

THE FAIRY TALES IN CRISTINA CAMPO'S "DELLA FIABA"

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Cristina Campo is better known today for her poetry, letters, and literary translations than for her critical essays on fairy tales. Yet an enduring reflection on this genre spans Campo's entire publishing history, from the first draft of her essay "Fiaba e mistero" ("Fairy Tales and Mystery"), published in 1953 and then expanded for publication nine years later in her first collection of essays, which was itself titled *Fiaba e mistero* (1962), to her last book of essays, *Il flauto e il tappeto* (*The Flute and the Carpet*), from 1971. Campo was born in the same year as Italo Calvino, Italy's foremost fairy-tale voice in the twentieth century, known for having collected 200 tales from all over Italy in the extremely popular 1956 volume *Fiabe italiane* (*Italian Folktales*). Campo's understanding of fairy tales was deeply influenced, however, by the work of a very different writer from Calvino, namely, French philosopher and activist Simone Weil (1909-1943), and especially by Weil's theoretical elaboration of the practice of "attention." In order to understand fairy tales, for Campo, it is necessary to wait rather than search, to trust rather than hope: discernment comes from readiness and openness, from suspending one's thought in contemplative awareness, from being, indeed, "attentive" in Weil's sense.¹ That fairy tales were central to Campo's life and work is confirmed by Campo's only overtly

¹ In Weil's words, "all that I call 'I' has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived" (*Gravity and Grace* 118). On Campo, Weil, and attention in the context of fairy tales, see my essay, "The Beauty of the Beast." On the relationship between Weil and Campo more generally, see for example Caramore, Negri, De Stefano.

autobiographical essay, titled “La noce d’oro” (“The Golden Walnut”) after the magical, life-saving nut which is a common fairy-tale motif.² In this essay, Campo remembers experiencing her childhood like a fairy tale: her godmother was a gift-bearing fairy and her cousins reminded her of “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” in the Grimm brothers’ tale by the same title; her own skin resembled the Snake King’s, probably a reference to Giambattista Basile’s “The Enchanted Snake”; and the orders of her doctor-uncle were experienced as all-powerful spells. Fairy tales in general were for Campo the magic walnut that saved her during the difficult times of her life, and many of her essays touch on the spiritual meanings of this genre.³ Among these essays, “Della fiaba” is the most extensive, with multiple references to tales and tellers from different times and places. What follows are annotations on some of these fairy-tale references for those who may not be familiar with the more obscure of the stories that Campo refers to, or with some of the details of the better-known ones.

“Misterioso è il narratore di fiabe” (“The teller of fairy tales is mysterious,” 29).

Campo regularly refers to popular folktales and fireside storytelling, alluding to fairy tales as part of oral traditions rather than of literary

² Campo worked on this essay, off and on, between 1951 and 1969; it first came out twenty-one years after her death.

³ Campo’s essays on fairy tales include: “Una rosa,” dedicated to “Beauty and the Beast”—first published in *Fiaba e mistero* (1962) and then revised for *Il flauto e il tappeto* (1971); “In medio coeli,” published in the journal *Paragone* in 1962 and then revised for *Fiaba e mistero* and, again, for *Il flauto e il tappeto*; “Della fiaba,” which first appeared with the title “Fiaba e mistero” in the eponymous volume of 1962 and then in *Il flauto e il tappeto* nine years later; and “Il flauto e il tappeto,” published in the eponymous collection—the last one to come out during Campo’s lifetime. For more on fairy tales in Campo’s work, see my essay, “Tough Magical Nuts to Crack,” as well as Caramore, Dei, De Stefano, De Turrís, Fozzer. In this essay, I will refer to “Della fiaba” as published in the 1987 Adelphi volume, *Gli Imperdonabili*.

histories.⁴ Despite this insistence on popular transmission, however, the tales that Campo brings under her critical eye are distinctly literary productions with a named author, as she indeed implies, at the start of “Della fiaba,” when she writes that each fairy tale and its telling may apply to a multitude of people but belong and refer to a single person.

“È possibile che chi fa fiabe sia simile a chi trova quadrifogli che, secondo dice Ernst Jünger, acquista veggenza e poteri augurali” (“It is possible that the maker of fairy tales resembles the one who finds four-leaf clovers and who, according to Ernst Jünger, acquires visions and augural powers,” 29).

Campo attributes to fairy-tale writers the same powers that German author Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), in his 1960 essay “Vierblätter” (Four-leaf clovers), recognizes in those who find four-leaf clovers by seeing them without even seeking them, like Jünger’s own mother. This power is what Campo calls clairvoyance (“veggenza”): the ability to see what is not presently there as well as the ability to see what is barely there by not seeking it, by not looking. It is once more Weil’s attention that Campo references here: the “I” must be passive in order to achieve true sight, accurate vision.⁵

“(è, credo, il caso di una Madame d’Aulnoy)” (“I believe this is the case for Madame d’Aulnoy,” 30).

The first fairy-tale author mentioned in Campo’s “Della fiaba” is the French writer who coined the term “conte de fées,” whence the English “fairy tale”: Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville,

⁴ In the essay “In medio coeli,” Campo even describes a gendered voice when she describes the traditional teller of fairy tales as the wise woman of the house, the grandmother (15).

