

# Encountering Ageing Women: Ambiguous Representations of the Elderly in Early Modern Literary Fairy Tales

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# ENCOUNTERING THE FEMALE OTHER

## ENCOUNTERING AGEING WOMEN: AMBIGUOUS REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ELDERLY IN EARLY MODERN LITERARY FAIRY TALES

VIOLA ARDENI

*Abstract:* This essay offers a comparative analysis of two early modern literary representations of the encounters between a pair of ageing sisters and a king, a barber, and a group of fairies. The representations occur in the literary fairy tale “La vecchia scortecata” (“The Old Woman Who Was Skinned”), which appears in the Neapolitan text by Giambattista Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*The Tale of Tales*, 1634–36), and in “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” (“The Tale of the Old Skinned Woman”), featured in *Lo cunto de li cunti*’s translation in Bolognese, *La chiaqlira dla banzola* (*The Chatterer on the Bench*, 1742) by Maddalena and Teresa Manfredi and Angela and Teresa Zanotti. The multilingual literary encounters not only bring forth anxieties related to decay and the ageing of things contemporaneous to the writing of both works but they also display how ageing women have been conceived as an ambiguous aberration—an *abject*, in Julia Kristeva’s conceptualization—within the fictional universe of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary fairy tales. It is thus postulated that ageing in women is an intolerable characterization within the fairy-tale ecosystem while an unavoidable one. The essay finally shows how the two women’s co-existence is destabilizing in nature and problematizes heteronormative conventions regarding the institution of family and reproductive norms.

### Introduction

The fairy tale “La vecchia scortecata” (“The Old Woman Who Was Skinned”) begins by presenting two elderly sisters who live in extreme poverty by the walls of their king’s castle. They so loudly and constantly complain about their misfortunes that the king, aurally stimulated by their voices, begins to sexually desire them.

Despite having never seen them, he walks to their impoverished home and behind their firmly closed door, he makes himself heard by courting them. Far from thinking his neighbours may be old, he only associates the women's voices with youth, beauty, and virginity. Under pressure, the sisters remain out of sight but decide to take the misunderstanding to the next level. First, they each suckle one of their own fingers for eight days and then show the smoothest one to the king through the door's keyhole. Second, when the king demands a sexual encounter with the owner of the best-looking finger, she accepts but manages to be received in complete darkness and spends the night with him. A post-coital lamp's light delivers the truth to the king who, horrified and finally aware, commands his servants to throw his guest out the window. Only a fig tree softens the woman's fall and keeps her in midair until a group of fairies laugh uncontrollably at her predicament, thus triggering a magical transformation whereby the ageing woman becomes a perfect young beauty. Rejuvenated, she is discovered by the king and accepts his immediate wedding proposal. At the wedding's luncheon, the two sisters reunite and separate again, since the second woman, still elderly, cannot comprehend what occurred to her sister's ageing body. She lets envy overcome her and repeatedly asks for an explanation, but her now-young sibling lies by declaring that she was flayed. The older sister thus tries to emulate her, pays a barber, and dies under his tools, while he is skinning her alive as she requested.

The woman's death concludes this unforgiving fairy tale, which appears in Giambattista Basile's collection, *Lo cunto de li cunti ovvero lo trattenemiento de peccerille* (*The Tale of Tales or Entertainment for Little Ones*), published posthumously in Naples between 1634 and 1636.<sup>1</sup> *Lo cunto de li cunti* is a complex baroque text written in Neapolitan with a framed narrative structure in which ten destitute ageing women recount ten fairy tales per day for five days to their prince and his wife.<sup>2</sup> "La vecchia scortecata" appears just before the concluding eclogue of the first day, as the last narrated tale.

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<sup>1</sup> Basile (1566–1632) was a renowned poet, editor, and courtier who dedicated himself to fairy-tale writing, among other genres, while at the Spanish court in Naples. For all translations of his work, see Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, translated by Nancy Canepa.

<sup>2</sup> The frame tale, the forty-nine tales and four eclogues constituting *Lo cunto de li cunti*, also known as *Pentamerone*, speak of fantastical beings, such as fairies and ogres, belonging to the classical and folkloric early modern traditions of the West and often focus on human vices, like curiosity and envy. In order to weave together his material, Basile employs a mélange of

In this essay, I offer a comparative analysis of “La vecchia scortecata” by Basile and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” (“The Tale of the Old Skinned Woman”) by Maddalena and Teresa Manfredi and Angela and Teresa Zanotti.<sup>3</sup> The Manfredis and Zanottis included “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” in their work *La chiaqlira dla banzola, o per dir mii fol tradutt dal parlar napulitan pr rimedi innucent dla sonn e dla malincuni* (*The Chatterer on the Bench, or Tales Translated from Neapolitan as Innocent Remedy for Sleep and Melancholy*), a 1742 fairy-tale collection in Bolognese that recasts the fictional recitation of tales in a court offered by ten ageing women, as it was proposed by Basile in Neapolitan, as a compilation of fifty tales narrated by an ageless *chiaqlira*, or chatterer (Magnanini 87).<sup>4</sup> *La chiaqlira dla banzola* is recognized to be the first complete translation of Basile’s fifty tales and its eleventh tale, “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà,” also closely respects the plot set by Basile.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I focus on the representations of the encounters between the pair of ageing sisters and their king, a barber, and a group of fairies as they are encapsulated in two early modern fairy tales from *Lo cunto de li cunti* and *La chiaqlira dla banzola*, respectively.

## Representations

Largely established in Western Europe by Basile himself with the publication of *Lo cunto de li cunti*, the genre of literary fairy tales conflates popular motifs, orally narrated folk tales, as well as other literary genres, such as the Italian novella, in a cohesively written narrative meant to entertain courts with marvellous and

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genres and writes in a highly refined Neapolitan language, often employing colourful baroque hyperboles and metaphors.

