (and others) currently turning to them as semioticians?” Bauman asks (1), and then goes on to examine how their remarks on folklore articulate with what folklorists believe today. He finds much of value: Propp’s articulation of the fabula/story relationship; Bogatyrev’s and Jakobson’s understanding of folklore as a system; Bogatyrev’s focus on “function” as a dynamic variable affected by improvisation as well as tradition; and Bakhtin’s truly ethnographic approach in *Rabelais and His World*. For Bauman, the work of Bogatyrev, Jakobson, and Bakhtin in fact converges with the contemporary approach to folklore he identifies with: the ethnography of performance, which builds on the ethnography of speaking to study the conventions of performance as *parole* in a specific cultural system.

Bauman concludes by suggesting “some of the ways in which the work of current folklorists goes beyond the work of the founders . . . , charting directions that should be of interest to students of the semiotics of literature both oral and written” (13). Bogatyrev and Jakobson, for instance, emphasized the conservative function of folklore as shaped by tradition and communal censorship. However, ethnographers of performance who study folklore within specific social situations see folklore texts as “emergent, the product of the complex interplay of expressive resources, social goals, individual competence, community ground rules for performance, and culturally defined event structures” (Bauman, “Conceptions of Folklore” 13–14). This event-centered perspective not only moves beyond earlier abstract conceptualizations of censorship in folklore, but also makes possible the study of how performers manipulate available communicative functions to achieve specific and varying social ends, and reinforces an intertextual interpretation of oral and written texts as well. Or as Bauman puts this last point, “to identify a particular oral text as traditional is to highlight its place in a web of intertextuality that, far from placing it apart from written literature, unites it with written literature still more firmly” (16).

The implications of the theoretical itinerary traced by Bauman are wide-ranging (and I am not evaluating here the trajectory that his own research has taken more recently). To begin with, semi-
oticians and folklorists no longer contrast folklore and literature by invoking the Saussurian distinction of *langue* and *parole*; they choose instead to examine the socially situated dynamics of tradition and creativity or performance in both. Viewed in this light, individual performers deserve the same attention as artists that individual authors already receive. Second, an event-centered perspective on folklore runs parallel to the triadic sign-event first conceptualized by Charles Peirce and later by Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok, all of whom emphasize the materiality and the socially-variable functions of a sign. Third, studying verbal art in both folklore and literature raises questions about the text’s relationship to other texts, the strategies adopted when communicating with specific audiences within given generic and social parameters, and the social functions or ideological effects of these strategies. And finally, Bauman’s account suggests that the study of folklore *in* literature has become an integral part of the study of folklore *and* literature, simply because these two artistic forms of communication systematically interact and transform each other.

Semiotics and folkloristics, folklore and literature. I am tempted here to say “and they lived happily ever after,” but not so long as nagging questions remain. Is communication the primary function of verbal art and of language in general? And do a performer’s or author’s strategies necessarily represent a unified, immediate expression of that individual’s ideology or social practice? Something is lacking: that sustained concern with the subject, as socially and symbolically constituted in ways that question the primacy of consciousness and experience, which informs much contemporary criticism. By stretching its own post-structuralism or “post-Saussurianism” to accommodate the problematics of postmodernity, semiotics has generated polymorphous intellectuals like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, and also produced the related but distinct species of grammatologists. Optimistically satisfied with the fullness of presence projected by actual events, performers, and audiences, however, many folklorists have resisted reflecting on the subject, preferring to go on celebrating the creative individual. More than a decade after Bauman’s essay appeared, I find myself posing a qualified version of his question: if my interest in oral and written narrative extends to the issue of subjectivity,
is there still something to be gained in connecting semiotics with folklore and literature?

I believe there still is, but only if the semiotic emphasis on the communicative functions of language can be modified by reflecting on its symbolic functions, and if semiotic tools can be employed critically rather than descriptively. The methodological framework of this book is therefore informed by a compositely deconstructive approach to language, which draws on Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous; my framework is also informed by Mieke Bal’s critical narratology of semiotic descent. Deconstruction displaces the speech-centeredness of folkloric and generally verbal signs, a shift I find theoretically enabling when reaching for problems of ideology and gender. As for narratology, it establishes itself as an analytical tool precisely by prioritizing the study of “narrative subjectivity,” which Bal defines as a network rather than an unquestionable identity.20

