

Identity and hope in Matteo Garrone's adaptation of Giambattista Basile's tale «The old woman who was skinned» read in the light of Gabriel Marcel's and Ernst Bloch's philosophy

Armando Maggi

In the Western tradition of classic literary fairy tales we often encounter the motif of two sisters, or stepsisters, who embody two opposite characters and thus two opposite destinies: one is kind and humble and thus will be rewarded, whereas the other is arrogant and rude and will be punished. The best-known example is Charles Perrault's «The Fairies», which seems to echo Giambattista Basile's «The Three Fairies», in which a donkey's testicles fall onto the disrespectful stepsister's forehead, «where it stuck to her skin and looked like a birthmark caused by a pregnant mother's cravings» (Basile 2007: 284). As Thea Rimini stresses in her article for this journal, the grotesque is one of the main elements that connect Basile to Garrone. In selecting «The old woman who was skinned» (the tenth tale of the first day in Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti*) as one of the three narrative threads of his film *The Tale of Tales* (2015), Matteo Garrone was drawn to the multiple disquieting elements of Basile's tale, especially its gruesome ending, but also its morbid lingering on the identification between physical appearance and female self. The ravaging effects of time on the body, not just the female one, are a

leitmotif of seventeenth-century culture, but in Basile's tale Garrone also found an unsettling and misogynistic view of female identity as intrinsically unstable and transient, an identity that swiftly moves from visibility to invisibility, from deserving praise to deserving scorn and insult.

By focusing on this tale from Basile's collection, this brief essay will broach the issue of literary reception as a constantly evolving process, and thus it will also examine how our changing rapport with the narrative text has affected Garrone's appropriation of the tale. However, a more pressing question will lead our analysis. Basile's and Garrone's tale compels us to examine the connection between self-awareness and hope, which we will read in the light of two short essays by the French 'Catholic existentialist' Gabriel Marcel and the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch.

«The old woman who was skinned» presents a first major problem. Although, as Louis Vax underscores, fairy tales do not necessarily equal 'moral tales', we expect these stories in all their possible renditions (films, books, etc.) to convey some moral, ethical teaching (Vax 2001: 205). However, the perfect correspondence between morality and immorality, and thus between reward and punishment, is missing from Basile's story.

In a nutshell, this Neapolitan tale revolves around two poor old women living in a dark and miserable room beneath a king's palace. Without seeing them, carried away by his imagination the king becomes convinced that a beautiful girl lives there and rushes to 'her' door to ask 'her' to show him her beauty. The old women refuse to let him in and, aware of the king's excitement, «grow cocky» and decide to deceive him (Basile 2007: 117). «In a little tiny voice» they reassure the king standing outside their door that, in eight days, they will show him one finger (*ibid.*). Upon his return, the 'girl' tells the king, who can hardly control his sexual arousal, that she will sleep with him only if she is received at night and in complete darkness. In a reversal of the Cupid and Psyche myth, which Basile uses in several of his tales (Maggi 2015: 25-67), after possessing her the king lights a candle, realizes that a naked old woman is lying next to him, and has her

thrown out of the window. In Basile, the old woman doesn't die because her hair gets entangled in the branch of a fig tree. Some fairies, who had never laughed, happen to pass by, find the spectacle so comical that they burst out laughing and, to thank the old woman for her ridiculous show, turn her into a young and beautiful girl. In Garrone's film, a mysterious witch-like woman, whose garb recalls the characters from Pasolini's 'mythic' films (*Oedipus the King*, for example, or *Medea*), walks by, finds the scene amusing, and suckles the old woman, who magically becomes young again. In both versions, the mystified king takes her back to his palace and throws a party to celebrate their marriage. Like the king, the other sister as well is deeply confused and struggles to recognize her sibling. Overwhelmed by envy, at the wedding party the old woman insists that her sister tell her how she became so young and, when the servants ask her to leave the palace, reiterates that she has the right to live there because she is the queen's sister. In Basile, the young queen puts off all explanation and tries to comfort her obstinate sister by stressing that now she, the queen, will take care of all her old sister's needs. In Garrone's film, the queen simply tells her that she doesn't know how the transformation happened. In both the book and the film, since the old sister keeps pestering her during her party, the queen tells her that she looks young because she had been flayed. In Basile, the old woman asks a barber to skin her and bleeds to death; in Garrone, she doesn't die but trudges back to her village drenched in her own blood.