<sup>3</sup> The Manfredi sisters, Maddalena (1673–1744) and Teresa (1679–1767), and the Zanotti sisters, Angela (1703–n.d.) and Teresa (1697–n.d.), are the first women to publicly pen literary fairy tales in early modern Italy. Raised in Bologna among scientists and writers, they belonged to two prominent families of the local bourgeoisie and were known for their scientific activity and literary production in the Bolognese language.

<sup>4</sup> Currently, an English translation is unavailable for “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” or *La chiaqlira dla banzola*. Hence, all translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> The four Bolognese authors took several structural liberties in their translations, such as removing the frame tale and the division by days, as well as in relation to the language, by simplifying *Lo cunto de li cunti*’s hyperbolic style and syntax (Badini Gualducci 21–22). *La chiaqlira dla banzola* also misses *Lo cunto de li cunti*’s introductions and summaries to the tales and it does not report Basile’s eclogues at the end of each day.

unusual stories, as in Basile's case (Rak xxxix), and to appease domestic gatherings in *salotti*, mainly attended by women, with light and witty narratives, as in the Manfredis and Zanottis's case a few decades later (Albanese 17).

Max Lüthi has observed how fairy tales typically feature characters that are not subject to the passing of time, having no specific age (76–94). Yet, fairy tales may also represent individuals who rapidly go from being extremely young to extremely old because of a magical metamorphosis. By doing so, fairy tales allow for a dynamic notion of time and for the existence of an ageing process. In early modern fairy tales, specifically, an ageing woman may be subjected to a series of overlapping representations that paint a complex picture of what it is to be elderly. An elderly woman may be the story's antagonist, being endowed of magical objects and power that may destroy those whom she encounters or threaten them with mystery. She may also be a rejected and marginalized character, someone who is not any more an active part of the narrative and social fabric because of her lack of youth, fertility, and sexual activity. Finally, she may even be a diegetic source of physical or metaphorical liberation.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that when it comes to representing the elderly, “La vecchia scortecata” and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtga” are not the sole fairy tales to offer a depiction of ageing women in *Lo cunto de li cunti* and *La chiaqlira dla banzola*.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the authors are not alone in tackling the trope in the larger repertoire of early modern literary fairy tales. Allan B. Chinen, for instance, has collected fairy tales featuring ageing characters from around the world, or elder tales. According to Chinen: “Elder tales symbolize the developmental tasks individuals must master in the second half of life. ... Elder tales do not speak of growing *up*, they deal instead with growing old, and most importantly, with *growing*—psychologically and spiritually” (2–3). Although I concur with Chinen from a narratological standpoint, I argue for the need to take into account gender identity and roles for an analysis of the representation of the elderly in fairy tales. I do so because, while growing old concerns all human beings regardless of sex and gender, I agree with Susan Sontag and others, who have pointed to the gendered nature of ageing. When she writes, “For most women, ageing means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification” (20), Sontag is describing ageing as a

<sup>6</sup> In general, female characters occupy a variety of roles in fairy tales: the queen, the mother, the enchantress, the princess in distress, just to name a few.

<sup>7</sup> Basile as well as the Manfredis and Zanottis represent old age in a total of six tales in the respective collections.

process that does not simply indicate growing old but also carries along social and physical discrimination and marginalization. I contend that we may find the roots to Sontag's contemporary perspective on ageing in early modern narratives from Italy.

My claim is threefold. First, by juxtaposing the literary fairy tales by Basile and the Manfredis and Zanottis, I aim to show that the encounter with a pair of old women experienced by a king that blindly and obsessively desires them, an avid barber, and a group of melancholic fairies, brings forth anxieties related to decay and the ageing of things contemporaneous to the writing of both fairy tales at study here. Early modern sensibility associated ageing first to physical, then to social and artistic degradation (Sohm 28–35).<sup>8</sup> In addition, as Nancy Canepa points out, “the obsession with the corrosive action of time, ... the cult of death, the taste for violent images are all familiar elements of the baroque aesthetic” (“From the Baroque” 264). It is my contention that the obsession with the passing of time and its corporeal effects as well as the anxieties caused by looming death persisted in time and in literary representations from early modernity, since they are evident both in *Lo cunto de li cunti* and in *La chiaqlira dla banzola*. This remains true even when we consider the latter work's departure from the baroque aesthetic characterizing *Lo cunto de li cunti* (Albanese 15–22). The typical repetition of fairy tales across narratives makes it even possible to trace perpetrating standards for bodily appearances, age conventions, and stereotypes about women's beauty across centuries and media beyond early modernity. For instance, Giuseppe Pitré's nineteenth-century literary fairy tale “Donna Peppa e Donna Tura” and Matteo Garrone's 2015 film *Tale of Tales*, uphold a similar image of old age in women.<sup>9</sup> The constricting spiral of cultural norms that all these fairy tales, from Basile to

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<sup>8</sup> In the one-hundred-year span in which Basile, the Manfredis and Zanottis wrote their literary fairy tales, a person was generally considered to be elderly if they were between fifty and sixty years of age (Sohm 3). Since *Lo cunto de li cunti* was started around 1630, Basile would have been between fifty-five and sixty-six years old, depending on which source one follows (*Lo cunto de li cunti* XI). *La chiaqlira dla banzola*'s authors, instead, varied widely in age and cannot all be considered to have been writing in their later years: at the time of publication, Maddalena Manfredi was sixty-seven and her sister Teresa was sixty-one; Teresa Zanotti was forty-five and her sister Angela was thirty-nine.