⁵ Campo is likely referring to a 1960 essay titled “Vierblätter” (“Four-Leafed Clovers”) that Jünger published in the periodical *Antaios*, co-edited by Jünger and Mircea Eliade (pp.525-526); it was republished in Jünger, *Sgraffiti* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985). An Italian translation of this essay may be found in <http://www.storytellinglab.org/articoli/incontri-pericolosi-per-uniconologia-della-fortuna-in-ernst-jünger-copy/> (accessed June 2020).

Baroness d'Aulnoy (1651-1705), whom Campo refers to, here and elsewhere, as "Madame d'Aulnoy." Her work, according to Campo, becomes increasingly light over time: D'Aulnoy published her first fairy tales in 1697, several years after her arguably much "heavier" religious and historical books. Campo's emphasis on lightness in this context is reminiscent of Calvino's, who saw his own writing as involving "the subtraction of weight," since for this author, "there is a lightness that is thoughtful and that is different from the frivolous lightness we all know. Indeed, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem heavy and opaque" (Calvino 3, 12). A similar idea is developed in Campo's essay "Con lievi mani," "With light hands"; as a critic explains, "La lievità di Cristina è . . . nell'utilizzare la trasparenza delle fiabe per attraversare il torbido di un'esistenza" ("Cristina's lightness consists in using the transparency of fairy tales in order to cross the murkiness of existence," Abis 178)—lightness as the ability to "float" over depth, as it were. Likewise, Campo describes the combinatory method of the fairy-tale writer, so dear to Calvino (who employed it in his own fiction): "il narratore di fiabe trasceglie quei materiali e li ricompono" ("the fairy-tale teller chooses those materials and combines them back together," 30). Unlike Calvino, though, Campo posits a familiarity with mystery at the root of each fairy-tale author's ability to combine motifs; beauty is the first of these motifs, since beauty is for Campo the narrative motor of every fairy tale.

"le Tre Melarance che cantano e ballano" ("the Three Oranges that sing and dance," 30).

Campo cites two tales as evidence that beauty always and clearly stands for something else in the fairy-tale genre, and that beauty is the very mystery animating fairy tales: Campo's insistence on the saving power of beauty in fairy tales echoes Weil's belief that "Beauty is the supreme mystery of this world," for "Of all the attributes of God, only one is incarnated in the universe, in the body of the Word; it is beauty."⁶ The first is "The Three Oranges," of which she only mentions the main motif. The three magical fruits appear in numerous fairy tales across southern Europe: the earliest version is Giambattista Basile's "The Three Citrons" (1634-6); the

⁶ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 72; *First and Last Notebooks* 83.

best-known is Carlo Gozzi's play, *The Love of the Three Oranges* (1761), turned into an opera by Sergei Prokofiev in 1919; and the most widely read is Calvino's "The Three Pomegranates" (1956). In all versions, a listless prince looks for a beautiful wife, inspired by the sight of red blood on white cheese (a popular fairy-tale motif related to the earlier story of Perceval), and is given access to the three title fruits, which contain as many beautiful maidens: the first two disappear as soon as they emerge from the rind due to the prince's slowness in offering them water, while the third stays with him but must undergo painful trials, including death, transformation, and resurrection, because of the prince's gullibility in falling for an impostor.

"la Figlia del Re dal Tetto d'Oro" ("the Daughter of the King of the Golden Roof," 30).

The second tale that Campo cites as evidence of the central power of beauty in fairy tales is evoked through the Princess of the Golden Roof. She is the object of desire in the Grimm brothers' fairy tale titled "Faithful John," from their *Kinder und Hausmärchen* (1812-1857). Her beauty is so irresistible that anyone who sees her portrait is bound to fall in love with and risk his life for her. This is why the dying king at the start of the tale tells his faithful servant John not to let the heir to the throne, namely, the king's own son, enter the room where this princess's portrait hangs. The prince enters nevertheless: curiosity, *pace* better-known fairy tales such as Perrault's "Bluebeard," is not the prerogative of women. Thanks to his servant, however, who is clever as well as faithful, the prince marries the princess. Together, the two survive life-threatening ordeals, again all thanks to faithful, clever John.

"Le tre teologali, sì, ma anche tutte e quattro le cardinali, e i sette doni dello Spirito per soprammercato" ("The three theological virtues, yes but also all four of the cardinal ones, and the seven gifts of the holy spirit on top of that," 30).

In order to overcome the fearsome obstacles inherent in the fairy-tale quest for beauty, fairy tale heroes need in Campo's view the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—as well as the four cardinal virtues—fortitude, temperance, justice, and prudence—and, on top of those, the seven gifts of the holy spirit: wisdom,

understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

“Sinbad il Marinaro—quell’Odisseo d’Oriente” (“Sinbad the Sailor—that Odysseus of the Orient,” 31).

“Sinbad l’ha detto: una fiaba non opera se non sulla materia prima dell’esistenza, il suo campo alchemico naturale” (“Sinbad said as much: the fairy tale only operates on the primal matter of existence, on its natural alchemical field,” 38).