Appropriating Derrida’s notion of writing or écriture allows me to situate the tradition/performance opposition differently. As already noted, performance-oriented folklorists have strengthened the ties between folklore and literature by treating the speaking subject as an individual artist, the center of a communicative and social network. Yet, while privileging an event or performance might even lead to a reversal of the elitist opposition of written and oral literature,21 structurally a hierarchy is left intact.22 Displacing this hierarchy will require reconsidering more fully that the spoken word, always in an intra-subjective form, is not unmediated, even though the signifier’s evanescence in speech and the speaker’s physical presence may contribute to an impression of the direct presence of thought. As conceptualized by Derrida, “writing” locates the continuity of the written and the oral in mediated meanings and absence—features traditionally identified with writing to brand it as a poor substitute for the direct fullness of speech.23 Communication is inevitably distorted representation, and the symbolic function of speech, its supplemental materiality, is made intelligible as a symptom of already mediated signification and absence. Thus, the speaker or tale-teller cannot be considered the immediate or unified source of meaning, and the subject both of language and in language cannot simply be viewed as an active situational variable, but as problematic.
Redefining “writing” along these lines shifts attention from communication to representation, and deconstructs the independent subject who speaks his own words and gives them meaning through his presence. Hélène Cixous exposes this subject as a specifically patriarchal one which privileges speech not only over writing, but over “voice” as well. Like Derrida, she challenges the primacy of speech over writing, but by affirming a feminine “voice” Cixous also confronts patriarchal deconstruction. As I read Cixous, this “voice” is neither the essentializing expression of what it is to be a woman, nor is it something a woman can “find” and recognize as her “own” in some purely liberatory explosion of authenticity. As Cixous describes it, the feminine “voice” claims a complex affinity with writing and a material connection with the body, without returning us to the unified subject. “Writing,” she chants, is “the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling of the other in me”; this “peopling gives neither rest nor security, always disturbs the relationship to ‘reality,’ produces an uncertainty that gets in the way of the subject’s socialization” (The Newly Born Woman 85–86). Working analogously, the marginalized feminine “voice” turns into privileged access to such writing: “Listen to woman speak in a gathering (if she is not painfully out of breath): she doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws her trembling body in the air. . . . She exposes herself. . . . She inscribes what she is saying because she does not deny unconscious drives the unmanageable part they play in speech” (92). Both “writing” and “voice” are thus “the experience of not-me within me” (85), and represent a different subjectivity, which since it is not propre (as both “own” and “proper”) does not rely on the authority of presence.

But both “writing” and “voice” are also material processes: here, the emphasis is on the body, the involvement of its materiality. For “voice,” in particular, this involvement translates into listening for and producing song, making sounds reverberate as such in what we otherwise hear as speech, and playing out metaphors to release the “living word” which “can be felt full of flesh.”24 In this way, Cixous explicitly brings the question of gender to bear on the relationship between writing and orality,25 furthering a deconstructive project, yet seeking to voice the perspective of women. By affirming the reciprocal implication of “writing” and “voice” (which are not identical to these terms in their common usage),
she exposes speech as a patriarchal illusion of self-presence and self-sameness from which women should free themselves, especially since we/they have experienced this fiction only vicariously through men or in fragments. A plurality of variously empowered and disempowered voices now displaces (rather than opposes) the masculine speaker and constitutes the practice of “writing.”

This continuity between writing and voice is not, however, free of struggle. Many of the more ideologically powerful voices in “writing” reinforce patriarchal structures, just as much writing, literary or otherwise, models itself on the “self-same” fiction of speech, preferring not to “admit there is another.” Cixous offers a way into the struggle. By privileging “voice,” she peoples language, thus making Derrida’s “writing” less overbearing and more diversified from the perspective of those who are othered by it. In the specific analysis of a folk or literary narrative, when the objective is not to explain in a generally philosophical framework how all narratives partake of “writing” as polyvalence and absence, Cixous’s peopling of language helps us articulate the ideological and semantic struggles at work in the narrative. And finally, the displacement of speech through “voice” emphasizes the material, bodily aspect of language—a questioning of the patriarchal body/mind split with important repercussions for the study of women’s/feminine verbal narratives in particular, since it encourages a reading and writing of the body. Writing, then, is holding a mirror to our bodies (and subjectivities) so as to transform into symbols those bodily symptoms which want to speak but which on their own are iconic rather than verbal signs.