<sup>9</sup> Italian folklorist Pitré published his fairy tale in one of his many collections of tales, titled *Fiabe e leggende popolari siciliane* (*Sicilian Fairy Tales and Popular Legends*, 1888), gathered among lower- and middle-class tellers and transcribed in Italian. Garrone's film is instead only the second film adaptation ever attempted of Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* in Italian cinema and

Garrone, fictionally recount—two lonely elderly women pushed to pretend to be younger and randomly rewarded for undergoing a rejuvenating metamorphosis—reflects existing systems of misogyny in Italy as elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The very fact that the representation of ageing women as a source of anxiety, which first came to light as reason for entertainment and has since fuelled our desire for unforgiving fairy tales for centuries, is an active part of these systems.

My second contention is that ageing women are conceived as an aberration within the fictional universe of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary fairy tales. This insuperable yet unavoidable obstacle that an ageing woman embodies makes her *abject*, in Julia Kristeva's words: "Frontière sans doute, l'abjection est surtout *ambiguïté*. Parce que, tout en démarquant, elle ne détache pas radicalement le sujet de ce qui le menace—au contraire, elle l'avoue en perpétuel danger" ("Abjection is without doubt a frontier, but it is above all *ambiguity*. Because, although it demarcates, it does not radically detach the subject from what menaces it—on the contrary, it shows it to be in perpetual danger"; *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* 17; Lechte 132; my emphasis). Ageing women in early modern fairy tales are ambiguous because they are perceived as a constant danger and they are repellent to other characters (chiefly the king, here posing as Kristeva's *sujet*), and because they return in different contexts. In the tales by Basile and the Manfredis and Zanottis, the nocturnal encounter between the first woman and the king, as much as the unsuccessful attempt to turn into a younger beauty experienced by the second woman, demarcate ageing in women as a characterization that is intolerable in the fairy-tale ecosystem but also an entity that men cannot seem to be able to avoid. Further, and ironically, readers cannot avoid them either, since *Lo cunto de li cunti*'s frame tale and *La chiaqlira dla banzola*'s first tale prominently feature a group of ageing women that make the entire narration possible, thanks to their fictional vocal performance. Part of the reason for this ambiguity may be found in Basile's own disorienting poetics that at once dehumanizes and empathizes with the characters. I also assess that the contradiction expressed by the attractive

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does it through a transnational production that employs digital and artisanal special effects to bring Basile's baroque narrative to the screen.

<sup>10</sup> Armando Maggi similarly recognizes this misogynist tendency in his comparative analysis of Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* and Garrone's *Tale of Tales* ("Identity and Hope" 2). For my use of *misogyny*, I borrow the definition by Kate Manne, who understands it as the social forces faced by women because they are women and because they may also be those that enforce a patriarchal order (XV–XXIII).

aberration of an ageing woman in early modern fairy tales—the ambiguity of representation—finds its resolution in the female body. For “La vecchia scortecata” and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” to have a conclusive ending, an ageing woman must be either flayed alive or she must undergo a bodily transformation triggered by the laughter of fairies. In these early modern collections of fairy tales, therefore, an ageing female body conducting a liminal existence as abject can produce the narration itself by voicing it. It can also bring the narration to an end through its own skinning, it can bring youth back, and it can be the source of physical release for other women—the fairies’ laughter.

If representing two sisters with opposite destinies is a common motif to literary fairy tales (Maggi, “Identity and Hope” 1), these two tales share the portrayal of two sisters that are also advancing in age. My third and last claim is that the family unit that the women constitute—a pair of old, unmarried, and childless sisters living together—specifically problematizes contemporaneous heteronormative conventions regarding families and reproduction. To put it differently, the women’s existence poses a threat to the institutions of marriage and family, and to reproductive practices and women’s roles.

### Ageing women

The three moments in the tales by Basile and by the Manfredis and Zanottis that chiefly express the never-ending anxiety associated with ageing as well as the ambiguity generated by the elderly in fairy tales are the encounter between the first woman and the king, the one between the second woman and the barber who flays her, and the brief meeting between the first woman and a group of fairies. Before these encounters, however, both fairy tales first introduce the two old women in their everyday appearance. The description of ageing in “La vecchia scortecata” starts in the paratextual summary, which precedes the diegetic introduction by the fairy tale’s narrator, Iacova, and the fairy tale itself:

Lo re de Roccaforte se ’nnamora de la voce de na vecchia, e, gabbato da no dito rezocato, la fa dormire cod isso. Ma, addonatose de le rechieppe, la fa iettare pe na fenestra e, restanno appesa a n’arvolo, è fatata da sette fate e, diventata na bellisema giovana, lo re se la piglia pe mogliere. Ma l’altra sore, ’nmediosa de la fortuna soia, pe farese bella se fa scortecare e more. (Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* 198)



The king of Strong Fortress falls in love with the voice of an old woman, and after he is tricked with a sucked-on finger, he gets her to sleep with him. But upon discovering her old hide, he has her thrown out the window, and when she remains hanging on a tree she is enchanted by seven fairies, after which she becomes a splendid young woman and the king takes her for his wife. But the other sister is envious of her fortune, gets skinned to make herself more beautiful, and dies. (Canepa 115)

This synopsis points out that, while the male character has an aristocratic title and proper name, the two women have no appellation and are solely defined by their age. The old age of the two characters is the tale's focus, although only one woman is mentioned at first.<sup>11</sup> It is also made clear how being envious, or *'nmediosa* in Neapolitan, is what causes the second woman's troubles. On this note, the tale's title "La vecchia scortecata" is telling: two substantivized adjectives—two adjectives (*vecchia*, "old," and *scortecata*, "skinned") used as nouns—point to ageing and being flayed as fundamental identifications, in addition to sounding like an ironic proclamation of destiny (being flayed), for those who do not accept their predicaments (being old).