Basile's tale (and Garrone's interpretation) defies some fundamental clichés of the fairy-tale genre. First of all, if a fairy tale is meant to convey a moral teaching, this story doesn't work. Yes, the old woman is punished because of her envy toward her luckier sister. It is essential to point out, however, that the sister who becomes young and beautiful (called Dora in the film) doesn't experience this miracle as a consequence of her staunch morality. In Basile, it is the older sister who ends up in bed with the king. In Garrone's version, Dora is the more mischievous of the two. She is the one who comes up with the plan to mislead the king; she also forces her sister (Imma in the film) to stick her finger in the keyhole and let the lascivious king kiss it and suck it.

Moreover, Garrone rightly highlights the king's sexual incontinence, hinted at in Basile, by showing him in two sex scenes with multiple partners. If we assume that the tale centers on the nefarious consequences of unbridled passion (envy, lust), the king as well should be subjected to some sort of punishment, but nothing happens to him.

The tale also suffers from a basic fallacy. By letting the king believe that they were one attractive girl, what were the two old sisters trying to accomplish? Neither the tale nor the film claims that the sisters were pursuing sexual satisfaction, and not even the expensive gifts they receive seemed to be the real goal of their deception. To glean a better understanding of this issue, we need to go back to the original myth of Cupid and Psyche, which was so dear to Basile. In book 5 of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, Cupid beseeches Psyche to respect his wish to conceal his identity while making love to her every night, even though her jealous sisters hold that a «monstrous snake» lies with her in the dark (Apuleius 1996: 283). Cupid does not explain why he must protect his identity, although innumerable medieval and early-modern commentators, starting from Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, offered diverse interpretations that were mainly reliant on Christian theology. Basile maintains the motif of a hidden identity that needs to be preserved, but whereas in Apuleius the mysterious visitor is a divine beautiful being, in the Neapolitan story the old woman, who stands for Cupid, tries hard to protect a false image of herself, an identity that was given to her by the king's unrestrained sexual imagination. This is the core of Basile's, and Garrone's, narrative: the woman's erroneous desire to hold onto a self that does not belong to her, and does not exist.

Before we proceed, we must recall what Ernst Bloch states at the beginning of his book *Traces*. In the chapter titled «The Mark!», Bloch emphasizes the importance of 'the marks' that appear «among us to the side» (Bloch 2006: 5). «Apart from the amusement» that a story provides, writes Bloch, «an impression is still working: What was that? Something moved! And it moved in its own way. An impression that will not let us come to rest over what we heard. An impression on the surface of life, so that it tears, perhaps» (*ibid.*: 6). This sudden

impression, which we perceive as an unanswered question, as a 'tearing apart' of the fabric of life, is the 'mark' that lingers in the reader's, or viewer's, mind. For Bloch, this mark, this insistent question has a fairy-tale and utopian nature, in the sense that it points to a resolution to come; it expresses a hopeful request. In the first book of his opus *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch stresses that «the never-forgotten spirit of fairytale works in the dreams of a better life, but also, and this must finally be understood, suo modo in works of art» (Bloch 1986: 98). Bloch contends that «every great work of art, besides its manifest essence, is also carried towards a *latency of its coming side*, that it: towards the contents of a future which had not yet appeared in its time, in fact ultimately towards the contents of an as yet unknown final state» (*ibid.*).

Hypothesizing that a work of art (a Neapolitan tale along with its film adaptation, for instance) harbors the «latency» of a future disclosure, the revelation of a broader significance (its «yet unknown final state»), means that we can't help but heed its demand. I will argue that Matteo Garrone's film adaptation of Basile's tale does not wipe off the 'mark' from the tale; it actually makes its demand more visible and more urgent.