Although most of the fairy tales Campo refers to are European, she occasionally invokes other traditions. An exotic figure that appears regularly in her essays is Sinbad the Sailor, the hero of a middle-eastern story cycle that is a late addition to *The Thousand and One Nights*. Sinbad’s adventures, set in the late eighth and early ninth century CE, are first found in 17th and 18th-century collections and not in the original 14th-century manuscript of the *Nights*, though they do appear in the first European translation of the *Nights* (1711, French and then English). Campo describes Sinbad here as that “Odysseus of the Orient” for although he hails from Baghdad, his fame, like that of his Greek counterpart, is based on his journeys across the seas as well as on his wits and wiles. As well as being a resourceful traveler, Sinbad is a skillful storyteller, well aware of the power of the teller to shape his own story.

“Superfluo ricordare i lais di Maria di Francia, quella lunga, amorosa leggenda aurea” (“It is unnecessary to remember here the Lays of Marie de France, that long and loving golden legend,” 31).

Campo repeatedly compares fairy tales with hagiography: saints are like fairy tale heroes and fairy tale writers tell stories similar to the stories of saints—and even similar to the story of the Gospels.⁷ The

⁷ In “Il flauto e il tappeto,” Campo refers to, “quel destino dei destini, quella fiaba delle fiabe . . . alla quale tutte le fiabe della terra convergono e copertamente alludono: la vicenda di un dio sopra la terra” (“that destiny of destinies, that fairy tale of fairy tales . . . on which all the fairy tales on earth, converge and covertly allude: the story of a god on earth,” 131).

Lais of Marie de France are twelve narrative poems exalting courtly love, written in Anglo-Norman in the twelfth century and sometimes regarded as precursors of the fairy-tale genre because of many shared motifs, as well as for their shared self-presentation at the junction of oral and written traditions. “Yonec,” for example, features a beautiful young woman locked in a tower and unlawfully impregnated by her true love (similar to the Grimms’ earliest “Rapunzel”); “Guigemar” tells of a man who is cursed by a dying deer, guided by a magical boat, and protected by a knot in his shirt that only his beloved can untie. When Campo calls Marie de France’s *Lais* a long and loving *Golden Legend*, she is alluding to the immensely popular Latin collection of saints’ lives initially compiled in thirteenth-century Italy by Jacobus of Voragine: unlike fairy tales and like many saints’ lives, the *Lais* often end unhappily, at least in earthly terms, because of their characters’ self-sacrificial nature.

“Persino alla corte di Re Sole corsero fiabe che non erano in realtà se non parabole: Belinda e il mostro, La gatta bianca” (“Even at the court of the Sun King there were fairy tales that were nothing other than parables: Belinda and the Monster, The White Cat,” 31).

Campo renames the fairy tale generally known as “Beauty and the Beast,” here and elsewhere, as “Belinda e il mostro,” perhaps after its Tuscan version, “Bellinda e il mostro” in Calvino’s collection and in the nineteenth-century collections Calvino drew from (Campo’s spelling of the female protagonist’s name, with one “l” instead of Calvino’s two, is used in many of the earlier versions—including Vittorio Imbriani’s important folktale collection, 327). She assigns this tale to the court of the Sun King, Louis XIV, who reigned in France until 1715, but the oldest version of this beloved story, by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, was published in 1740, and its most famous version, by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, in 1756. In “Della fiaba,” Campo only mentions “Beauty and the Beast” in passing, but she devoted her essay “Una rosa” to this very tale, the title of the essay referring to the rose that Beauty asks her father to bring back for her from his journey. For Campo, this tale is a parable, where the monster is a figure of God and the female protagonist is an image of the human soul, not unlike the early Christian interpretation of Apuleius’s tale of “Cupid and

Psyche” as an allegorical representation of the story of the soul.⁸ (I will turn to “The White Cat” below.)

“Colpisce . . . una Comtesse de Ségur che dopo aver puntigliosamente ammonito figli e nipoti con le disgrazie della innocente, pervicace Sophie . . . e del virtuoso Blaise, all'improvviso, richiesta di una fiaba disegnò due itinerari mistici perfetti: l'Histoire de Blondine, de Bonne-Biche et de Beau-Minon e Le bon petit Henri” (“One is struck by the Countess of Ségur who, after meticulously admonishing her children and grandchildren with the misfortunes of the innocent and stubborn Sophie and of the virtuous Blaise, suddenly, when asked for a fairy tale, drew two perfect mystical itineraries: The Story of Blondine, Good-Hind, and Handsome Cat and The Good Little Henry,” 31)

In another chronological switch, Campo claims that the Countess of Ségur wrote her fairy tales after her popular novels about Sophie and Blaise, but the opposite is true. Sophie Rostopchine, Countess of Ségur (1799-1874)—the Russian-born French children’s author who started writing in her fifties, with her own grandchildren as her intended audience—published her fairy tales in 1856, in a volume that includes the two tales mentioned by Campo, “The Story of Blondine, Bonne-Biche, and Beau-Minon” and “The Good Little Henry.” However, Segur’s novels, “Sophie’s Misfortunes” and “The Poor Blaise,” did not appear until a few years after her fairy tales, in 1858 and 1861 respectively.

