Basile's *Pentameron*: From the Marvellous to the Fantastic

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Lo Cunto de li cunti (1634) by Giambattista Basile is well known as a masterful baroque text, identified by Benedetto Croce as "il piú bel libro italiano barocco" (x1). Considered an offspring of Boccaccio's *Decameron* because of its similar structure, it eventually becomes known as the *Pentameron*, although Basile himself did not officially give it this title. Basile's short stories differ from Boccaccio's in that they often employ popular folklore, including the realm of fairies and fantasy. In fact, Basile's tales are commonly studied with other "fairy tales" such as those by the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault. Rather than confine the *Pentameron* to its sources in fables, fairy tales, religion, and folklore, I propose to consider Basile's work as a collection of baroque short stories infused with the *fantastic* and *marvellous*.^{1,2} On a structural level, Basile imitates the Boccaccian frame-story, with story-tellers who are assembled together and each tells one story per day. However, Basile departs from Boccaccio by adding commentary in the form of a versed Eclogue at the end of each of the first four days. These Eclogues serve as moral exempla and do not necessarily follow any theme set by the day's stories. The moral of the Eclogues is much more developed than in the stories. Furthermore, the Eclogues are acted out by characters who do not participate in the daily story-telling. While the daily tales are recounted by village women assembled together by a prince, the characters who recite the Eclogues are servants of the prince. These stylistic differences offer elements of the fantastic and marvellous and further distinguish Basile's work from Boccaccio's.³

The marvellous tale itself is nothing new, with a tradition that predates written literature and is grounded in ancient religions. Propp states that "Le conte (merveilleux) vient des anciennes religions" (180), and that, "On a indiqué que les formes fondamentales des contes [merveilleux] remontent à des images religieuses déjà mortes" (190). Modern critics, especially Todorov, draw a distinction between notions of the marvellous and the fantastic, and I believe that Basile's text already provides specific examples of each.⁴ Reaction to the "other world" and its inhabitants defines this difference. While the marvellous allows for the intrusion of the unreal into the real world, the fantastic does not. With the marvellous, fairies and other magical objects are accepted and circulate easily between the real world and the "other" world. Michel Stanesco provides insight

into the easy acceptance of the marvellous in the medieval tale. Todorov establishes a modern definition of the marvellous that closely resembles the medieval marvellous.⁵ The fantastic, on the other hand, resists the intrusion of the unreal into the real world and hesitates before the supernatural.⁶ Basile's text demonstrates the marvellous in a manner typical of fairy tales, while the Eclogues demonstrate some of the fantastic qualities described by Todorov and others. Although the required "hesitation" before the fantastic may not be as obvious or developed in the *Pentameron* as in modern works,⁷ especially in nineteenth-century fantastic literature, the Eclogues present an unnatural element that challenges the reader's sense of the unalterable physical law of nature.

A brief presentation of the traditional fairy tale structure used by Basile for most of the daily stories will provide a contrast for his innovative use of the fantastic in the Eclogues. The characters of the tales are equally distributed between human and fairy personages. Following the typical fairy tale schema, the humans are either peasants or aristocrats who are aided by fairies. The humans and fairies inhabit the same world and do not express any surprise at their interactions. This tendency for the boundary between the two worlds to be traversed easily is a trait of the medieval tale and probably derives from its religious ancestry. As Stanesco observes,

Le conte fantastique⁸ pullule d'êtres de l'autre monde: fées, sorcières, morts, enchanteurs, dragons, animaux fabuleux, etc Et pourtant, dit Max Lüthi, 'les humains du conte . . . fréquentent les êtres de l'au-delà comme s'ils étaient leurs pareils. Ils acceptent les dons d'une façon calme et imperturbable ou bien les refusent . . . Il leur manque l'expérience de l'intervalle entre eux et les autres êtres.' (16)

In fact, a glance at the first day of stories reveals practically every type of character described by Stanesco and portrays the easy movement between the two worlds. The human characters are not disturbed by the interval that separates them from the fairies. For instance, the story of "La Mortella" (1.2) involves many incredible elements. A countrywoman of Miano gives birth to a myrtle tree. A fairy issues forth from the tree and marries a prince, none of which astonishes the other characters nor disturbs the reader because the fairy tale frame is maintained. Stanesco explains that "There is not always a border between our world and the Other World, circulation between the two is always possible" (18).

