
Call for Abstracts: Travelling Fairy Tales

International conference

**on Processes of Cultural Transfer in the Italian,
French, and Spanish Fairy-Tale Traditions**

**from 10 to 12 June 2026
at Bergische Universität Wuppertal**

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The telling of fairy tales presupposes a cultural, albeit imagined, narrative community that constitutes itself through narrative patterns and motifs which generate reality, meaning, and identity. This occurs, on the one hand, within the specific framework of its cultural space, and on the other, in relation to the processes of adaptation and transformation to which fairy-tale subjects and motifs are subjected when they ‘travel’ between cultural spaces as travelling narratives (Baumbach/Michaelis/Nünning 2012) in an entangled history (Conrad/Randeria 2002). Accordingly, the concept of ‘travelling’ for this conference is to be understood in a threefold sense: it encompasses adaptive trans- and intertextual movements of fairy-tale subjects and motifs across the Romance-cultural area, the concrete geographical journeys of numerous fairy-tale authors, and, finally, the travel motif in the sense of a rite de passage (van Gennep 1909), which forms the nucleus of the fairy-tale diegesis and structurally points to the anthropological origins of the genre (Propp 1987). Due to this, special attention is paid to the journeys undertaken by fairy-tale characters, as their mobility simultaneously reflects the transcultural migration of fairy-tale topoi and motifs, and can thus be read as a mirror of social, political, and imaginary spaces of movement.

The aim of this trans-Romance and comparative conference is to bring into focus the hitherto little-studied, yet expansive, phenomenon of ‘travelling fairy tales’: the triad of mutual transfer of literary materials and motifs between Italian, French, and Spanish fairy tales and fairy-tale collections; the travels of the authors themselves; and the journeys of the characters within the tales.

Fairy-tale subjects are characterized by an exceptionally high frequency of adaptation and migration. This is evidenced, not least, by the typologies of folkloristic research systematized since the nineteenth century, such as the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU), which classifies fairy-tale types – albeit in broad terms – across national, linguistic, and medial boundaries. Few other literary reservoirs of subject matter are so deeply shaped by reuse, reconfiguration, hybridization, and genre-crossing; fairy tales become veritable “medium breakers” (Greenhill and Matrix 2010) and “shape shifters” (Tatar 2010, 56; Warner 1994). Particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the rise of dramatic genres (theatre, opera, melodrama), they were increasingly adapted for the stage and, from the twentieth century onwards, most notably through the Walt Disney Company, conquered the cinematographic space (Ayres 2003; Haas/Trapedo 2018) and, more recently, the World Wide Web.

As part of the cultural DNA – Zipes speaks of *memes of memory* (2006) – fairy tales negotiate fundamental themes of human existence and coexistence (Rudy 2018) and establish universal narrative frameworks that are adapted, updated, and transformed oikotypically (Sydow 1934). Consequently, fairy tales are to be understood as narrative-communicative vectors of specific historical, social, political, legal, economic, and literary-poetological moments of reflection. Particularly in times of crisis, fairy tales fill lived realities with meaning, reduce their complexity, and offer comfort and potential for identification through their magical narrative worlds (Buttsworth/Abbenhuis 2017; Lopez-Ortíz 2014; Grätz 1995). In this way, fairy tales become utopian spaces of longing but also instruments of critique and subversion, questioning established power relations and role distributions as well as traditional norms and values, and presenting alternative societal visions.

Fairy-tale subjects circulate globally (Graça/Tehrani 2016; Johnson et al. 2021, 1). However, the Romance cultural sphere displays a particularly high density and intensity of motif and cultural transfer (Seago 2018; Trinquet 2012) due in no small part to their shared Latin origin, manifest for instance in the cross-cultural reception of Apuleius’ *Cupid and Psyche* (Bottigheimer 2014). Since the sixteenth century, numerous intertexts and reinterpretations can be traced between Italy, France, and Spain, indicating a tightly interwoven network of literary mobility. This includes “Oriental” material via Galland’s translation and publication of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (1704-1717) and, through the reception of the Brothers Grimm, also the German fairy-tale tradition.

The Romance-cultural world thus functions not only as a decisive transfer field for narrative motifs but also as a laboratory for poetological, medial, and sociopolitical transformations of the fairy tale.

The conference seeks to explore, from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives from the sixteenth century onwards, the ways in which these materials have been processed in their specific social, political, and economic contexts. Scholarship frequently identifies the late seventeenth century as a key period in the European reception of the fairy tale, locating France as its geographical starting point. There, Charles Perrault wrote down and published orally transmitted narratives of centuries in his *Contes en vers* (1694) and *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, avec des moralités / Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (1697). In this period, poetological questions about the literary fairy tale (*conte de fées*) as opposed to orally transmitted tales gained prominence, as the genre stood in opposition to the principles of the Classicist doctrine of *vraisemblance* (Trinquet 2012).

Yet, already in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Italian collections by Giovanni Francesco Straparola (*Le piacevoli notti*, 1550-1553) and Giambattista Basile (*Il Pentamerone*, 1634) were written down and influenced both the late seventeenth-century French fairy-tale tradition and the Spanish. The transcription of this inherently oral genre did not remove it from orality; rather, by the end of the seventeenth century in France, fairy tales had become a marker of entertainment and distinction among the social elite and a fixed element of salon culture. Against the backdrop of the *Querelle des femmes* and the *préciosité*, aristocratic women such as Madame d'Aulnoy, Madame L'Héritier, and Madame de Murat successfully appropriated the Italian fairy-tale tradition, transforming it into an instrument of emancipation with subversive impact on both socio-cultural and political levels. In the eighteenth century, the fairy tales and collections of their successors, such as Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (*Magasin des Enfants ou Dialogues d'une sage gouvernante avec ses élèves*, 1756), increasingly took on a pedagogical program. Like the Brothers Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1857), they targeted a young, predominantly female readership in France, aiming to educate through fairy-tale literature. By the early nineteenth century, for example, Comtesse Stéphanie Félicité Genlis's *Nouveaux contes moraux et nouvelles historiques* (1805) were consciously recast into feminist adaptations (Duggan 2018, 115). In nineteenth-century Italy, too, there emerged a tradition of collecting and studying region-specific variants, for example in Domenico Giuseppe Bernoni's *Fiabe e novelle popolari veneziane* (1828) or Giuseppe Pitrè's *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani* (1875).