“la saga del buon piccolo Enrico, che per pietà filiale ascende la montagna improba in cerca della pianta della vita, è una salita al Carmelo” (“the saga of the good little Henry who out of filial piety climbs the arduous mountain in search of the plant of life, is an ascent of Mount Carmel,” 31).

“al toccare la cima tutti gli ostacoli si capovolsero in talismani” (“upon touching the summit, all the obstacles turned into talismans,” 32).

⁸ On Campo’s “Una rosa,” see my essay “Cristina Campo’s Visions and Revisions.”

“Qualunque cosa pur di salvare mia madre” (“Anything to save my mother,” 32).

“pensò a sua madre... pensò al giardino meraviglioso” (“he thought of his mother . . . he thought of the marvelous garden,” 33).

All these quotations refer to Ségur’s “The Good Little Henry.” This is the tale of an impoverished seven-year-old boy who can only save his sick mother’s life by picking the plant of life only found at the top of a nearby mountain—a mountain so perilous that all who tried to reach its summit had died. On his way up, Henry saves the life of a Crow, a Rooster, and a Frog, and they each later help him surmount otherwise impassable obstacles or perform otherwise impossible tasks: the Rooster carries him across a river; the Crow helps him hunt for the demanding Wolf guarding a precipice; and the Frog helps him fish for the equally demanding Cat in charge of protecting a ditch. Henry also has to perform by himself absurdly lengthy and tedious tasks: baking 468,329 loaves of bread for an Old Man, after harvesting the wheat and performing every step in between himself; and making wine from scratch for a Giant. When Henry finally reaches the top of the mountain, an Old Man helps him find the plant of life and Henry is able to return home very quickly thanks to the magical stick the Wolf had given him. The whole trip takes over two and a half years and his mother, after she heals, scarcely recognizes him. Once home, out of the tobacco box the Old Man had given him come a crowd of workers who build a pretty house in a garden for Henry and his mother; the cartoon from the Giant allows Henry to conjure clothes, furniture, and everything else he and his mother might ever need; and the Cat’s claw keeps them both safe from illness and aging. It is even said, the tale concludes, that Henry and his mother were made immortal by the fairies.

Little Henry’s journey is for Campo an “ascent of Mount Carmel,” in reference to sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross’s book by the same name: there are seven stations in Henry’s physical climb up his mountain as there are in the spiritual climb of the Spanish saint; and all the obstacles on Henry’s way up turn into helpful talismans on his way down: they are his rewards for past good deeds, as Little Henry’s bird explains. The impossible is achieved through talismans and magic formulas, which are akin

to prayers. Likewise, on the next page Campo quotes again from this tale to highlight how even the hero's memory of the good is a mystical, spiritual aid to overcome the obstacles found in his quest.

"l'Histoire de Blondine è una storia di cacciata dal paradiso e di redenzione dal peccato originale" ("The Story of Blondine is a story of expulsion from paradise and of redemption from original sin," 31)

"The Story of Blondine, Good Hind, and Handsome Cat" tells of a seven-year-old king's daughter whose wicked stepmother has her abandoned in the dangerous Lilac Forest. Blondine is rescued by Handsome Cat and his mother, Good Hind. The latter informs Blondine they are all under the spell of a powerful wizard. Blondine then sleeps for seven years and wakes up grown and well read, a practiced artist and musician, grateful to have been spared those years of study. Blondine's stepmother has in the meantime died of rage, her cruel half-sister Brunette has been married off to a man aptly named Violent, and her father was still awaiting her return. Good Hind warns Blondine never to leave the safe enclosure of their park; but a Parrot convinces the girl that her saviors are in fact keeping her prisoner, and that picking a certain Rose will free her from her captors and restore her to her father. When Blondine does pick the rose, however, the flower reveals itself to be Blondine's own evil genius and the Parrot resumes his true form as the evil wizard: a spell by Good Hind had made him a bird and Blondine's betrayal of her benefactors had freed him. Good Hind and Handsome Cat are now dead because of her disobedience, Blondine is told, and the girl must wander the wasteland that their death has brought about until she agrees to spend six months on the back of a tortoise without asking a single question. At the end of her silent journey Blondine meets the Fairy Bienveillante who shows her the skins of Good Hind and Handsome Cat. Blondine faints at the sight, but that turns out to be the last of the trials imposed by the Queen of the Fairies. When Blondine comes to, she is told that Good Hind and Handsome Cat were in reality the Fairy Bienveillante and her son Prince Parfait, who themselves had been transformed into animals by the evil wizard and could only return to their true forms if Blondine plucked the rose. Good Hind and Handsome Cat had prevented her from doing that because they knew that it was an action that would release Blondine's own evil genius. Together, the three return to Blondine's

father, who marries the Fairy at the same time as Blondine marries the Prince; and even Brunette and Violent become amiable people.

“L’iniquo pappagallo, custode della rosa proibita, non istiga Blondine a impadronirsi di quella rosa, la supplica di liberarla”
 (“The evil parrot, guardian of the forbidden rose, does not incite Blondine to steal that rose, he begs her to free it,” 34).