In the story, "La Pulce" (1.5), there is again circulation between the two worlds when characters who are not described explicitly as fairies and are apparently humans in fact display magical powers. A thoughtless king grows a flea the size of a sheep and offers his daughter to the suitor who correctly names the creature. A terrible ghoulish recognizes the flea by its scent and claims the princess.⁹ She is eventually rescued by the seven sons of an old woman, and, despite their decidedly superhuman powers, none are called fairies or otherwise by Basile. Although these stories involve other-worldly characters, neither the characters of

the tale nor the reader questions supernatural power when it is contained within the traditional fairy tale structure. Furthermore, the straightforward prose does not contribute to an irregular rhythm which could accentuate the mysterious. On the other hand, Basile's verse, bizarre and exaggerated, disturbs the easy rhythm set by the tales. Heaping up of descriptions is one way in which Basile produces this effect. Giallaise describes how the necessary act of eating can become tedious: "Riempiti bene la pancia, divora, inghiottisci, sbrana, vuota, raschia, trangugia, ingoia, muovi le mascelle" etc. (Rak 128-30).¹⁰ The verse overwhelms the reader rather than allow the same easy access as do the tales. It immediately puts the reader on guard, seemingly inviting the next step toward the fantastic — that is, hesitation before the text.

Basile's use of the Neapolitan dialect augments the peculiar tone in the exempla. Dialect is not used to achieve realism, but instead, follows the seventeenth-century baroque precept calling for excessiveness. Basile exaggerates and deforms this dialect, inventing words and "Neapolitanizing" others, to achieve an even greater degree of "movement." In fact, the *Pentameron* is sometimes criticized as being too difficult to read in the original and is often studied in translation into modern Italian.¹¹ Penzer, who translated the *Pentameron* into English, notes Basile's significant divergence from "popular or spontaneous usage" to a more "artistic remodeling of the dialect" (xxxii). This concern with effect implies an awareness of audience reaction and the typical reaction sought by Baroque works was one of unsettled awe. Preoccupation with effect and reaction reduces to a secondary position the role of diegesis, or, plot.¹² Croce explains one of the main reasons for use of dialect in the Seicento as the "spasmodic pursuit of novelty" (xxxii). Extravagance of expression typifies the baroque form which Elio Gioanola celebrates as a masterpiece of language "con tutte le girandole di parole che si rincorrono come in una reazione a catena, nel festoso esplodere delle espressioni come in un fuoco d'artificio" (263). This use of language generates a certain instability not present in the tales. It is an instability born from nontraditional use of language where language becomes predominantly ornamental rather than referential. This use of language invites the fantastic hesitation.

As has been noted, Basile follows Boccaccio's method of having characters tell stories for a day and transforms the traditional Boccaccian structure, adding moral exempla at the day's end in the form of Eclogues. The Eclogues are theatrical performances acted out by characters who do not participate in the daily storytelling and the morals do not derive directly from any specific story. In fact, they are very separate in nature from the stories themselves. The *moralité* was very popular among authors of this period and was usually related to the story or fable. For instance, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1559), written prior to the *Pentameron*, also demonstrates an interest in moral judgement. Charles Perrault (1696), guided by La Fontaine's same desire to *plaire et instruire*, gives *moralités* in a whimsical tone as a reaction to his tales.¹³ While

Basile begins and ends each story with a brief moral, he spins out developed exempla in the four Eclogues.