In the introduction to the fairy tale, then, the fictional narrator, Iacova, offers her listeners, and the collection's readers, a preventive interpretation that is heavily skewed towards the aberration of ageing. The accursed vice of wanting to be beautiful is embedded in women, Iacova claims, and is something one cannot escape, it brings a painful death, and it affects the old more than the young. According to this narrator, who poses as one of Basile's strange alter egos, one must especially criticize an ageing woman when it comes to bodily appearances (*Lo cunto de li cunti* 198). Such framing is not only a metatextual parody, since Iacova herself and her nine narrating partners are extremely old, but it is also an intertextual reference to two topoi that span beyond the fairy-tale genre, invectives against women on the one hand, and hyperbolic descriptions of the feminine grotesque on the other hand.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Obscurity about the summaries' authorship may give reason for mentioning only one of the two sisters: "We don't know if Basile authored the synopses introducing each of his fifty tales" (Maggi, *Preserving the Spell* 19–20).

<sup>12</sup> "Examples of the grotesque woman in Italian literature can be found in Dante's 'femmina balba' (*Purgatorio* 19.7–9, 16–21), Ariosto's Alcina (*Orlando furioso* 7.73.1–74.4), Machiavelli's

Once the narration begins, unsurprisingly, Basile's sisters are a long collection of crude hyperboles:

doi vecchiarelle, ch'erano lo riassunto de le disgrazie, lo protacuollo de li scurce, lo libro maggiore della bruttezza: le quale avevano le zervole scigliate e 'ngrifate, la fronte 'ncrespata e vrogolosa, le ciglia storciolate e restolose, le parpetole chiantute ed a pennericolo, l'uocchie guize e scarcagnate, la facce gialloteca ed arrappata, la vocca squacquareta e storcellata e 'nsomma la varvea d'annecchia, lo pietto peluso, le spalle co la contrapanzetta, le braccia arronchiate, le gamme sciancate e scioffate e li piede a crocco. (*Lo cunto de li cunti* 198–200)

They were the summary of all misfortunes, the register of all deformities, the ledger of all ugliness: their tufts of hair were disheveled and spiked, their foreheads lined and lumpy, their eyelashes shaggy and bristly, their eyelids swollen and heavy, their eyes wizened and seedy-looking, their faces yellowed and wrinkled, their mouths drooly and crooked; in short, they had beards like a billy goat's, hairy chests, round-bellied shoulders, withered arms, lame and crippled legs, and hooked feet. (Canepa 116)

The women's hair, foreheads, eyes, mouths, chests, shoulders, legs, and feet are put on display in a detailed yet humorously exaggerated portrait of ugliness, rather than ageing *per se*.<sup>13</sup> In order to define ageing, Basile chooses two characters that are “lo libro maggiore della bruttezza,” a living catalogue of all things unattractive. Further, this passage is characterized by a “hypertrophic parodic style” by which the author turns on its head the traditional description of the beloved woman (Canepa, “From the Baroque” 264). By doing so, Basile positions himself as part of a long tradition of virtuous rhetoric and visual art against the ageing body.<sup>14</sup> In

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‘lavandaia’ in his letter to Luigi Guicciardini” (Ansani 93). For further reference on the topic, see Bettella.

<sup>13</sup> “The sisters too ... are described in Basile with a list of similes so long and odd that it reads as humorous” (Mazzoni 189).

<sup>14</sup> “Old women were a welcome subject for artists in the early modern period. Painting the particular visual qualities of elderly women may have been considered a tour de force for artists,

this way, he also adorns *Lo cunti de li cunti* with an abundance of descriptions and subjective characterizations, features often lacking in fairy tales.<sup>15</sup>

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Manfredis and Zanottis translate the description by keeping the characters' features in their Bolognese fairy tale:

Sti dou vecchi ern l' più brutt figur ch' s' fussn mai vùst al mond:  
gli avevn l'zì grossi com'è un cavicch, la front tutta crespà e  
brugnuquolosa, i palpìdr d'i ucch sempr pìn d'arcotta, i ucch stralunà,  
al mustàzz stort, una buccazza ch'i arrivava da un'urecchia all'altra,  
con la barba, al stomgh tutt plos, l'spall avvincà, l brazz e l gamb fatt  
a cavriòl. (*La chiaqlira dla banzola* 136)

These two old women were the ugliest figures the world had ever seen: they had eyebrows as thick as a wooden peg, their forehead wrinkly and lumpy, their eyelids always full of gunk, their eyes dazed, their face twisted, an ugly mouth that went from one ear to the other, with a beard, a hairy chest, bended shoulders, arms and legs like roedeers.

As does its Neapolitan counterpart, this depiction is a top-to-bottom scan that highlights bodily characteristics caused by ageing in an exaggerated manner, such as a wrinkly forehead or an imperfect facial symmetry. *La chiaqlira dla banzola* also presents a similar title for the fairy tale, “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà,” already positing from its start the destiny for at least one of the two women. The four authors prefer a more direct narrative than Basile, however, at first simply stating that together the two siblings are a *brut figur*, an ugly figure. What matters is the two characters and the diversion they provide their readers by displaying their extreme bodies, rather than the refined baroque metaphors employed in “La vecchia scortecata.” Notwithstanding this and other notable differences with

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allowing them to explore the specificity of irregularities in the face, neck, and hands, with the idea that these would be a challenge” (Fox Hofrichter and Yoshimoto 3).

<sup>15</sup> “The type of experimentation with radical metaphor that we find in Basile, which transports words and expressions from familiar to unfamiliar contexts and involves a perennial play of different perspectives, is in itself a substantial interrogation of the feasibility of the rigid stylistic paradigms and univocal worldview often associated with fairy tales” (Canepa, “From the Baroque” 266).

Basile's work—*La chiaqlira dla banzola*'s title and the fictional narrative emphasis on tales told to a circle of women, for instance—"La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà" still functions as a tale of stereotypes on ageing and women.