To clarify the interplay between paradigms I’ve been discussing, the table in Figure 1 represents “tradition” and “performance” in relation to the structuralist langue and parole and to the deconstructive “writing” and “voice.” These paradigms do not simply replace one another in an evolutionary narrative; rather, as they interrogate one another, their function changes without being nullified. For instance, “tradition and performance” does not impose a conservative distinction between folklore and literature, but seeks to articulate variables within both, while “writing” and “voice” bring to the forefront of that articulation the problematics of an ideologically-constructed, symbolically-produced, and gendered subjectivity. I am not, therefore, replacing the long-estab-
lished paradigm of "tradition and performance" with imported non-folkloristic concepts, but I am making visible the ideological implications of this couple, contesting and thereby transforming it by naming what it represses—first, symbolic representation, of which the subject is a product rather than the source; and second, the gendered pluralization of voice as an intra-subjective site of struggle.

This ideological framing of "tradition and performance" informs my understanding of folklore and literature, and explains

Figure 1.

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<th>Approach to Folklore &amp; Literature</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
<th>Key Variable</th>
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<tr>
<td>Structuralism</td>
<td>langue/parole</td>
<td>censoring system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functionalism</td>
<td>tradition/innovation norm/creativity (Saussure, Propp, Jakobson and Bogatyrev)</td>
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<td>Semiotics and Ethnography</td>
<td>tradition and performance (Peirce, Bakhtin, Bauman)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deconstruction</td>
<td>writing and speech (Derrida, Workman)</td>
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<td>Deconstruction féminine</td>
<td>writing and voice (Cixous)</td>
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<td>&quot;peopling&quot; (as articulation of power/gender struggles)</td>
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my broader use of “performance” to include written texts. It also qualifies my use of critical narratology in this book. As presented by Mieke Bal, the objective of “critical narratology” is to limn “ideology at work in narrative subjectivity” (On Story-Telling 47). Following an Althusserian definition of “ideology,” Bal emphasizes its naturalizing power, its discursive production of a seemingly coherent subject, and its discriminating— that is, hierarchical— shaping of a society’s representations and a subject’s positions. When ideology succeeds, a subject occupies one or more positions as if they were natural, in an it-goes-without-saying fashion. “Described in this way, ideologies contribute to the legitimization and the maintenance of social institutions and practices, to the unequal distribution of power, and therefore to the possibility of satisfying conscious and unconscious needs and desires, and, finally, to the masking of contradictions” (46). The primary task of a critical narratology then, is to make visible a narrative’s imposition by unfolding its strategic proposition of meaning— its subjectivity. Achieving this task involves tracing the network of subject roles, positions, and actions within a text, and then measuring this specific ideologically produced subjectivity against narrative and social norms. Shying away from the humanistic link between “subject” and “individual human being,” Bal identifies a “subjectival network” which articulates narration (who speaks?), focalization (who sees?), and agency (who does?). Distinguishing among these aspects of the text’s subjectivity breaks up the text’s apparent coherence, and allows its features and symptoms to be interpreted in relationship with the social.28

Though Bal’s various books contain a wealth of critical implements, I have found certain tools especially useful when analyzing postmodern transformations of the tale of magic. First, the seemingly obvious statement that the narrator exists only in the first person allows us to assign narrative and ideological responsibility to the so-called “third-person” narrator who, thanks to the naturalizing “once upon a time” fairy tale frame, is usually considered to be objective. Second, Gérard Genette’s important distinction between narration and focalization becomes even more valuable when Bal uses it to pose questions about the articulation of voice and vision in a text. Does in short the perspective through which we see match or conflict with the words of the narrator? Third, by
demonstrating that focalization includes selection and gaze along with the purely visual, and extends to what is seen (the focalized) as well as who sees (the focalizer), Bal supplies a fuller apparatus for making explicit the "vision" or ideology transmitted by a text's words. Fourth, her emphasis on "self-reflection" as a "socially indispensable critical function" insists on the inevitable narrative tie between the ideological and the critical, identification and alienation (On Story-Telling 31).

How does Bal's project connect with semiotics, deconstructive practices, and feminine/feminist interests as I have represented them in relation to the study of folklore and literature? Explicitly with Peirce's semiotics and implicitly with folkloristic applications of semiotics, Bal's project shares an attentiveness to signs in relation to their users and in socially-variable situations. Her analytical approach to narrative's multi-layered production does not hierarchically distinguish between written and oral texts, since in both cases "interpretation" requires listening for lack (what is omitted or denied) and repetition (which can emphasize or displace).