In our brief plot summary, we defined the old woman's metamorphosis as a 'miracle'. In the chapter «Religious Mystery» (third book of *The Principle of Hope*) Bloch expresses a disparaging view of the Catholic belief in miracles (miracles today have «degenerated into banal occultism» and only survive in Catholic «propaganda») but contends that the concept of 'miracle' acquires a positive significance if read in the light of the fairy-tale culture (Bloch 1995: 1307). Bloch despises the common view of a miracle as something supernatural that a human being experiences in a passive manner. Bloch is more interested in stressing what 'miraculous' means and does to a human being. «Joy», Bloch states, «is an essential part of the content of the miracle» (*ibid.*: 1308). The «miraculous», Bloch explains, is «the figure of identity», in the sense that «the miraculous is the flash of light of the subject and of the object, beside which nothing alienated exists anymore and in which subject and object have simultaneously ceased

to be separate» (*ibid.*: 1311). The miraculous, Bloch concludes, is the disclosure of «homeness». In a miracle, we 'come home' because we finally embody our truest and most joyful identity, in which our alienation from the world has been transcended. It is almost superfluous to mention that in «The old woman who was skinned» the two elderly sisters live in a dark room beneath the king's tower as if hiding their 'repulsive' bodies from the external world. On the contrary, Garrone stages the old woman's miraculous transformation in the forest as a majestic *mise-en-scène* in which the tall girl's imposing naked body, barely covered by her long red hair, dominates a luscious natural setting, as if the girl were a new Eve in a new garden of Eden, having finally healed the separation between self and world.

Let us pause a moment before we proceed. Garrone's film 'betrays' the original seventeenth-century tale in one significant point: its ending. In Garrone's *The Tale of Tales* Imma, the jealous sister, doesn't bleed to death but slowly walks back up the stairs leading to the main square of her village. We see her bleeding shoulders and her face entirely covered by blood (her face recalls Sissy Spacek's in the final gruesome scene of the horror film *Carrie*, 1976), and her eyes fixed in a dazed gaze. In Basile's book, nothing negative happens to her luckier sister, Dora. The queen remains young whereas her curious sister dies a ridiculous death. On the contrary, at the very end of Garrone's film, while attending a public event, the queen realizes that the skin of her hand and her arm is rapidly aging, and alarmed flees the scene. The mysterious woman who turned her into a young girl had warned her that «everything passes». At the end of the film, the sister (Dora) who had paraded her (false) youth is forced to disappear, whereas the sister (Imma) who were asked to hide her (true) identity (she shouldn't say that she is the young queen's sister!) exposes her flayed body, a body with no defense (no skin protects her flesh), a wounded identity visibly exposed to all violation.

We find in Gabriel Marcel's collection of essays *Homo Viator* a fruitful aid for a clearer understanding of the issues discussed so far. In «Ego and Its Relation To Others», written in 1941 when Nazism and Fascism were revealing their ugliest nature, the French Existentialist

Marcel contends that «presence» is «always dependent on an experience which is at the same time irreducible and vague, the sense of existing, of being in the world» (Marcel 1962: 15). The two old women from Basile's tale exemplify what we could call an 'endangered' or «vague» presence in Marcel's words, in the sense that in the tale (in both the literary and the visual version) they become visible, so to speak, only thanks to a man's sexual fantasy. They become 'present' (the sisters know that their presence is perceived), but as one and only one identity who does not exist (a beautiful girl). We stressed that the two old women's deepest, impossible request is to embody the king's fantasy. One of them, however, would live this embodiment by proxy.

If, as Marcel points out, a human being's «consciousness of existing» is strictly «linked up with the urge to make ourselves *recognized*» by others, the two old sisters used to confirm each other's presence in a sort of mirroring effect. Withdrawn from the world because their advanced age and poverty made them repulsive, Dora and Imma were specular images, which reflected what Marcel calls «the wound», that is, the 'vague' feeling, common to all human beings, of not being there or of not being totally there (*ibid.*: 16). To use a well-known Lacanian expression, the two sisters had created a 'mirror-stage' effect that made them visible and as a private occurrence (they were visible only to each other). In his famous 1949 essay on this subject, Lacan makes clear that the 'mirror-stage', which he had already conceptualized in 1936, is not limited to the infant but is active in the on-going formation of the ego. The 'mirror-stage', writes Lacan, is an «identification in the full sense analysis gives to the term» (Lacan 2006: 76). Marcel's philosophical discourse is very close to Lacan's. «Each of us», writes Marcel, «appears to himself and to others as a particular problem for which the circumstances, whatever they may be, are not enough to provide a solution» (Marcel 1962: 23). «The obscure consciousness that after all I am nothing but an empty void» leads us to see others as «a means of resonance or an amplifier» (*ibid.*: 17). On the one hand, the king is pursuing what he believes is a charming young woman; on the other, the two elderly sisters suspend any

reasonable approach to reality and support the king's delusion because it «recognizes» them as they wish they were.