### Encounters

After the setting of the stage, the first encounter occurs in complete darkness and tells of a man whose judgment is obfuscated by his own desire. In Basile's telling, as soon as the king lays next to his guest, he can sense with his fingers something strange about the woman's body but goes through with his sexual mission. Only once he is satisfied does he shed light on the reality of the person next to him with the aid of a lit oil lamp. In the Bolognese fairy tale, the narrator omits direct references to sexual intercourse but still positions a king in bed that, as soon as he touches a body that feels different to what he expected, resorts to the clarity of the lamp's light.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, both kings are fast at calling for help from their servants and punish their respective old trickster, in a "surreal reversal of the lessons on the power of love and its crucial role in helping to get beyond appearances and to overcome irrational fears" (Canepa, "From the Baroque" 273). The woman's corporeal reality, namely, her existence in a decaying body, prevents this part of the tale from turning into a love story. Likewise, her ageing body makes a parody of monarchical troubles when it comes to assuring the king that there would be heirs to the throne, since discovering an elderly woman instead of a virgin does negate the king any offspring.<sup>17</sup> Even the act of throwing the woman out of the window stems from the horror felt by the king, rather than by the trick she pulls on him, as her subsequent metamorphosis into a young woman and the ensuing wedding prove.

In the conclusive lines of the nocturnal meeting scene, before the servants' intervention, the woman tries to find her way back into the king's favours by recounting popular proverbs: "Gallina vecchia fa buono bruodo" and "Non se deve lassare la via vecchia pe la nova" ("An old chicken makes a good broth" and "Don't

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<sup>16</sup> These scenes parody the moment of truth at the centre of Apuleius's tale "Cupid and Psyche," featured in his work *Metamorphoses* (second century CE), and in which the woman discovers at night the wonderful beauty of her male lover, defying her sisters that had wrongly warned her about his ugliness.

<sup>17</sup> This king is, indeed, a defeated character, pointing to the kingdom's (and men's) dysfunctionalities, as many other *cunti* do in Basile's collection.

leave the old road for the new”; Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* 208; Canepa 120) on the one hand, and “Mai guai a qula cà ch’ d’ vecch n’ sà” (“Misfortunes may arrive to that house that does not smell of old”; Manfredi et al., *La chiaqlira dla banzola* 138) on the other. She references everyday life to attest to her own existence’s viability, creating a parallel between the natural ageing of the human body and that of domestic birds and homes as well as with the landscape’s familiarity. The Manfredis and Zanottis’s addition of a last curse directed at the king and all the men he represents—“sti zuvnazz, i vren dl parigìn, con al pìrruchìn e al pattanlèr, e ben brlicchi” (“These young men, [who] would like Parisian women with a wig and a short dress, all flirty”; 138)—reinforces the woman’s sentiment regarding her positionality as a discarded subject to the advantage of younger women. In this encounter, the king’s reaction to his bed companion’s true nature (an old woman versus an idealized young beauty) is not framed as a surprise or treated as something that may change over time because of habit, affection, love, or magic. The anxiety fostered by being corporeally close to ageing and the consequences of such anxiety on women’s lived experiences are at the core of these tales.

Ageing as a personal and social curse is an inescapable and binding feature that will cause one woman to be thrown out of a window and the other one to be flayed alive. While the first woman happens to be transformed by fairies passing by the tree that stopped her fall, the flaying scene features the woman who dares not to be content with her old body. Lacking her sister’s chance, she dies a violent death in a barber’s shop. This is because, in the seventeenth century, barbers usually completed small medical procedures that became to be later associated with those of a surgeon (Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* 220). The eighteenth-century fairy tale carries on such a tradition in its depiction of the woman’s skinning. Her demise is an important second encounter for the significance of ageing in these fairy tales. In “La vecchia scortecata,” the barber is at first resistant to the woman’s request but then concedes to be paid to perform a flaying procedure while she utters, “Chi bella vo’ parere, pena vo’ patere” (“If you want to be beautiful, you have to suffer”; Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* 216; Canepa 125). As he continues to flay her and she to speak, they “se ne iezero contrapuntianno lo colascione de chillo cuorpo fi’ a la rosa de lo vellicolo, dove, essennole mancato co lo sangue la forza, sparaie da sotta no tiro de partenza” (“they kept up the counterpoint on the lute of her body until he reached her navel, at which point, as her blood abandoned her and with it her strength, she let loose from behind a departing shot”; Basile, *Lo*

*cunto de li cunti* 216; Canepa 125).<sup>18</sup> In “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà,” the motto is much more literal—“Mo chi vol dvintar bell, bso ch’ s’ fazza razzar vi tutta la pell” (“Who wants to be beautiful, has to have their skin flayed”; Manfredi et al., *La chiaqlira dla banzola* 142)—and the musical metaphor is lost to a game of repetitions:

E al barbir tirava innanz al fatt so, e li s’aranzinava tutta es andava replicand: “Mo chi vol dvintar bell, bsò ch’ s’ fazza razzar vi tutta la pell.” Quis andònn drì tutt dù, lù razzand e lì ranzand, fin ch’ la scurdadura arrivò al bliguel; quand la fu lì, la vecchia fi l’ultma ... con riverenza parland. (142)

And the barber kept to his business, and she was twisting and saying: “Who wants to be beautiful, has to have their skin flayed.” The both of them so continued, him flaying and her speaking, until the flaying reached her navel; at which point, the old woman did her last ... respectfully speaking.

