Snowy fusion: Andersen’s Snow Queen and the Grimms’ Snow White blend in A.S.Byatt’s Fiammarosa

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In A.S. Byatt’s short story collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, “Cold” fully justifies the secondary title: a sophisticated seduction game which brings the reader close to the text by means of both a microscopic and a telescopic lens, this story draws on two female universes which the colour white will symbolically (dis)embody — good and evil. I will further emphasise this dichotomy by arguing that Byatt’s wonder tale metamorphoses these two antagonistic meanings of white in the particular figuration of Fiammarosa, its female protagonist. An interwoven path of mingled directions which converge in a moment and get their separate ways immediately thereafter is thus foretold by the quest for the symbolic readings of white, a privileged signature of female identity in Byatt’s fiction as well as in the tradition of wonder tales: concealed, yet at the same time unravelled by its two extreme positions in the chromatic range as absence or sum of colours, these meanings are arranged into stories which are quite different and cannot be imitated because they recall each other but are always another story.

Thus, in order to better analyse the way Byatt resumes traditional wonder tales’ colour white only to subvert and write it anew in her fiction, I will read “Cold” on a par with Hans Christen Andersen’s “Snow Queen” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Snow White”. I will also examine the symbolic articulation between the colour white and the motif of ice and snow, which is apparent in the titles of these traditional tales and hinted at in the title of Byatt’s tale, as another double-meaning symbol for female identity in the three tales: a hallmark of female identity in “Cold”, “The Snow Queen” and “Snow White”, ice and white also encapsulate the opposition life and death which will be solved in none of these wonder tales but “Cold”. I will analyse in detail the construction of a complex female identity symbolically
evinced by the game of opposition and complementarity at the heart of the colour white. It links indeed the female characters of these three tales by a thread of colourful points in a circle, which Byatt’s tale will complete and close. Finally, by paying special attention to the two Queens, I will then look closely at the way Byatt’s Fiammarosa thoroughly explodes the dichotomy which, in the wake of the nineteenth century (male) categorisation of women into fixed rigid standards of expected behaviour and social roles, pushes women into the corset of polar figurations of asexual angels and demonic temptresses, thus fusing the eponymous wonder tales’ evil and good female characters by means of the colour white.

In Andersen’s “Snow Queen” and the Grimms’ “Snow White”, female identity is framed through the symmetrical looking glass of the polar opposites bright and spectral white, life and death, warmth and cold, in which the positive pole is associated with goodness whereas the negative pole is related to evil. Snow, which is part of both titles, enhances these traits in its deeper connection to white: thus, Snow White is described throughout the Grimms’ tale as “a child as white as snow” (Tatar 243), “as beautiful as the bright day” (Tatar 244) and “a dear child” (Tatar 252), whereas the Snow Queen is portrayed as “very beautiful and dainty, but she was of ice, dazzling, gleaming ice, all through, and yet she was alive; her eyes shone like two clear stars, but there was no rest nor quiet in them” (Andersen 232). The colour white reaches its two extreme symbolic limits in these two female figures: the white of the East or the sum of all colours, Snow White, is the binary opposite of the white of the West or the absence of colour, Snow Queen. Thus, Snow White positively stands for

The white of … the dawn, when the vault of Heaven can be seen once more, void of colour but rich with the potential of manifestation from which both microcosm and macrocosm have been recharged like electric batteries as they passed through the womb of darkness, the fountain of all energy. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1106)

Conversely, the Snow Queen negatively represents

the matt white of death, which absorbs the individual and inducts … her into the cold, female lunar world. It is the herald of absence, nocturnal emptiness and the disappearance
of consciousness and of daytime colours. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1105-1106)

Moreover, in “Snow White” this colour paints the main character’s rite of passage between innocent girl and grown woman who is able to adapt to a new environment: her initial childish

white [as] the colour of purity, [which] originally was not a positive colour showing that something had been undertaken, but a neutral, passive colour showing that something had yet to be fulfilled” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1107)

changes into “the colour of revelation, of grace and of the transfiguration which dazzles, awakening the intellect at the same time as it eludes its grasp” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1108) when she steps into the Dwarfs’ cottage. Maria Tatar points out in her annotated edition of the Grimms’ tales that

In carrying out domestic chores, Snow White moves into a new developmental stage, demonstrating her ability to engage in labor and to carry out the terms of a contract. No longer a child, she is preparing herself for the state of matrimony. (248, note 13)

However, there is no such bildungsroman in “The Snow Queen”, who is already a grown woman when the tale begins: hers remains throughout “the colour of shrouds, of apparitions and spectres” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1106).