Spain was the destination of numerous educational journeys undertaken by French women writers such as Madame d'Aulnoy and the lesser-known Catherine Bernard, whose novel *Inès de Cordue* (1696) contains the first version of the fairy tale *Riquet à la houppe* (1697), later attributed to Perrault. In Spain, Cecilia Böhl de Faber, writing under the male pseudonym "Fernán Caballero," published the first Spanish folk-tale collections (*Cuentos y poesías andaluces*, 1859; *Cuentos, oraciones, adivinanzas y refranes populares*, 1877), shaped in part by 'Italian' and 'French' influence

transmitted by the Grimm's *Märchen*, with which she was familiar through her German roots. Furthermore, Spanish and Italian fairy tales belong not only to the European tradition but, through centuries of 'Moorish' influence in southern Italy and on the Iberian Peninsula, also to the 'Oriental'. This influence left its mark on the French tradition, with the Parisian orientalist Antoine Galland translating *Les Mille et Une Nuits* into French in the early eighteenth century and recasting it in a "Franco-Western" form (Grätz 1995, 7).

These examples illustrate the highly complex trans-Romance phenomenon of fairy-tale cultural transfer. It is the aim of the conference to examine and discuss, in a comparative framework, the reciprocal and as yet unexplored processes of migration, adaptation, and reception of fairy-tale material and motifs in the entangled history linking Spain, Italy, and France, as well as the neighboring country Germany.

Possible Research Questions

- **Fairy tales as mirrors of social structures and change:** Which political, social, or economic contexts influence national fairy-tale traditions and the transnational circulation of fairy tales within the Romance-cultural area? Which subjects and motifs are specific to the processes of cultural transfer between Italy, France, and Spain (as well as Germany)? Can certain topoi or figures – such as the benevolent fairy or the hideous animal groom – be identified as particularly mobile and malleable in intercultural exchange? What kinds of contemporary reconfigurations, for instance in the fields of queer and disability studies, do they undergo, and to which socio-political and cultural contexts can these be traced?
- **Fairy tales and media:** How has the reception of fairy tales evolved through their adaptation into various oral and written formats, particularly in relation to multimodal storytelling? In what ways do the poetics, functions, and aesthetic forms of the fairy tale change when adapted into different media – from orally rooted storytelling to literary fixation, and on to multimodal and digital formats such as film, graphic novels, video games, advertising, social media, and AI? What poetological, narrative, affective, and ideological transformations do the tales undergo in both dominant media adaptations, such as those by the Walt Disney Company (*Sleeping Beauty* (1937), *Tangled* (2010)), and under the influence of AI, which can generate new and alternative versions of fairy tales?
- **Postcolonial perspectives:** What role do colonial and 'orientalist' narratives play in the trans-Romance fairy-tale tradition (Lau 2025), including with regard to the Francophone and Latin American cultural spheres? How do representations of alterity, such as those in Villeneuve's *Contes marins* or Beaumont's *Magasin des enfants*, shape spatial settings and (secondary) character design? How are *Les Mille et Une Nuits* or fairy tales containing 'orientalist' topoi (e.g., exotic and sometimes anthropomorphized animals, cultural customs and artefacts, origins of characters) received? What kinds of "colonial encounters" (Sago 2021) can be identified in frame narratives? To what extent can the presence of Ladino or Ju-

deo-Sephardic narrative motifs be understood as expressions of transcultural contact zones (Pratt 1991), particularly in the Neapolitan or Iberian context?

- **Orality and cultural transfer:** How does the oral transmission of fairy tales affect their transcultural migration between Italy, France, and Spain? How does the narrative structure change when fairy tales move from an orally dominated tradition into written form, especially in the context of trans-Romance fairy-tale transfer based on a shared Latin heritage? How does the shift from orality to literacy alter the position of the narrative instance? How is the authorial persona constructed in works such as Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti*, Perrault's *Contes*, or d'Aulnoy's *Contes de fée* and how do these authorial stagings draw on rhetorical conventions that both imitate and control orally transmitted forms? How does the written fixation of orally transmitted material establish a new narrative order, often through the embedding of the tale within a frame narrative or metadiegetic storytelling situation? What is the function of such a frame, be it a court, a salon, or a school?
- **The role of travel in narrative construction:** What role does the travelling of characters play in the genesis of the narrative? Which semantic spaces and boundaries (Lotman 1972) do they cross or transgress? Are these spaces transformed, stabilized, or undermined? How do spaces themselves change when the fairy-tale subjects also travel geographically and temporally? To what extent do economic and political crises such as wars or famines affect the travel spaces of fairy tales? Can travel even be understood as a poetics of fairy-tale narration, one that structurally and thematically evokes a near-ritual dynamic of separation, liminality, and reincorporation (van Gennep 1909)?

We invite abstracts of approximately 350–400 words by November 30th, 2025 at the latest. Please send your abstract, along with a brief CV, to selina.seibel@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de and wiemer@uni-wuppertal.de. Travel and accommodation costs are likely to be covered.

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