Each Eclogue involves only two characters who act out a skit. The Eclogues are more noticeably baroque than the tales because of their use of the theatrical mask (the actors), elliptical language, repetition, and extended metaphors. Each Eclogue begins with the lead character opening a "riddle" which he develops into the moral. The secondary character acts as audience and receives the riddle, but does not initially understand the first actor's language and therefore hesitates. In the first Eclogue, Iacovuccio responds to Fabiello's questions, saying that he is still "miles away from the truth." The elliptical language of the Eclogues is immediately set apart from the language of the tales. The characters themselves hesitate before it. The beginning of "La Coppella," the first Eclogue, is especially elliptic. The reader, and even the second actor, Fabiello, are at the mercy of the first actor, Iacovuccio. The reader, along with Fabiello, must unravel Iacovuccio's metaphor-charged and sometimes opaque language. Iacovuccio reveals the power of the crucible, which can see through false appearances, in a passage full of metaphors and movement (created by repetition, asyndeton, and enjambments):

Aspetta di sentire tutto e poi meravigliati.
 Andiamo avanti e respire fondo,
 perché sentirai miracoli!
 ascolta adesso, fammi il piacere.
 Tu crepi per l'invidia,
 ti gonfi de rabbia, ti scende l'ernia
 per un signore, conte o cavaliere,
 perché va in carrozza,
 perché lo vedi servito e accompagnato
 da tanta gentuccia e tanta marmaglia:
 . . .
 non ingravidarti subito
 con questi fasti e apparenze,
 non sospirare e fare l'acquilina:
 mettili in questa coppella
 e vedrai quante ulcere e quante
 sono sotto una sella di velluto,
 scopri quanti serpenti
 stanno acquattati tra i fiori e l'erba,
 vedrai bene, se scopri il cesso
 con frange e con ricami
 di canutiglie e sete,
 se si tratta di profumi o di fetori! (70-79; 87-98)

Iacovuccio calls on Fabiello several times to Look & See, Listen, Smell. What he is *seeing* though can't be seen with the eyes — it resides in these extraordinary

metaphors. It is language itself and language that is not immediately accessible to the auditor (Fabiello). Enjambments and repetition (*quante, quante, quanti*) add to the irregular rhythm and spasmodic circulation in this passage. They heighten the bizarre aspect of the whole act between these two characters. The other Eclogues begin with episodes that portray the opacity of language as one character hesitates before the words of the other; the character hesitates because language is not used in a strict referential manner. In each Eclogue opaque language is used to describe some magic object that is not initially understood by the listener. For example, in "La Tintura," the second Eclogue, Cola Ambruoso says to Marchionno that, "Come si vede che che non ci sai fare!" (30). A perplexed Marchionno responds, "È come stare chiuso in un sacco, non si capisce niente, queste tue chiacchiere imbrogliano e confondono!" (37-39). In "La Stufa," the third Eclogue, Giallaise underscores the misunderstanding of Cola Iacovo, "Quando sei convinto di pescare, neanche allora peschi! tu pensi che io ti parli di quella stufa dove tu sei chiuso in una camerette . . . no, no, parlo di quello che soltanto a pensarci si dimezza ogni dolore" (17-24). In "L'Uncino," the fourth Eclogue, Narduccio describes his amazement before Cicco Antuono's speech and remarks on the transformatory powers of language: "Mi fai stupire e andare in estasi! quanto vogliamo scommettere che ti sei messo in testa di farmi vedere la luna nel pozzo" (29-32).

Initially, it might seem that Basile has abandoned the theme of the unreal. In fact, the unreal is still a concern and is presented much more directly to the reader than in the fairy tales where the magical world was safely "fictionalized" and diffused by its traditional structure. A more "direct" presentation does not infer, however, a more obvious one. Basile's subtle presentation of the unreal begins to approach the modern understanding of the fantastic. The Eclogues seem more fantastic than the stories peopled with fairies. They are acted out by "real" people, that is, the storytellers themselves. They create an initial mysterious atmosphere before revealing some magic object, that, in turn, reveals the truth. These "real" people in contact with a supposed magic object should be more problematic for the reader to accept than the intermingling of fairyworld and humanworld seen in the tales.¹⁴ The reader identifies more closely with the "actors" than with the obviously fictitious princes and princesses of the fairy tales. The reader and the actors participate in a fictional creation and must recognize the status of the text (or act) as pure artifice. However, the reader is still confronted with the magic objects and must decide how to decipher them. The "impossible" objects somehow reveal truths which the reader knows are possible, and the reader must accept these objects or reject them. Basile's text challenges the reader with these magic objects and with its very language. The atmosphere generated by Basile's use of language itself is a fundamental and vital element contributing to the fantastic qualities of the text.