Both tales oppose two female figures who stand for a binary construction of female identity split into the polar figurations of goodness and evil: Gerda and the Snow Queen, Snow White and the Queen. Gerda and Snow White are still children who are shielded by purity and innocence when they have to face an apparently greater power than their own when the tales begin. They can be read as the symbolic figuration of human feeling and warmth enhanced precisely by their childhood, which renders them more fragile against adult forces. On the opposite side of the scale stand the Snow Queen and the Queen, both of them bewitchingly seductive women who hold the power over life and death and embody the coldness of snow. This standard opposition between goodness and evil or warmth and cold is embedded in both tales, in which little Gerda and Snow
White move in a world filled with colour, warmth and fragrant aroma. Moreover, they stamp such an indelible mark on every human and animal creature they interact with due to the goodness of their heart that there is light and warmth around them — even when they are forced into the frontier of death. On the contrary, the Snow Queen and the Queen move in a uniformly white or glassy world which reflects the inner white of death or a perfect snow-crystal’s “false eternity — a duration outside time, to be escaped from” (OHS 155).

There is a difference between these Queens though: whereas Andersen’s Snow Queen is an intelligent and beautiful woman who does not have the particular destruction of a singled-out rival as her goal and whose power is circumscribed within the domains of reason, the Grimms’ Queen evinces the typical cruelty of the villain queens in the German tradition of wonder tales. The Snow Queen exercises a dangerous fascination over those who contemplate her white and cold figure from too near. Her lethal charm is further enhanced by such cold kisses they simply kill human feelings: her skin and her fur coat are made of a thick layer of snow which envelops her in a protective embrace but can be deadly for those who are too near her. Her favourite dwelling place inside her snowy castle is a frozen lake she has named “the Mirror of Intelligence”, a lake which “had split into a thousand pieces, and all the pieces were so exactly alike that the whole thing looked like a trick” (Andersen 267). However, the Snow Queen’s power literally melts into water in the presence of Gerda’s warmth, so much so that the strongest binary opposition in this tale is reason against feeling — or, more literally, cold against warmth. According to A.S.Byatt, “Andersen makes a standard opposition between cold reason and warm-heartedness and comes down whole-heartedly on the side of warm-heartedness, adding to it his own insistent Christian message” (OHS 155). By dropping the references to reason and a Christian message the same could be said of the Grimms’s Queen: driven by the un-Christian urges of envy and rage against someone she takes for a rival, she decides to eliminate competition with the help of a magic looking-glass which spurs her on her revenge by telling her Snow White is still alive despite the many tricks the Queen has played on her, and that she is now “the fairest ever seen” (Tatar 248). The Queen’s mirror strengthens her power in the sense it increases tenfold her cold-hearted determination to get rid of Snow White once and
for all no matter what it costs her: she holds the power of life and death over Snow White through her many deceitful tricks even without the mirror, which is definitely the focal energy of her cold fury.

A.S. Byatt will rewrite both Andersen’s and the Grimms’ tales in her own wonder tale ‘Cold’ by assimilating opposite features in the same character: Fiammarosa the ice princess can be read as both protean incarnation and subversion of Andersen’s Snow Queen and symbolic inversion of the Grimms’ Snow White. In order to argue this point, I will analyse the symbolic representations of the colour white in ‘Cold’, but first I will briefly summarise the storyline. This is the tale of an ice princess, Fiammarosa, who discovers she is framed for cold quite by accident, as she was almost killed as a child by too much warmth because she was believed to be too delicate to stand the cold which turns out to be her natural element after all. As a young woman, she is wooed by a glassblower prince from the desert, Sasan, who sends her three presents made of glass he himself has made. Each present is more intricate and more expressive of love than the last and they all delight her by their likeness to ice or frozen water. When they meet, they fall passionately in love with each other and Fiammarosa decides to marry him and go to his country. This proves to be a long and difficult journey for both: she can’t stand the increasing daytime heat and he does not fare too well in the night-time cold. One day, already pregnant, she decides to visit him in his workplace, which proves so hot for her she suffers a miscarriage and is ill for a very long time. Finally Sasan takes her on a long journey into the heart of the desert so that she can live in the cold glass castle he has built for her. The discomfort she feels during this journey because of the heat is matched by the cold he endures at night in the glass palace so he can be with her, and they live happily, intelligently and laboriously ever after.