“quella provvida colpa che apre il cammino di Blondine verso la vittoria” (“that happy fault that opens Blondine’s way towards victory,” 36)

Blondine’s journey tells for Campo about the loss of Eden and the redemption of original sin through another’s sacrifice—though Campo acknowledges that any exemplary story must be read on multiple levels at the same time. Blondine shows just how disturbing temptation can be, because it is presented as a good deed, as an act of tenderness or even of rescue: the Parrot asks Blondine to “free” the rose rather than to pick it. These temptations, for Campo, are analogous to those narrated in the Gospels, to which Jesus replies, “Not on bread alone . . .” or “You shall not tempt . . .” (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:2-3). Also analogously, the imperative force that pushes Blondine to succumb to temptation opens her path to victory through her “provvida colpa,” Adam’s *felix culpa*: there could be no redemption without sin, and this is at the heart of many fairy tales. Good Hind regains her fairy form thanks to Blondine’s infraction: she and her son would have gladly lived on as animals if that meant Blondine could be spared her tribulations; but their liberation can only be obtained through Blondine’s redemptive suffering.⁹

⁹ G.K. Chesterton also reads, in the prohibitions recurrent in fairy tales, a representation of Eden and original sin: “The vision always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things conceded depend upon one small thing withheld. All the wild and whirling things that are let loose depend upon one thing that is forbidden . . . In the fairy tale an incomprehensible happiness rests upon an incomprehensible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten, and cities perish. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone” (Chesterton 48-49).

“che la sorridente regina fosse una negromante, che nella stamberga del menestrello si celasse il magnanimo re Barba-di-Tordo non si appaleserà . . .” (“that the smiling queen should be a witch, that in the minstrel’s hut the magnanimous King Thrushbeard should be hidden, will not be revealed . . .,” 33).

The beautiful, smiling queen who turns out to be a witch is a clear allusion to Snow White’s mother figure, implicitly invoked in this paragraph also through the image of the mirror. Conversely, the dirt-poor minstrel that the princess is forced to marry in punishment for her arrogance, and whose hut she must care for as if she were a pauper and not a royal, turns out to be a king—the very king that the haughty princess had rejected as a suitor and nicknamed “Thrushbeard” because his chin reminded her of a thrush’s beak. This allusion comes from the Grimm brothers’ “King Thrushbeard,” where the spoiled princess must learn to appreciate firsthand the difficulties of a poor person’s life and work before she is able to once again enjoy the privileges of her class.

“la fata madrina, il buon genio recano allo sperduto portentosi alimenti, bevande riparatrici; consegnano noci che racchiudono carrozze, fazzoletti che prosciugano mari” (“the fairy godmother, the good genie bring to the lost protagonist miraculous foods, restorative drinks; they hand over nuts that enclose chariots, handkerchiefs that drain the seas,” 34).

Campo continues her analogy between fairy-tale magic and Catholic spirituality with a comparison between angels, patron saints, sacraments, and sacramentals on the one side, and fairy godmothers, miraculous foods, healing potions, and enchanted nuts and handkerchiefs on the other.

“il bell’uccellino, liberato, gridò allontanandosi: A buon rendere, Enrico!” (“The beautiful little bird, once freed, shouted as he moved away, I’ll return the favor, Henry!” 34).

Campo must be confused about the identity of the bird here: good little Henry frees a raven and a rooster, but not a little bird. Perhaps the confusion is due to the presence of the tailor’s little bird, small enough to fit in the tailor’s pocket, described just below this passage.

“Fu osservato che il sartorello coraggioso, per vincere al tiro in alto il gigante orrendo, capace di disgregarlo con un soffio, invece di una pietra lancia nei cieli un uccello” (“It has been observed that the brave little tailor, in order to win a high-toss competition against the horrific giant, capable of tearing him apart with a single breath, tosses a bird into the sky, instead of a stone,” 34).

As evidence that the law of necessity must be overcome in creative ways, Campo cites the eponymous humble protagonist of the Grimm brothers’ “Brave Little Tailor,” who at the start of the tale brags of having killed “seven in one blow.” The tailor is talking about killing flies, but the mountain giant he runs into misunderstood and believed that the tailor meant that he killed seven men with one blow. Therefore, with a mix of curiosity and disbelief, the giant challenges the little tailor to a rock-throwing contest. The tailor, however, throws into the air not a rock but a bird, which of course flies away and thus reaches farther than any rock thrown by a giant ever could.¹⁰

*“ho qui una gattina bianca qui fait si bien patte de velours”
 (“I have here a little white cat that makes nice so well,” 35)*

Like the little tailor, the princely hero of D’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat”—one of Campo’s most often quoted fairy tales—competes in ways that shirk the law of necessity, particularly when he brings to his royal father’s court a cat in place of a princess. The king had indeed tested his three sons in three different ways in order to choose the one worthy to succeed him. The king gives the brothers three tasks, and one year to complete each one: first, they have to find and bring him the smallest dog; then, the finest cloth; and finally, and most importantly, the most beautiful princess. In the course of his first quest, the youngest son arrives at an enchanted castle where he meets a beautiful White Cat. She helps him win the first two tasks