The grotesque duet to which Basile hints with reference to the *colascione* (a long-necked lute instrument) is played out by the Manfredis and Zanottis through the assonance between the verbs *razzand* (flaying) and *ranzand* (speaking). By referencing the labour done on a musical instrument, Basile objectifies the woman in order to recount her bodily transformation’s failure. His description also recalls the efforts that artisans put into forging their instruments as well as classical myths of creation and moulding. This encounter between the old woman and a barber is thus a deadly and failed version of the birth of a beautiful work of art. On a related note, the scene’s core meaning derives from a conception of the body as a skin-made container (Sohm 20), something one can control and try to remove in order to find the truth within. In this case, crucially, beauty is the ultimate truth, and ageing may only equal ugliness. In addition, the ageing woman is associated with

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<sup>18</sup> Scholars discuss this flaying scene in a variety of ways: in social and narratological terms, since this character needs to be removed from the story to conform to the upward social economy of the fairy tale, here represented by the first woman’s transformation (Mazzoni 182); in Jungian terms, considering the successful metamorphosis and the flaying as specular transformations (Guaragnella 548); as a metaphor for the baroque poetics itself (Ansani 94); and as the most ruthless aspect of the baroque aesthetic and pessimism (Canepa, “From the Baroque” 281).

bodily fluids and flatulence, which are so low on the linguistic register they are not transcribed by the eighteenth-century writers, who prefer to use an ellipsis. The Bolognese motto repeated by the woman is consequently revealing much more than the one in the Neapolitan text, since not only must one suffer (*pena patere*), but the flaying of old skin must occur to achieve the high standards of beauty.

As mentioned, the fallen ageing woman is magically transformed into her specular opposite, a young, attractive, wealthy, noble, virtuous, and lucky woman, thanks to the laughter of passing fairies. This interaction constitutes a third encounter with the elderly within the fairy tales, albeit one that is connotated differently than the other two. Several reasons account for the difference: only one of the siblings experiences it (the tales do not provide a mirroring encounter for the second sister); there are no men involved but only liminal subjects (an ageing woman and magical fairies); and the encounter has a successful resolution for both parties—youth and laughter, respectively. Youth and laughter are described hyperbolically, just as hyperbolically as the events are narrated. The formerly ageing woman, on the one hand, turns into an unbelievable beauty. Basile, for instance, writes that her face was “cossì bella che tutte l’altre bellezze averriano parzeto scarpune scarcagnate a paro de na scarpetella attillata e cauzante” (“so beautiful that by comparison all other beauties would have looked like worn-out house slippers alongside an elegant, perfect-fitting little pump”; *Lo cunto de li cunti* 217; Canepa 121). On the other hand, the fairies are depicted as unconceivably melancholic until they lay eyes on the fallen woman, who inspires their breath-taking laughter (and their subsequent gift). In Manfredi et al.’s *La chiaqlira dlla banzola*: “Questi, vdend qual spindai attaccà al albr e qual figura quàsì ridiculosa, l s’mìssn a ridr d’un gust quàsì gran che gli avn a crpar, ch n’ p’ssevn più aver al fià” (“Glancing that woman hanging from the tree in such a ridiculous manner, [the fairies] began laughing so much that they were about to die and did not have any breath left”; 139). While the overall meaning of this entire scene remains mysterious in both collections, thus encapsulating the ambiguity of ageing in fairy tales, the gift provided by the fairies in exchange for the received entertainment may be read as a textual reference made by the authors to their readers, who are thus invited to react in a similar way to the pleasure provided by the text. It is also significant that encountering the old body of a woman triggers bodily liberations, as not only the fairies get rid of their melancholy because they have met an elderly woman, but the woman herself de facto enters a different body and starts anew.

## Abjections

“La vecchia scortecata” capitalizes on the notion of ageing as a gendered feature, and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” confirms a view of ageing that associates the old body of a woman to an ambiguous alterity. The elderly are represented in these tales by a couple of lower-class and soiled women who live an isolated and impoverished life in a shack. In these narratives, in other words, an ageing woman is abject and inhabits a liminal space at the fringe of socially acceptable categories. Kristeva construes abjection to mean: “Celui par lequel l’abject exist est donc un *jeté* qui (se) place, (se) *sépare*, (se) situe et donc *erre*, au lieu de se reconnaître, de désirer, d’appartenir ou de réfuser” (“[The] one through whom the abject exists is thus an outcast who places (is placed), separates (is separated), situates (is situated) and therefore wanders, instead of recognizing himself, desiring, belonging, or refusing”; *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* 15; Lechte 130).

“La vecchia scortecata” and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” particularly relate an ageing female body to a monstrosity. Connecting ageing and monstrosity brings forth the depth of the double standard affecting women of an older age. When a man is characterized by monstrous traits—as in most rewritings of “The Beauty and the Beast,” for example—his female companion is led to discover the monster’s hidden truth. According to Cristina Bacchilega, “to understand the wondrous dimension of *monstrum* we must focus on the husband as ‘not human,’ either because he is invisible, ... unusual, ... animal, or object-like. ... There is a mystery to be solved, a wonder to be appreciated” (167). In “The Beauty and the Beast” retellings, the woman also eventually accepts and embraces her lover’s monstrosity, notwithstanding his body’s inscrutable origins. He, and only he, can literally be a *monstrum*, an extraordinary marvel to behold. Instead, an ageing woman and her decaying body are an impassable obstacle that one can hardly watch. In the fairy tales analyzed here she must be rejected if she cannot be transformed into a younger person. In short, an ageing woman may well be a monster, in a reasoning pertinent to the taste for dissonance, rarity, and disproportion of the Baroque (Castillo 24), which *La chiaqlira dla banzola* perpetrates when it concerns ageing and women.