In “Cold”, white reaches its two extreme representations of opacity and brightness, death and life. The first limit is clearly illustrated thus:

As she [Fiammarosa] drank in her mother’s milk, she became milky (...) the child’s skin became softly pale, like white rose petals… But with the milky flesh came languor. Her pale head dropped on its pale stalk (...) there was no life in her, most of the time. She yawned. She drooped… the white head dropped on to the circle of the milky arms on the table, a picture of
lassitude and boredom… (117-122)

This figuration of a milky white languorous princess falls apart when Fiammarosa enfolds herself in a protective layer of ice which brings her back to life as an ice maiden:

And her body came alive with the desire to lie out there, on that whiteness, face-to-face with it, fingertips and toes pushing into the soft crystals. (…) The cold snow on the soles of her feet gave her the sense of bliss that most humans associate with warm frills of water at the edge of summer seas, with sifted sand, with sunny stone… Her body was full of an electric charge, a thrill, from an intense cold… The snow did not numb Fiammarosa; it pricked and hummed and brought her, intensely, to life. And one night, as she moved, she found that her whole body was encased in a transparent, crackling skin of ice that broke into spiderweb-fine veined sheets as she danced, and then reformed. The sensation of this double skin was delicious. She had frozen eyelashes and saw the world through an ice-lens; her tossing hair made a brittle and musical sound, for each hair was coated and frozen. (122-128)

Quite unlike the two wonder tales I have discussed before, in A.S. Byatt’s “Cold” female identity is built through a binary unfolding which opposes but also paradoxically merges two distinctive ways of being — and saying one is — a woman by unveiling two of the faces female identity can possess. These are apparent in the two values the colour white assumes for Fiammarosa: “the white of the west is the matt white of death, … the herald of absence [and] nocturnal emptiness”, (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1105-1106) which throws a misty veil over Fiammarosa’s lethargy and languidness due to excessive warmth and quite recalls Snow White’s deadly sleep, is the polar opposite of “the white of the east [as] the white of … the dawn, … the fountain of all energy” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1106) which brightens Fiammarosa by turning her into the Snow Queen, as both come alive in icy surroundings. Thus, Fiammarosa is a snow white passive child before she overcomes her own rite of passage, the discovery of her true nature, but she is also a snow queen who is not affected by any outward power and it is her own igneous side which can quite literally melt her. Female identity and power are defined by the colour white, so it is not by
mere chance that the landscape in which Fiammarosa moves is white as well. Fiammarosa’s nocturnal forays are therefore fittingly illuminated by a glowing full moon over the white infinity of snow:

It was full moon. Everything was black and white and silver (…) She stared up, at the great moon with its slaty shadows on its white-gold disc, and the huge fields of scattered, clustered, far-flung glittering wheeling stars in the deep darkness, white on midnight, and she was, for the first time, happy. This is who I am, the cold princess thought to herself, wriggling for sheer pleasure in the snow-dust, this is what I want. And when she was quite cold, and completely alive and crackling with energy, she rose to her feet, and began a strange, leaping dance, pointing sharp fingers at the moon, tossing her long mane of silver hair, sparkling with ice-crystals, circling and bending and finally turning cartwheels under the wheeling sky.

(125-127)

Fiammarosa thus celebrates her complete freedom and her elemental power when she throws away the clothes which constrain her in suffocating heat and comes alive in the invigorating polar cold by dancing naked in the snow under the full moon.

“Cold” is still another way of saying white, which assumes paradoxical values in different ways when compared to “Snow White”: white as snow in its light and smoothness when touched, Snow White will then turn white as snow in her cold and deathly pallor. The same character will thus pass through two distinct states by means of the sleep which keeps her dead while alive: Fiammarosa’s sleep is always symbolic and coincides with her inner unawareness of her own nature. Thus, Fiammarosa undergoes the experience of death in life through the lethargy caused by excessive warmth in two key moments in the text: first in her childhood, before she becomes aware of her true nature, which is outwardly evinced in the milky white of her skin that will later acquire the texture and glitter of ice and inwardly uncovered by the white of the initiated, the one who waits; later on, when she suffers the miscarriage due to excessive heat, which is outwardly symbolised in her loss of luminosity and inwardly translated by the empty white of mourning. In Fiammarosa, child and woman fuse into a single person, the child-woman who will only be able to use the power she discovers within herself after she has lost it. Death, or “cold reason”, is
simultaneously life, or “warm-heartedness”. Reason and feeling, or cold and warmth, lose their negative and positive value only to merge into their opposite. Moreover, in Byatt’s wonder tale it is cold, not warmth, which is synonymous with life and envelopes Fiammarosa in a protective icy mantle—quite like it does the Snow Queen. However, coming alive in external cold does not mean Fiammarosa does not possess inner warmth, as she acknowledges in a conversation with her tutor when talking of a foremother who was inwardly as well as outwardly cold:

You choose your words very tactfully, Hugh. You told me I was “framed for cold”. That is a statement of natural philosophy, and time. It may be that I have ice in my veins, like the icewoman, or something that boils and steams at normal temperature, and flows busily in deep frost. But you did not tell me I had a cold nature. The icewoman did not look back at her husband and son. Perhaps she was cold in her soul, as well as in her veins? (132)

Unlike this icewoman who, by the way, quite resembles the Snow Queen, Fiammarosa is capable of passionate feeling which she utterly discloses in her fiery love for Sasan. In her own words, it is love which leads her to use her intelligence and willpower to live in the desert as she would die if she could not be with the man on whom her heart was set.

To conclude, ‘The Snow Queen’ and ‘Snow White’ portray the construction of two polar female identities which reveal but one of woman’s faces: if they can incarnate the millennial combat between goodness and evil, they can also be read as the fragmentation of the female psyche into mutually exclusive components of feeling or reason, goodness or evil, fragility or strength, child or woman. In “Cold”, A.S. Byatt will however configure a unique female identity which integrates all these faces which cease to be absolute values, therefore humanizing her female protagonist. Fiammarosa is at the same time Gerda and the Snow Queen, Snow White and Queen, body and spirit, sleeping princess and prince who awakens her through his love since her transformation depends mainly on herself, thus revealing the theory Byatt subverts in “Cold”:
Science and reason are bad, kindness is good. It is a frequent, but not a necessary opposition. And I found in it, and in the dangerous isolation of the girl on her slippery shiny height a figure of what was beginning to bother me, the conflict between a female destiny, the kiss, the marriage, the child-bearing, the death, and the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art, of putting a frame round things. (OHS 155-156)

**Works Cited**


**Abstract**

“Cold”, the wonder tale which, in *Elementals*, fully justifies the secondary title *Stories of Fire and Ice*, is a sophisticated seduction game which brings the reader close to the text by means of both a microscopic and a telescopic lens, as this story draws on two female universes that the colour white will (dis)unite: goodness and evil.

I further emphasise this dichotomy by arguing that Byatt’s tale assimilates opposites in the symbolic meanings of white as a privileged signature of feminine identity. In order to better analyse the way Byatt resumes traditional wonder tales’ colour white only to subvert and write it anew in her fiction, I will read “Cold” on a par with Hans Christien Andersen’s “Snow Queen” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Snow White”. I will evince the link between this colour and the motif of ice and snow, which is apparent in the titles of these traditional tales and hinted at in the title of Byatt’s tale, as another double-meaning symbol for female identity in the three tales.

I will finally look closely at the way Byatt thoroughly explodes the dichotomy which pushes women into the corset of polar figurations of asexual angels and demonic temptresses in her female protagonist, Fiammarosa, by blending the eponymous wonder tales’ evil and good female characters through the colour white.

**Keywords**
Fiammarosa; Snow White; Snow Queen; White; Fusion.

**Resumo**

“Cold”, o conto maravilhoso que, em *Elementals*, justifica plenamente o subtítulo *Stories of Fire and Ice*, é um sofisticado jogo de sedução que aproxima o leitor do texto de forma simultaneamente telescópica e microscópica, esboçando os dois universos femininos que a cor branca irá (des)unir: o bem e o mal.

Procurarei ainda reforçar esta dicotomia analisando o modo como o conto
byattiano assimila opostos na leitura simbólica do branco como assinatura identitária privilegiada do feminino. Para melhor desmontar o modo como Byatt retoma, subvertendo, a cor branca do wonder tale tradicional e o reescreve na sua ficção, procederei a uma leitura em paralelo com os contos “The Snow Queen”, de Hans Christian Andersen, e “Snow White”, dos irmãos Grimm. Destacarei ainda a ligação entre o branco e os motivos narrativos do gelo e da neve que, sendo aparente nos títulos dos dois contos selecionados e sugerida no título do conto de A.S.Byatt, constitui outro dos símbolos de duplo sentido para a identidade feminina nos três contos.

Finalmente, analisarei o modo como Byatt faz explodir por completo a dicotomia que espartilha a mulher em figuras extremas de anjo assexuado e tentadora demoníaca na sua protagonista, Fiammarosa, pela fusão do bem e do mal operada pela cor branca.

**Palavras-chave**

Fiammarosa; Branca de Neve; Rainha do Gelo; Branco; Fusão.