¹⁰ Luisa Muraro cites Campo in an article published in 2003 in *Il Manifesto* (Campo would have been horrified), where she argues against the sovereignty of the law of the strongest in contemporary politics. There are other ways of doing politics, and Muraro finds support for her arguments in how Campo claims that fairy tale heroes win: by refusing the existing competition, which is based on the law of the strongest, and choosing instead a different world.

and when she learns of the third, she asks the prince to cut off her head—whereupon, a beautiful woman emerges: she had been enchanted and could regain her true form only after finding a man who resembled in every way her first lover, the one killed by the fairy stepmothers who had taken her from her biological parents and enclosed her inside a tower. For Campo, the prince who chooses the white cat as the most beautiful of princesses is a spiritual man: he chooses differently, flees from the law of necessity, eschews a contest limited to beauty. In D’Aulnoy’s fairy tale, though, the prince only *tells* his brothers that he is bringing a little white cat; he knows well that he is actually bringing a beautiful queen but, as he had done before with the dog and the cloth, he steers his brothers’ potential envy away by hiding the identity of the one with him, saying it is a cat instead of a woman. Campo approves of the trick, of course: the rules and moral obligations in fairy tales are changeable, and truthfulness is optional. What the youngest brother is doing here, that is unexpected, is not so much bringing a cat instead of a princess but rather telling his brothers first, and then his father the king (with the words Campo quotes above) that he is doing so. It is already the third time that the youngest brother presents something seemingly worthless which turns out to be so much greater than anyone thought, but they all believe him still. And when the king approaches the rock within which the prince says that the white cat dwells, the former-cat-now-queen (queen, the text specifies, and not just princess) opens the rock and emerges in all her glory—with a beauty so unsurpassable that the king right away exclaims that the crown is hers. As it turns out, this queen is heiress to six kingdoms so not only does she not need the king’s gift but even bestows one of her own kingdoms to each older brother and the king himself.

“la principessa che cade nel sogno magico di cent’anni può ringraziare il geloso terrore del re suo padre” (“the princess who falls into the magical, one-hundred-year sleep, should thank her father the king’s jealous terror,” 35).

The reference here is to Perrault’s tale of “Sleeping Beauty,” with its unforgettable one-hundred-year sleep brought on by the pricking of a spindle that not even the king’s “jealous terror,” resulting in the ban of all spindles from his kingdom under penalty of death, was able to prevent. What the princess should thank her father’s “jealous terror” for, instead, is that he had her ensconced in a safe place and

left to sleep in peace as she awaited the end of her spell, and the arrival of the prince (who, contrary to what most people think, does not kiss her in Perrault's tale, but simply kneels next to her).

“si sa, fuggendo Bagdad, chi ci si troverà di fronte a Samarcanda” (“we all know, fleeing from Baghdad, whom we will meet in Samarkand,” 35).

This is a reference to the tale generally known as “The Appointment in Samarra,” where Samarra is another name for Samarkand, the city on the Silk Road located in present-day Uzbekistan. The story is most famously told by W. Somerset Maugham (1933) and will sound familiar to many Italians thanks to one of Roberto Vecchioni's most popular songs, “Samarcanda” (1977), with its unforgettable refrain, “Oh oh cavallo oh oh cavallo oh oh.” In Maugham's retelling, from which Vecchioni as well as Campo clearly draw, a man escapes to Samarkand because he had felt threatened by Death while visiting the Baghdad market; but it is in Samarkand that he actually comes face to face with Death, who explains to him that it was not a threat the man experienced but rather surprise, since Death had an appointment with him in Samarkand. Maugham's brief and haunting narrative is said to hark back to the Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 53a. But that old version is in fact quite different, and it is obvious that the story both Campo and Vecchioni refer to is Maugham's own, unique and unmistakable, quite different from, and far more memorable than, its Babylonian inspiration, which features neither the flight on a horse nor the city of Samarkand.

“il mansueto pastore, la fanciulla murata nella torre” (“the meek shepherd, the girl walled in the tower,” 35).

The meek shepherd might refer to the Grimm Brothers' tale, “The Shepherd,” whose young protagonist is famous for his wisdom. The girl locked in the tower refers of course to the Rapunzel stories, catalogued as ATU Tale Type 310, “The Maiden in the Tower.” The earliest of these is Basile's “Petrosinella” and the most famous the Grimms' “Rapunzel.” The “Maiden in the Tower” tales have some motifs in common with the hagiographic account of the fourth-century martyr Saint Barbara, who was locked in a tower by her pagan father so as to protect her extraordinary beauty. The motif of

the girl in the tower, taken away from her parents by female supernatural beings in punishment for her biological mother's eating transgression, appears as well in d'Aulnoy's "The White Cat."

“. . . entrano l'una dopo l'altra al battesimo della principessa neonata le fate madrine. Sette pianeti, dodici costellazioni, benigni o avversi a seconda dei meriti dei genitori” (“one after the other, the fairy godmothers arrive at the newborn princess's baptism. Seven planets, twelve constellations, benign or adverse according to the parents' merits,” 36-37).