The fantastic tone becomes more apparent since there is no plot development in the Eclogues. The narrative is in a stasis and does not clearly guide the reader

as do the neatly structured and closed tales. With no real development of situation, the second character functions as an audience for the monologue of the first. The first actor simply talks. He weaves language into a design, as interested with effect as with content. The effect then, is of one character building an illusion through discourse and trying to dispel illusions with the same speech. This atmosphere unsettles the reader. It does not incite fear or terror, as some modern critics require of the fantastic,¹⁵ but does cause the reader a slight feeling of uncertainty in the face of these theatrical acts which involve magic objects, supernatural powers, and strange language. It remains uncertain whether Basile had this specific effect in mind when he set about to try something new and bizarre in the spirit of the Seicento. While the fantastic presence is not the underlying cornerstone of the Eclogues, Basile's tenet of astounding the reader with unusual language encourages the fantastic effect. He recognizes this effect within the text as the secondary actor's hesitation at the beginning of each Eclogue. (However, Todorov considers events, not language, as fantastic.) In the modern texts, the creation of the fantastic is consciously pursued and carefully promoted. It is almost as if Basile's use of baroque language coupled with the innovative theatrical element combusts for a brief moment to produce a glimmer of the fantastic. Even in modern texts, critics recognize the difficulty of *sustaining* the fantastic: "Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude; dès qu'on choisit l'une ou l'autre réponse, on quitte le fantastique . . ." (Todorov 29). "Le fantastique . . . ne dure que le temps d'une hésitation" (Todorov 46). And, the fantastic can only last until the end of the first reading, it cannot be achieved in the second reading: "Une fois le livre achevé, nous comprenons . . . qu'il n'y a pas eu fantastique" (47). Todorov describes the modern fantastic to be ephemeral ("un genre toujours évanescant" [47]), and the fantastic element in Basile's text is also difficult to isolate. While the *Pentameron* may not be so purposefully directed toward the fantastic as are modern texts, it does exhibit fantastic qualities which are precisely different from those in the marvellous tales. Basile does more than simply recount fairy tales; he demonstrates a new sensitivity towards the fantastic that modern fantastic authors¹⁶ will later explore and develop. Basile's work liberates the unreal from its traditional medieval representation and opens the way for future authors to experiment and exploit this new perception.

NOTES

- 1 M. Petrini and N.M. Penzer recognize Boccaccio as the major influence on Basile's work. Petrini states: "il Penzer, che pure era studioso di folklore, afferma che il modello boccacesco prevale sul resto" (*Il gran Basile* 54).
- 2 M. Stanesco describes the difficulty of determining the origin of the *conte*: "Autrement dit, son origine se perd dans 'la nuit des temps.' Il serait peut-être plus prudent de dire avec Mircea Eliade que 'le scénario du conte n'est pas lié à un contexte historico-culturel, mais exprime plutôt un comportement anhistorique, archétypal de la psyché.' C'est ce qui expliquerait, du moins partiellement, sa tendance à l'universalité" (14-15).
- 3 Petrini remarks on this obvious difference between the two authors: "Naturalmente, il

primo elemento di differenziazione, e che attiene anche alla struttura, e non solo all'argomento, è il predominare della dimensione magico-fiabesca, sia pure fusa, in maniera assolutamente originale . . ." (*Il gran Basile* 54).