Finally, Bal's philosophical aligning of her narratology with "critical sciences" signals her recognition of the history of semiotics. This "scientific" yearning for comprehensiveness and clarity distinguishes Bal's approach to narrative from deconstruction, while her critical focus on the text's subjectivity marks their affinity. By attempting to fill in gaps, to interpret symptoms and violations of norms, Bal's narratology seeks to bring about an awareness of the text's unconscious—an analytic translation of it—but also brings into relief the untied threads and tacit interests that unmake the coherence of both textual production and interpretation. 29

Perhaps the most powerful point of condensation between these distinct lines of inquiry—semiotics, deconstruction, feminist studies, and critical narratology—is their keen attention to the "performativ" as constituting the link between verbal signs and their users (senders and receivers), that is, to the social uses of an utterance or a narrative performance. As studied by speech-act theorists, however, the performative force of an utterance—that it does what it states—ultimately depends on the subject's conscious intention (is she or he serious in promising, ordering, parodying?), which, somewhat like the ethnography of performance,
again makes the self-present and ever-conscious subject the center of a contextually-bound performance. Within deconstruction, many feminisms, and critical narratology, while the meaning of a (sign-)event still depends on its performative force, its context-bound performance, that context can be framed and reframed, resulting in different meanings which no one subject can master. And without discounting the significance of agency, the effect of this shift is to resituate responsibility not within individual intention, but in the network of ideologies articulated in a performance as interpreted within multiple frames.

There it is, then, a happy ending to my meta-narrative. I do believe, after all, in the compatibility of critical narratology and deconstruction, just as I wish to enlist both to unmask naturalizing gender-constructions. And yet, more than a point of arrival, this theoretical frame is a willfully constituted starting point. The critical practices I bring into play serve distinct interests, and I must therefore recognize their differences and their struggles. For struggle there is, within and between the frameworks I have drawn, and within and between my own positions in these frameworks.

**POSTMODERN FAIRY TALES AND THE PERFORMATIVE**

Why and how do I want to refer to “postmodernism”? Whether we like it or not, postmodernism has affected many of today’s configurations of Western culture and its hierarchical distinctions among disciplines and genres, especially literature, popular culture, and folklore. Though conflicting interpretations of postmodernism have almost succeeded in theorizing it out of existence, several of its versions still attest to its vitality. Most significantly, postmodern studies have advocated anti-humanistic conceptualizations of the subject, played with multiplicity and performance in narrative, and struggled with the sexual and gender ramifications of problematizing identities and differences.

The working definition of postmodern narratives I have adopted here rejects a purely stylistic understanding of the postmodern, does not celebrate or condemn its subject, and wishes to encourage distinctions among performative uses of postmod-
ernism. Though I agree with Margaret Ferguson that "postmodernism" is "the best umbrella term for the cultural, social, and theoretical dimensions of our period" ("Feminism and Postmodernism" 3), I would also like to make some distinctions among the poetics and politics of such a diversified cultural landscape. Linda Hutcheon’s approach to postmodernism has its appeal. She reads postmodern fiction as a primarily European and American “cultural enterprise” which distinguishes itself from other contemporary practices through its self-conscious contradictions, parodic intertextuality, and conflictual dialogue with historicity (“Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism” 10). Since they rhetorically and literally “incorporate that which they aim to contest”—modernism, history, the humanistic subject, other narrative texts and genre—Hutcheon sees postmodern fictions as “‘borderline’ enquiries” practicing “writing-as-experience-of-limits” (16-17), crossing borders between genres, and challenging “a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has ignored the role of history in art and thought” (21-22). From the perspective of these proliferating and contradictory narratives, History, like the other “master narratives,” to use Lyotard’s term, is de-naturalized and re-evaluated in the present as another made-up story. Complicity and challenge, “writing” and “voice”—postmodernism self-consciously activates this informing paradox of narrative.