Alluding to the beginning of Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty," Campo notes the similarities between fairies and celestial bodies, connecting literature, astrology, and social mores. Perrault writes that the aged fairy had not been invited because she had stayed in her tower for over fifty years and everyone thought her either dead or under a spell. Campo brings up another possibility, namely that in deciding which fairies to invite, the Queen chose those who were her friends instead of the more powerful ones—a social blunder that would have cost her daughter's life, were not the princess's death sentence alleviated into a magical sleep by the last fairy: delay, rather than misfortune, will guide the girl's life.¹¹

“la scena del ballo tondo, di ciò che Madame d'Aulnoy... chiama le branle des fées” (“the scene of the round dance, of what Madame d'Aulnoy calls the fairy brawl,” 37).

Campo describes the “branle des fées” as the fairies' round dance celebrating the spring equinox or, alternately, the once-in-a-century Council in a clearing in the Breton forest of Broceliande: into its center, mothers toss their deformed children in hopes that the fairies will gather them and grant them special gifts. In D'Aulnoy's “White Cat”—the best-known literary instance by far of the *branle des fées*, though Campo does not make the connection—this is the fairies' dance when they obtain what they had demanded of the queen in exchange for their fruits (which she had craved and eaten while

¹¹ Chesterton likewise speaks of “the terrible allegory of the ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ which tells how the human creature was blessed with all earthly gifts yet cursed with death; and how death also may perhaps be softened to a sleep” (43).

pregnant): her one daughter, the princess whom they raise inside a tower and transform into a white cat when she breaks the rules and flirts with a young man (whom the fairies feed to a dragon). The cat princess can return to her normal form only after finding a prince who resembles her unfortunate lover.

“La sostituzione mistica, così come un tempo nelle Trappe e i Carmeli, è sempre, anche nelle fiabe, la premessa ineludibile del portento (“Mystical substitution, as once practiced in Trappist and Carmelite monasteries, is always, in fairy tales as well, the unavoidable premise of portent,” 38).

Mystical substitution is the Catholic practice of offering up one’s own suffering as a way of atoning for someone else’s sins. For Campo, this is akin to what the Good Little Henry does by risking his life in climbing the impassable mountain: his voluntary self-sacrifice in turn leads to his mother’s magical healing, or, in Catholic terms, a miracle.

“Al principe cadetto, l’ultimo dei nove cigni stregati, la tunica di ortiche che deve disincantarlo giungerà con una sola manica: non s’è avuto il tempo di terminare l’altra . . . Egli conserverà tutta la vita la sua ala di cigno . . . ” (“The youngest prince, the last of the nine bewitched swans, will receive the nettles tunic meant to disenchant him, but with one sleeve missing; there was no time to complete the other one . . . He will keep his swan wing for the rest of his life,” 38).

At the end of the tale about the swan brothers, the youngest of the boys is left with one swan wing in place of one of his arms. This is because his sister was unable to make enough complete tunics out of plants to undo the spell put on her brothers by their witch stepmother; one sleeve was missing from the last tunic, hence the one arm not covered by the spell-breaking sleeve remains a swan wing. In the Grimms’ version of this story, “The Six Swans,” there are six swan brothers and the tunics are made of asters; in Hans Christian Andersen’s retelling, “The Wild Swans,” the swans are eleven and the tunics must be more painfully made by the sister with stinging nettles. The more painful plant is the one Campo remembers, though I know of no version where the swan brothers are nine, as Campo assumes. For most readers, the protagonist of

the tale is the sister, who escapes the stepmother's spell and saves her brothers by refraining from speaking or laughing for six whole years as she sews the tunics. Campo, instead, focuses on the youngest of the six, nine, or eleven brothers, the one who keeps his swan wing instead of an arm as the physical memory of his dark night of the soul.

“Come non intravedere tra le penne, il rosso pelo, gli stracci, il lampo azzurro dell’abito della Moira?” (“How could one not glimpse, amid the feathers, red fur, and rags, the blue flash of the Moira’s dress?” 39).

Campo relates common fairy-tale motifs such as animal fur, bird feathers, and rags to the Moirai of Greek mythology, also known as the Fates (a name closely related to words such as the English “fay” and “fairy” and the Italian “fata”), and, in Roman times, as the Parcae. These three female figures control the fate of every human being, a fate depicted in paintings as a thread between their spinning fingers. In iconography they traditionally wear white robes, though Campo here mentions a flash of their blue robe.

“Blondine che dopo una notte di sonno sa tutto lo scibile. Oppure: Est-ce vous mon prince? Vous vous-êtes bien fait attendre!” (“Blondine, who after one night’s sleep knows all that there is to know. Or else: Is it you my prince? You certainly made me wait!” 39).

Time in fairy tales follows its own rhythm, which is why Blondine can sleep for seven years and when she wakes up she has completed her education. Campo’s quotation in French, on the other hand, comes from Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty.” These are the irritated words the princess says to the prince upon awakening; although she has been asleep for one hundred years, she has clearly preserved a sense of the passing of time. Thus, when she awakens she first wonders whether it is in fact the prince before her and then immediately proceeds to scolding him about taking so long (though the text clearly states that one hundred years had to pass before she could wake up, it was not the prince’s arrival but rather the end of the preordained sleeping time that determined the princess’s awakening).