At the fairy tales’ onset, the two women are too monstrous to openly live in their community, thus existing enclosed in a poor dwelling that is hyperbolically



too close to the king's palace to not be noticed.<sup>19</sup> When the king spends the night with his guest, her bodily scent reaches him before he may touch her. What Basile writes as “lo shiauro de la vocca soia, l’afeto de le tetelleche e la mofeta de chella brutta cosa” (“the fumes coming from her mouth, the stink of her little tickly areas, and the stench of that ugly thing”; 206; Canepa 119), the Manfredis and Zanottis translate with “la puzza qu’ mnava la vecchia dalla bocca, dai pi, dal lasìn e, insomma, da tutti i cù” (“the stink that the old woman released from her mouth, her feet, her armpits, brief, from all sides”; 138). In either case, abjection can never really disappear. Later in the stories, the second woman cannot help but be skinned and die because she represents a threat to her bystanders by recalling death and decay through her bodily presence; she is a *memento mori* (Fox Hofrichter and Yoshimoto 2–3). She loses her life, moreover, because she embodies abjections, namely, anything that must be discarded, overcome, rejected.

The descriptive passages throughout “La vecchia scortecata” and “La Fola dlla Vecchia Scurtgà” point to additional facets of abjection. When the narrators explicitly mention the women’s bodies, words such as “negra vecchia,” “vecchia scura,” and “nigro scuorzo” (Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* 93, 97, 98), and “plazza quì negra” (Manfredi et al., *La chiaqlira dlla banzola* 142) express views that are contemporaneous to the authors and to the prejudices on skin tonality.<sup>20</sup> To sum up, those who have a darker skin are ugly and repugnant, as well as deserving of a violent death.

Moreover, the two women share a childless and unmarried existence. Ageing women are thus presented as aberrations because of their loss of an active sexual life and the lack of pleasing visual attributes associated with womanhood. *Lo cunto de li cunti*’s frame tale already discusses fertility and procreation as reason for anxiety and conflict between a prince and his wife.<sup>21</sup> “La vecchia scortecata,” and

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<sup>19</sup> In Basile’s text, the women live in a *vascio*, or a Neapolitan basso. These street-level slum dwellings covered large areas of central Naples. In the Bolognese rendition, the couple is instead confined in a courtyard. The sisters’ physical invisibility to the king’s eyes at the beginning functions to enlarge his hyperbolic desire for them.

<sup>20</sup> Canepa translates the first and second epitomes with “wretched old woman,” following another meaning of the Neapolitan word *nigro*, and translates the latter appellation as “black bark” (119, 122, 125). The Bolognese can be rendered literally as “black, old skin.”

<sup>21</sup> The prince’s wife, Lucia, is pregnant and subjected to an enchantment by which she demands to be told stories. Whenever she is crossed in her desire, Lucia threatens to give herself a miscarriage. Moreover, and possibly more disturbingly, once the prince realizes that Lucia had

later “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà,” follows suit by doubling the aberration of a childless woman with ageing. In this light, the drastic attempt at rejuvenation by the second woman is even more tragic since it pits younger (and more fertile) and older (and more sterile) women against each other.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the shared life of the two characters as unmarried sisters living in isolation far from institutions like convents that may have housed women, questions heteronormative familial systems. While the women are rejected by their surroundings because of their individual age and physical features, their pairing in liminal conditions is also a social and cultural aberration for their time.

By mentioning a hairy chest among other bodily features, the narrators also stress heteronormative binary conceptions of the female body. For a woman to age means not only losing affiliation to her gender but hirsutism may also blur the lines between human and non-human animal species. An abnormal amount of hair on a human body features among the baroque wonders as well as causing anxiety in early modernity. As Jazmina Cininas explains it: “Anxieties reach their zenith when female hair growth exceeds not only the social parameters set for her gender, but also those for her species” (30). Considering the similarity between the two texts, these sensations regarding an abnormal hairy person linger into the eighteenth century and thus appear in *La chiaqlira dla banzola*.<sup>23</sup> An ageing female body collects all forms of alterity and its aberration is extreme enough to put into question the two characters’ gender and race as well as their humanity.<sup>24</sup>

A last form of aberration is the characters’ poverty, in an example of fairy tales’ ability to mirror their societies’ constrictions on women. From the Middle Ages to early modernity, the social status of an ageing, unmarried woman was

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committed identity theft so that he married her instead of another woman, he condemns her to be buried alive while pregnant with his heir.

<sup>22</sup> “[T]he sexual objectification of the youthful female body has presented particular problems for the aged female body subjecting these bodies to the indignity of becoming sexless or even aggressively anti-sexual, marked by decay, with older women doomed to covet a young body” (Do Rozario and Waterhouse-Watson 235).

<sup>23</sup> Overly hairy humans, such as Petrus Gonsalvus and his daughter Antonietta or Tognina, portrayed in c. 1580 by Bolognese painter Lavinia Fontana and clearly affected by hypertrichosis like her father, are a true spectacle in early modernity.

<sup>24</sup> In early modern iconography, heresy was also represented as a naked and dishevelled ageing woman, as one may see in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconografia* (1593). For an analysis in the terms of representation of ageing women of the *Iconografia*’s 1603 edition, see Filipczak 41–44.

among the poorest. When childless, ageing lower-class women were removed from the place of work and often were not counted by tax collectors, thus figuring as beggars (Caviglioli 39). Moreover, because early modern fairy tales developed and flourished along with societal changes, they often discuss relations of power and class struggles (Zipes 6–8). In “La vecchia scortecata” and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà,” the narrators indeed tell the story of a tumultuous encounter—a struggle—between a king and two lower-class women. Yet, it is the women’s gender that specifically prompts their initial feelings of obligation towards the king’s insistent love-making requests heard from behind their shack’s closed door. Later, the disparity of wealth between the siblings and their king may decrease, and not simply when one of the women manages to be physically closer to a higher position of power but inasmuch as her ageing body becomes a younger, less abject one. Lastly, her sister’s fatal flaying underscores the dysfunctionality of this magically founded social mobility for poor, ageing women.