A fairy-tale related example might be helpful at this point. Italo Calvino’s framework for the collection *Italian Folktales* (1956; English trans. 1980), I would argue, is not postmodern. Angela Carter’s project in the collection *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) is. In his journey into folklore, Calvino discovered not only that “folktales are real” in their abstract logic as a “general explanation of life,” but also that he could identify and value certain Italian characteristics—as opposed to the French or the German characteristics of the tale (xviii). Like the Grimms’, Calvino’s approach thus supports a humanistic and nation-building project. Carter, on the other hand, assumes that fairy tales transmit unofficial, cross-culturally varied, and entertaining knowledge. Similarly, though for both writers the folk/fairy tale is clearly tied to the struggles and labor of the ordinary people, for Calvino the genre embodies human destiny in narrative, while for Carter it documents the resourcefulness and diversity of people’s—espe-
cially women's—hard work. For Calvino, the fairy tale's appeal lies in the “joyous logic and precise rhythm” of transformation (*Italian Folktales* xxix); for Carter, in its active and varied responses to the “same common predicament—being alive” (*The Virago Book* xiv). It is Carter's focus on subjectivity as constructed in social and narrative contexts that makes hers a postmodern approach.

Though they both work with the folk tradition in a text-mediated way—Calvino in archives and with earlier published collections, Carter with all published works—as editors they also locate themselves differently in relation to the storytelling tradition they seek to represent in their collections. When Calvino wishes to become a “link in the anonymous chain” of transmission by modifying tales as all tellers do, his goal is to embellish the tale according to clearly literary standards of narrative style. Carter overtly participates in the chain of transmission by explicitly marking her selection of tales on the basis of specific class and gender considerations. Having made her choices, however, she re-presents a variety of styles and voices without making any textual changes herself. If Calvino's collection presents a somewhat essentialized metaphorical Italian fairy tale, animated by “a continuous quiver of love,” then Carter's book precipitates a conversation with and among different kinds of tales and female protagonists—jokes as well as romantic and moral tales; “sillies,” clever women, brave and good ones. In spite of his well-documented notes, Calvino's shaping of the tales remains in the background. Carter's positioning is there, tongue-in-cheek, in the chapter headings and in the two titles of the collection (*The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* in England and *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* in the United States) but not evident in the tales themselves—a strategy designed to maximize the entertaining dialogue among fairy tales and to multiply the performative effects of their “domestic art.” In this sense above all, Carter's editing project is postmodern while Calvino's is not.

But what is this “performative,” and how does it relate to gender? In linguistics, performative speech has exceptional force because in a ritual of display it constitutes what it names, “man and wife” in a marriage ceremony, for instance. As I understand it, Judith Butler's distinction between “performance” and “performative” relies on their intimate relation. Through repeated performances, the power of the performative is both actualized and par-
Butler makes two significant moves here. First, she views gender itself as performative discourse which involves “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal in time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 33). The seeming statement of recognition “It’s a girl!” is thus an interpelation which initiates the process of “girling,” an assignment never to be fully completed because “femininity” is “the forcible citation of a norm” and not a pre-existing reality. Second, like Derrida, Butler locates the source of authority for these pronouncements in citationality or reiteration while, at the same time, emphasizing the provisionality of such power, since “reiterations are never simply replicas of the same” (*Bodies* 226). Gender is performative. The authority of the performative depends on repetition, which requires multiple performances. In certain hyperbolic cases, however, this authority produces twisted effects which expose the norm as fantasy and compulsion. In such instances, the “re-signification of norms is thus a function of their inefficacy, and so the question of subversion, of working the weakness in the norm, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation” (*Bodies* 237). As such, performance is always already implicated in the citation of a norm, whether it be gender, subjectivity or narrativity, but can re-articulate this norm by way of exposing its constructedness.

As I read postmodern transformations of the fairy tale, I want to argue that they are doubling and double: both affirmative and questioning, without necessarily being recuperative or politically subversive. As literary texts, cartoons, movies, musicals, or soap operas, postmodern fairy tales reactivate the wonder tale’s “magic” or mythopoeic qualities by providing new readings of it, thereby generating unexploited or forgotten possibilities from its repetition. As “borderline enquiries,” postmodern re-visions of traditional narratives do more than alter our reading of those narratives. Like meta-folklore, they constitute an ideological test for previous interpretations, and in doing so, postmodern fairy tales exhibit an awareness of how the folktale, which modern humans relegate to the nursery, almost vindictively patterns our unconscious and “secretly lives on in the story” (Benjamin 102). Semiotically speaking, the anti-tale is implicit in the tale, since this
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well-made artifice produces the receiver’s desire to repeat the tale anew: repetition functions as reassurance within the tale, but this very same compulsion to repeat the tale explodes its coherence as well-made artifice. Finally, and perhaps most simply, the postmodern fairy tale’s dissemination of multiple possible versions is strangely powerful—all re-tellings, re-interpretations, and revisions may appear to be equally authorized as well as unauthorized.