Both sisters experience the sudden rejuvenation as a revelation, as a form of awakening. In Garrone's *The Tale of Tales*, we first see Dora in the forest admire her naked young body and then, during her wedding party, Imma stare in awe at her sister's beauty. The king himself at first can't believe his eyes when he opens the window and, looking down, spots the young beauty (in Basile) or when he runs into the girl while hunting in the woods (in Garrone). Rather than an actual 'awakening', the magical transformation is closer to an instance of daydreaming, because it is the actualization of a communal fantasy (the king's and the sisters'). In a key passage of his essay, Marcel offers a sharp insight: «Each of us, in a considerable part of his life or of his being, is still unawakened, that is to say that he moves on the margin of reality like a sleepwalker. Let us say that the *ego*, as such, is ruled by a sort of vague fascination» (*ibid.*: 22-23).

The film adaptation of Basile's tale makes a major 'correction' to the original tale. In the Neapolitan collection, the old woman married to the king remains young forever whereas her nosey sister bleeds to death. On the contrary, Garrone's film ends with the queen realizing that her magical youth is fading away quickly and thus she will soon return to her original non-identity. Garrone's *The Tale of Tales* at once visualizes and undermines the power of magic by highlighting its illusory nature. The sisters' 'awakening' had been only an illusion; they believed they could fill their inner 'void' with a fantasy. It is in the final pages of his essay on the ego that Marcel brings his reasoning to a bold conclusion: the act of 'finding oneself' lies in one's «availability» (*disponibilité*), that is, the subject becomes 'incarnate' when «he is aware of himself far less as a being than as a desire to rise above everything which he is and is not, above the actuality in which he really feels he is involved» (*ibid.*: 25-26). Marcel phrases this crucial concept as an explicit response to the «pseudo-Nietzschean ideology» dominating contemporary Europe (*ibid.*: 27). Speaking of Nazism, Marcel underscores that the «fanatical multitudes who, taking their orders without a shadow of enquiry or reflection, rush singing to their death»

have not 'risen above themselves' but have only succumbed to idolatry, what Marcel had previously called «egolatry» (*ibid.*: 26; 20).

As «A Metaphysic of Hope», another essay in *Homo Viator*, makes clear, for Marcel 'the desire to rise above everything' is nothing but the subject's openness to the other, his 'availability', thus stressing the fundamental connection between being a 'person' and 'being there' for the other. Being a person is not based, as Basile's tale shows, on secrecy and illusion, but rather on a certain «intimacy» resulting from my 'hoping in' the other, by 'other' meaning the radical otherness of reality (*ibid.*: 40). But couldn't one say that hope as well is an illusion, like the magical transformation from old woman to beautiful girl? A fundamental connection, Marcel contends, exists between «absolute hope» and «liberty» (*ibid.*: 47; 45). 'Absolute hope' «transcends imagination», that is, it is free from projections and illusions; it is an inner disposition rather than a demand. «If time», Marcel concludes, «is in its essence a separation and . . . a perpetual splitting up of the self in relation to itself, hope on the contrary aims at reunion, at recollection, at reconciliation» (*ibid.*: 53).

What in Basile was a conventional, albeit horrific, derision of female identity, in Garrone's film turns into a source of disquiet. The fleeting nature of female beauty, which traditionally identifies with a woman's identity, becomes the locus of reflection on the illusory roots of human identity, on the 'void' that humankind strives to fill up with 'magical thinking'. Garrone lingers on the rapid decaying of the young queen's hand, arm, and face with such morbid insistence that we, the viewers, can't help but receive this representation as a pressing request. In our voyeuristic position, we can't help but perceive a demand, the need for a resolution to the 'problem' of our existence, and our death. If a seventeenth-century reader of Basile's collection of fairy tales approached this horrendous story with ironic detachment as if being a reader necessarily meant being male (readership equaled male identity), in 2015 Garrone's film turns the trope of the 'vague' and 'unstable' female identity into a new baroque representation of a universal condition.

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The author

Armando Maggi

Armando Maggi teaches in the department of Romance Languages and Literatures and the College at the University of Chicago.

Email: amaggi@uchicago.edu

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