## Conclusions

In this essay, I examine two early modern literary fairy tales about the tribulations of two ageing women and their encounters with an obsessive king and a heartless barber, Basile’s “La vecchia scortecata” from *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–36) and the Manfredi and Zanotti sisters’ “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà,” featured in *La chiaqlira dla banzola* (1742). Regarding the genre of literary fairy tales, I point out that an ageing woman that tricks a king, and then turns into a younger version of herself, is an example of fairy tales’ proneness to both temporal stillness in the narrative and mobility in the characters’ age. In terms of representation, instead, I reflect on the continuity of thought in early modern Italy about deep-seated stereotypes regarding an ageing woman’s body in spite of the differences between *Lo cunto de li cunti* and *La chiaqlira dla banzola*. I specifically outline several forms of representation when it comes to ageing women in fairy tales in early modern Italy; all forms that underscore how an ageing woman’s bodily existence is starkly different from the one of a man because of the double standard of ageing: death, monstrosity, abjection in terms of sexuality, gender, species, and social norms.

It is difficult to associate a clear moral lesson with the tales—it is unclear why the sisters trick the king, but most importantly, the rejuvenating transformation is not paralleled by high moral grounds (Maggi, “Identity and Hope” 3)—and the fairies’ scene arguably signifies liberation and the overcoming of marginalization, at least for some. Kristeva, for instance, conceives of laughter almost

as a remedy, “un façon de placer et déplacer l’abjection” (“Laughter is a way of placing or displacing abjection”; *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* 15; Lechte 130). Further, *Lo cunto de li cunti* features ten ageing women as tellers and *La chiaqlira dla banzola* has one female narrator (the *chiaqlira*). Although these elderly and female figures tell the story and thus make it possible for the fairy tales to endure, they all coexist with a representation by which ageing women personify abjection. The women’s ageing bodies and their abusive descriptions are the necessary premise and the carrier of the narration and account for its narrative *exploits* (Rubini 142–43). Notwithstanding the crucial role performed by the feminine narrator in literary fairy tales from early modernity, the body that hosts and emits the narrating voice is still recounted in its fragility and ugliness. The constant recounting of female ageing, from Basile to the Manfredis and Zanottis and beyond, in terms of a horrifying, even if ambiguous, experience demands us to reflect on the real struggles experienced by living elderly women who embody the inspiration for these tales.

With my contribution, I hope to shed light on the gendered nature of corporeal aberrations in Italian fairy tales, and also on the misogynist ageism perpetrated by the societies for which “La vecchia scortecata” and “La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà” are echo chambers. One last textual passage may highlight the extent of the representation’s persistence, and yet again the moral ambiguity inherent to the fairy-tale elderly. The bodies of Basile’s characters are so exaggeratedly ageing that one of the women is able to pull her loose skin backwards and make a knot with it behind her back when she prepares for her nocturnal encounter with the king: “la vecchia, tiratose tutte le recheppie de la perzona e fattone no rechippo dereto le spalle legato stritto stritto con no capo de spao” (“the old woman smoothed back all the wrinkles on her body and gathered them behind her shoulders in a knot, which she tied tightly with a piece of twine”; *Lo cunto de li cunti* 206; Canepa 119). In *La chiaqlira dla banzola*, although the description of the skin-pulling technique acknowledges the woman’s embarrassment, while *Lo cunto de li cunti* does not, by highlighting the woman’s feelings, the Manfredis and Zanottis still do not escape sexist body imagery concerning an ageing woman:

La vecchia mo in st mentr era tutta intrigà, perche la cgnusseva ben anca li cmod l’era mai crespa, es era tant passa ch’a i cascava zò la carn, ch’la s svintlava. So surella i deva man accumuldr sta carn; i in chiappàvn di pzigùtt es la ligavn con di chiappitt tant ch’la n cascass quès zò da tutti i là, mo a s’pò credr ch’ bella figura la feva. (138)

Meanwhile the old woman was very embarrassed, because she knew well how wrinkly she was, she was so wilted that her skin was hanging and waving. Her sister helped her to arrange her flesh: they picked up patches and tightened them with ribbons so that the skin would all fall down, but one may imagine how good she looked.

All five authors reflect on the natural process of skin ageing and depict in fairy-tale terms what will become aesthetically driven plastic surgery in later centuries. On the one hand, the irony of *La chiaqlira dlla banzola*'s last quoted line concerning a *bella figura* points to a continuing and underlining tendency to inspire laughter—in the readers as much as in the tales' bystanders, such as the fairies. On the other hand, it points to the aesthetic and social importance of a tight and young-looking skin to the two ageing characters. These representations are so vivid that director Garrone commented on plastic surgery while working on his film adaptation to Basile: "You have to think about the modernity of some passages, to think that in the seventeenth century Basile was anticipating aesthetic surgery because he was highlighting the fact that women want to look younger and they underwent some procedures, some sort of lifting of the tongue" (Anderson).

While the fairy tales are undoubtedly a humorous "parable, ante litteram, on the perils of plastic surgery!" (Canepa, "From the Baroque" 280), it is my intent to consider the cultural framework bringing ageing women to desire a younger look and persistently undergo surgical procedures, be it through the encounter with a sixteenth-century barber or with a twenty-first century surgeon. In spite of the societal changes in Italy since Basile and the fact that the Manfredis and Zanottis penned their fairy tales in Naples and Bologna, respectively, the dependence of institutions such as the monarchy, marriage, and family on women's physical productivity has remained; not to mention the role age has had in affecting a woman's place in her culture and society. "La vecchia scortecata" and "La Fola dlla Vecchia Scurtgà" provide a venue for discussing not only ageing and gender in early modernity but also the persistence of misogynist biases in later adaptations of the story first written by Basile, which confirms my contention that these biases continue beyond the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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