Though these “parodic” texts—in Linda Hutcheon’s sense of the word—self-consciously exploit the articulation of “writing” and “voice,” they are not performatively the same. As Nancy A. Walker suggests, re-vision “is not merely an artistic but a social action, suggesting in narrative practice the possibility of cultural transformation,” but only those rewritings which “expose or upset the paradigms of authority inherent in the texts they appropriate” are “disobedient” (6–7). Depending on the degree to which one category reflects on the others and to which specific desires intersect as the texts are produced and consumed, the ways postmodern fairy tales produce subjectivity, narrativity, and gender can differ greatly. Multiple permutations produce postmodern transformations of fairy tales because their simultaneously affirming and questioning strategies re-double in a variety of critically self-reflexive moves. As my readings will show, some postmodern revisions may question and remake the classic fairy tale’s production of gender only to re-inscribe it within some unquestioned model of subjectivity or narrativity. Other postmodern tales expose the fairy tale’s complicity with the “exhausted” forms and ideologies of traditional Western narrative, rewriting the tale of magic in order to question and re-create the rules of narrative production, especially as such rules contribute to naturalizing subjectivity and gender. Still other tales re-place or relocate the fairy tale to multiply its performance potential and denaturalize its institutionalized power. In every case, though, these postmodern transformations do not exploit the fairy tale’s magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings.

Postmodern fictions, then, hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale, playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices. Frames and images may vary, but gender is almost inevitably the privileged place for
articulating these de-naturalizing strategies. And while this play of reflection, refraction, and framing might produce ideologically “destructive,” “constructive” and “subversive” effects, the self-reflexive mirrors themselves are themselves questioned and transformed.

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As for myself, perhaps I could tell the tale of these complex and inter-woven narratives this way: “In the beginning, were stories—or better, people would tell enchanting stories. These stories might seem old and worthless, but performing their magic’s many tricks once more unleashes new powers which, in turn, can expose the magic as trickery and thus unmake its spells.” This revised magic, which Zipes calls “antimythic,” is the play of re-tellings, re-evaluations, and re-figurings or re-visions which I see as constituting postmodern transformations of fairy tales. Postmodern fairy tales are wonders in performance, and as such perform varying wonders.

The folklorist W.F.H. Nicolaisen has recently posed the seemingly innocent question “Why Tell Stories?” then answered it by showing how the etymology of story carries us down to narrative’s shared roots with history, knowledge, and wisdom (6). Nicolaisen’s discussion of “storying” as an “essential component of our intellectual survival kit” also reminds us that “we continually invent ourselves,” because the stories we tell produce and find us in the past, and enable us to live through the present’s uncertainties by projecting us into the future. We encounter stories “not only as narration from knowledge and wisdom but also as a narrative given shape through ideas and relevance through vision” (6). This apparently simple definition thus ties story to history (knowledge), values (ideas), and figuration (vision); implicitly, it also signals that mastery of such narrative ingredients produces power, as both privilege and empowerment.

As I work with the multiple versions, conflicting interests, and articulations of verbal and visual, I will seek to show how the magic of postmodern fairy tales retells history, values, and gendered figurations. For each text, this uncovering takes place at the cross-
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roads where the postmodern fairy tale’s telling marks meet—its dialogue with the history of the tale of magic, and with its own place in a postmodern market; its replay of tradition and performance, or “writing” and “voice”; its scripted desires and performative effects; and, most tellingly, the specific configurations of gender, narrativity, and subjectivity that it performs. Chapter Two examines the strategies by which postmodern texts for adults expose the construction of “Snow White”’s narrative frame and its complicity with an essentializing ideology of gender. Though all popular fairy tales do not inscribe static and “natural” beauties like Snow White, the voices, gazes, and actions of female fairy-tale heroines inevitably find themselves measured against such a normative frame. To qualify this negative assessment of the fairy tale’s narrative and gender construction further, Chapter Three explores the historicizing and performance-oriented side of the postmodern project of self-reflection by developing an intertextual reading of “Red Riding Hood” in folk versions and literary retellings. With the double vision of postmodern fairy tales already established, Chapter Four proceeds to differentiate, along the lines of gender and subjectivity, among the narrative strategies and ideological projects that selected contemporary revisions of “Beauty and the Beast” perform. Finally, Chapter Five focuses on specifically feminist manipulations of the “Bluebeard” plot to powerful but varied effects.
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