“Il dialogo, sotto la buia porta della città, tra la guardiana d’oche e la testa mozza del cavallo: “Addio Falada che pendi lassù! / Addio Regina che passi laggiù! / Se tua madre lo sapesse, / di dolor ne morirebbe . . .” (“The dialogue, under the dark city gate, between the goose girl and the chopped head of the horse: Goodbye Falada, who are hanging up there! Goodbye Queen, who pass down there! If your mother only knew she would die of sorrow . . . ,” 39).

“The Goose Girl,” by the Grimm Brothers, is the tale of a princess who, after her mother sends her off to meet her bridegroom, is betrayed by the servant accompanying her. The servant takes on the princess’s identity and steals her magical, speaking horse, Falada. The princess is left to guard geese with a little boy named Conrad while the servant, posing as the princess, has Falada killed for fear he might speak the truth and reveal her imposture. The horse’s head is hung over a doorway under which the goose girl passes every day, and every day the horse and the goose girl exchange a little dialogue (the passage quoted by Campo). Eventually, Conrad alerts the king to the goose girl’s strange behavior, and after the king discovers the truth of her story, he marries the true princess and executes the impostor.

*Fiaba oscura, nespola dura,
la paglia e il tempo ve le matura. (“Mysterious fairy tale, hard
medlar fruit, / straw and time will ripen both,” 39).*

The formulas that often close fairy tales remind us of the repetition inherent in this genre. Campo cites this closing rhyme, binding fairy tales and medlar fruits through their common dependence on time to reach their fruition, as a typical folktale ending. I was only able to find a verbatim example in the prolific fairy-tale writer Luigi Capuana’s “I due vecchietti,” “The two old people” (*Il Raccontafiabe*, 1893).

*“L’uomo gettò alcuni incensi su un braciere, separò il fumo con
le due mani, e per quell’apertura i prigionieri uscirono in un
giardino.”*

*“La vecchietta le si avvicinò, le passò dinanzi agli occhi la
rocca muovendola da sinistra a destra nell’aria, e la ragazza vide*

una valletta boscosa e uno spiazzo a lei noti e sdraiato sull'erba il suo amante."

"Ho sognato che dai sotterranei saliva una parola. Veniva dal basso, mi è passata davanti: io l'ho vista ed è spaventosa."

"Quando si aggirava pei monti egli prendeva abitualmente l'aspetto di un mulo mezzo putrefatto." ("The man tossed some incense into a brazier, separated the smoke with his two hands, and through that opening the prisoners went out into a garden.

The old lady approached her, placing the spindle before her eyes and moving it left to right into the air, and the girl saw a wooded vale and a clearing she recognized; and lying on the grass was her lover.

I dreamed that a word was rising up from the dungeons. It came up from below, it moved before me: I saw it and it is frightening.

When he wandered around the mountains he usually took on the appearance of a half-putrefied mule," 40).

I was unable to locate the provenance of these quotations, which Campo most likely translated herself and changed to fit her own style and rhetorical needs. The first one is reminiscent of the *Thousand and One Nights*; the second, with its old woman, young woman, and spindle, looks like some version of "Sleeping Beauty"; the third, with its absence of identifiable motifs, is the most mysterious; and the last one is vaguely reminiscent of the Grimms' "The Donkey" except for the memorable "half putrefied" detail.

"Et in Deo meo transgrediar murum" ("And through my God I will pass through the wall," 41).

This Latin quotation from Psalm 17:30 is remembered here by Campo as evidence of belief in the seemingly impossible: believers trust in God's power to let them pass through walls, they believe in miracles—much like the fairy-tale hero believes in magic.

"Sorgono pallide, dal loro bagno di sangue, le mogli di Barbablù" ("Bluebeard's wives arise, pale, from their bloodbath," 41-42).

In Perrault's tale by the same name, Bluebeard is a wealthy aristocrat who has killed his wives and kept their bodies inside a locked room that he forbids his latest wife from entering. When he returns from

his trip and discovers that she transgressed his orders and, in so doing, learned of her predecessors' fate, he readies to kill her, too, but her brothers arrive in the nick of time to save her and kill Bluebeard. The fairy-tale protagonist's faithfulness for Campo is rewarded with more than could ever be expected, more than one's obvious reward, and all who took part in the hero's adventure come back to life and are transfigured—Bluebeard's wives, then, and even the tiny animal helpers, who recover their human grace and dignity.

But of course this is not true: Bluebeard's wives do not come back to life from their bloody chamber, in Perrault' story; they stay dead. The limits of Campo's understanding of fairy tales are clear in the plain untruth of this sentence, and in its status as wishful thinking. One is tempted to say, "Cristina dear, you know, sometimes, perhaps, a fairy tale is just a fairy tale." True enough, and it is not as if Campo did not know the ending of "Bluebeard." In their wishful thinking, in their creative approach, Campo's very personal interpretations are a gentle invitation into reading ourselves into the fairy tale laid before us, the way she does—embracing Horace's dictum, "de te fabula narratur." In this process the fairy tale may enrich our literary senses: first, with attention to details that may offer a way in by pointing to the presence, in certain stories, of our own condition—at the foot of an impassable mountain, trapped inside a doorless tower, stuck with a wing instead of a limb; and then, with the kind of trust that extends beyond hope and into belief: that love is work and so is waiting, and that a bird will always reach farther than a stone.

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