- 4 In general, critics seem to agree on the eighteenth century as the birthdate of the "modern" fantastic, that is, the time when the fantastic and the marvellous are no longer interchangeable terms.
- 5 Todorov states: "Dans le cas du merveilleux, les éléments sumaturels ne provoquent aucune réaction particulière ni chez les personnages, ni chez le lecteur implicite. Ce n'est pas une attitude envers les événements rapportés qui caractérise le merveilleux, mais la nature même de ces événements" (59).
- 6 Todorov provides a variety of definitions of the fantastic, including a citation of Roger Callois from *Au coeur du fantastique*: "'Tout le fantastique est rupture de l'ordre reconnu, irruption de l'inadmissible au sein de l'inaltérable légalité quotidienne'" (31). Todorov also cites Olga Reimann's similar description of the fantastic: "'Le héros sent continuellement et distinctement la contradiction entre les deux mondes, celui du réel et celui du fantastique'" (30).
- 7 By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fantastic short story is well established with the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Prosper Mérimée, Théophile Gautier, Nerval, and Poe.
- 8 It must be observed here that Stanesco does not differentiate between the marvellous and the fantastic, but refers to the reactions to *l'Autre Monde* by both terms. For the purposes of this study, however, a clear delineation between the fantastic and the marvellous is necessary and has already been discussed. I will refer to the medieval tale and the fairy tale as marvellous rather than fantastic.
- 9 Propp remarks that although the characters may differ in marvellous tales, the plot usually revolves around similar situations. "L'envoi et le départ lié aux recherches sont des constantes. Celui qui envoie et celui qui part, la motivation de l'envoi, etc., sont des variables" (173).
- 10 All citations of the *Pentameron* from Rak's edition.
- 11 Benedetto Croce remarks that even in Naples few Italians read the *Pentameron* in the original because of the difficulty of the dialect: "Eppure l'Italia è come se non possedesse quel libro, perché, scritto in un antico e non facile dialetto, è noto solo di titolo, e quasi nessuno più lo legge, nonché nelle altre regioni, nemmeno nel suo luogo d'origine, Napoli (Croce's edition xxvii). At the same time, Petrinì scolds critics who rely solely on Croce's translation, urging them to study the original: "è necessario sforzarsi di leggere il *Cunto* nell'originale: basta confrontarlo con la traduzione Croce" (*La fiaba* 171).
- 12 H. Wölfflin's notion of the "unsettling" effect of the baroque is applicable to Basile's use of dialect: "[Baroque] wants to carry us away with the force of its impact, immediate and overwhelming. It gives us not a generally enhanced vitality, but excitement, ecstasy, intoxication . . . This momentary impact of the baroque is powerful, but soon leaves us with a sense of desolation, of something yet to come, of dissatisfaction and restlessness rather than fulfillment. We have no sense of release, but rather of having been drawn into the tension of an emotion condition" (38). This *tension* answers the fantastic feeling of uncertainty and disbelief.
- 13 It is interesting to note that Perrault and Mlle Lhéritier were seemingly influenced by Basile's work, although there is no formal proof. T. Crane mentions that the "first fairy tale which appeared in France, and was the *avant-coureur* of the host that soon followed under the lead of Charles Perrault, '*L'Adroite Princesse*,' is found in the *Pentameron*" (xii).
- 14 "D'abord, il faut que le texte [fantastique] oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication sumaturelle des événements évoqués" (Todorov 37-38).
- 15 H.P. Lovecraft considers fear to be inherent in the fantastic. Peter Penzoldt also requires an

element of fear in the fantastic: "'A l'exception du conte de fées, toutes les histoires sur-naturelles sont des histoires de peur, qui nous obligent à nous demander si ce qu'on croit être pure imagination n'est pas, après tout, réalité'" (Todorov 39-40). However, Todorov admits that "La peur est souvent liée au fantastique mais elle n'en est pas une condition nécessaire" (40).

- 16 Francis Dubost also recognizes that the fantastic is a relatively modern conception in comparison to the marvellous with its long ancestry. He cites a comment by M. Rodinson in reaction to Jacques LeGoff's *Le Merveilleux dans l'Occident médiévale*: "Au Moyen Age, il n'y a pas de fantastique *au sens où il* (Todorov) *le prend* parce que l'auteur d'une fiction ne cherche pas à provoquer l'hésitation. Il raconte un événement, ou décrit un phénomène, extraordinaires" (116).

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