

A TALE OF TALES – Film at CONCA VERDE on 29.09.15 – Talk by Peter Anderson

Tale of Tales (Italian: *Il racconto dei racconti*) is a 2015 Italian-French-British fantasy horror film, directed by Matteo Garrone, starring Salma Hayek, Vincent Cassel, Toby Jones and John C Reilly. The film was an Italian-led production with co-producers in France and the United Kingdom. It was Garrone's first English-language film. It competed for the Palme d'Or at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival.

It is a screen adaptation based on collections of tales by Neapolitan poet and courtier Giambattista Basile: *Pentamerone or Lo cunto de li cunti (Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones)* which contains the earliest versions of famous fables like Rapunzel /rəˈpʌnzəl/, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella. The Baroque stories mix real and surreal with many metaphorical usages. Pentamerone was the first book of fairytales, written in the 1600s that has inspired many authors including the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Perrault. The three tales are *La Cerva Fatata (The Enchanted Doe)*, *La Pulce (The Flea)*, *La Vecchia Scorticata (The Flayed Old Lady)*, that have been freely adapted with elements of other tales by Giambattista Basile, as well as a touch of artistic license.

The Book

The *Pentamerone* (Neapolitan: *Lo cunto de li cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille*, "The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones") is a seventeenth-century fairy tale collection by Italian poet and courtier Giambattista Basile.

The stories in the *Pentamerone* were collected by Basile and published posthumously in two volumes by his sister Adriana in Naples, Italy, in 1634 and 1636 under the pseudonym Gian Alesio Abbatutis. These stories were later adapted by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, the latter making extensive, acknowledged use of Basile's collection. Examples of this are versions of Cinderella, Rapunzel, Puss in Boots, Sleeping Beauty, and Hansel and Gretel.

While other collections of stories have included stories that would be termed fairy tales, his work is the first collection in which all the stories fit in that single category. He did not transcribe them from the oral tradition as a modern collector would, instead writing them in Neapolitan, and in many respects was the first writer to preserve oral intonations.

The style of the stories is heavily Baroque, with many metaphorical usages. As an example, the sun is referred to in many different ways, such as:

- "... the Sun, like a chief physician, went out to visit the flowers that are sick and languid, ..."
- "The next morning, as soon as the shades of Night, pursued by the constables of the Sun, had fled the country, ..."
- "... as soon as the Sun with his golden broom had swept away the dirt of the Night from the fields watered by the dawn."
- "... as the Night, having aided the robbers, is banished from the sky, and goes about collecting the faggots of twilight ..."
- "... as soon as the Sun opened his bank to deliver the deposit of light to the Creditor of the Day, ..."

This has been interpreted as a satire of Baroque style, but as Basile praised the style, and used it in his other works, it appears to have no ironic intention.

Although the work fell into oblivion, the Brothers Grimm, in their third edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, praised it highly as the first national collection of fairy tales (fitting their romantic nationalist views on fairy tales), and as capturing the Neapolitan voice. This drew a great deal of attention to the work.

Here is a quote from Wilhelm Grimm: "This collection (Basile's *Pentamerone*) was for a long time the best and richest that was to be found in any nation. Not only were the traditions the most complete to be found, but the author also had a special talent for collecting them, and an intimate knowledge of the Neapolitan dialect. The stories are told with no breaks, and the tone in the Neapolitan tales is perfectly caught.... We may therefore look on this collection of fifty tales as the basis of many others; for although it was not so in actual fact, and was indeed not known beyond the country in which it appeared, and was never translated into French, it still has all the importance of being the first in its kind, owing to the coherence of its traditions. Two-thirds of them are, as far as their principal incidents are concerned, to be found in Germany, and are current there to this very day. Basile has not allowed himself to make any alteration, scarcely even any addition of importance, and that gives his work a special value."

The tales of Giambattista Basile are set in Basilicata and Campania, where he spent most of his life as a guest of the local nobility. Among the places related to the stories we find the city of Acerenza and the Castle of Lagopesole, the latter connected to the fairy tale *Rapunzel*. Soon to open is the *Museum of the fairy tale* in the town of Acerenza.

Synopsis of the book

The *Pentamerone* is structured around a fantasy frame story, in which fifty stories are related over the course of five days, rather than the ten of the Tuscan compendium.

A **frame story** (also known as a **frame tale** or **frame narrative**) is a literary technique that sometimes serves as a companion piece to a story within a story, whereby an introductory or main narrative is presented, at least in part, for the purpose of setting the stage either for a more emphasized second narrative or for a set of shorter stories. The frame story leads readers from a first story into another, smaller one (or several ones) within it.

The frame story in our case is that of a cursed, melancholy princess named Zoza ("mud" or "slime" in Neapolitan, but also used as a term of endearment). She cannot laugh, no matter what her father does to amuse her, so he sets up a fountain of oil by the door, thinking people slipping in the oil would make her laugh. An old woman tries to gather oil, a page boy breaks her jug, and the old woman grows so angry that she dances about, and Zoza finally laughs at her. The old woman puts a curse on her: she is to marry the prince of Round-Field, whom she can only wake by filling a pitcher with tears in three days. With some aid from fairies, who also give her gifts, Zoza finds the prince and the pitcher, and nearly fills it but falls asleep. A Moorish slave steals it, finishes filling it, and claims the prince.

This frame story in itself is a fairy tale, combining motifs that will appear in other stories: the princess who cannot laugh in *The Magic Swan*, *Golden Goose*, and *The Princess Who Never Smiled*; the curse to marry only one hard-to-find person, in *Snow-White-Fire-Red* and *Anthousa*, *Xanthousa*, *Chrisomalousa*; and the heroine falling asleep while trying to save the hero, and then losing him because of trickery in *The Sleeping Prince* and *Nourie Hadig*.

The now-pregnant slave-queen demands (at the impetus of Zoza's fairy gifts) that her husband tell her stories, or else she will crush the unborn child. The husband hires ten female storytellers to keep her amused; disguised among them is Zoza. Each tells five stories, most of which are more suitable to courtly, rather than juvenile, audiences. The Moorish woman's treachery is revealed in the final story (related, suitably, by Zoza), and she is buried, pregnant, up to her neck in the ground and left to die. Zoza and the Prince live happily ever after.

Many of these fairy tales are the oldest known variants in existence.

Giambattista Basile - Biography

Born in Giugliano to a Neapolitan middle-class family, Basile was a courtier and soldier to various Italian princes, including the doge of Venice. According to Benedetto Croce he was born in 1575, while other sources have February 1566. In Venice he began to write poetry. Later he returned to Naples to serve as a courtier under the patronage of Don Marino II Caracciolo, prince of Avellino, to whom he dedicated his idyll *L'Aretusa* (1618). By the time of his death he had reached the rank of "count" *Conte di Torrone*.

Basile's earliest known literary production is from 1604 in the form of a preface to the *Vaiasseide* of his friend the Neapolitan writer Giulio Cesare Cortese. The following year his villanella *Smorza crudel amore* was set to music and in 1608 he published his poem *Il Pianto della Vergine*.

He is chiefly remembered for writing the collection of Neapolitan fairy tales titled *Lo cunto de li cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille* (Neapolitan for "The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones"), also known as *Il Pentamerone* published posthumously in two volumes by his sister Adriana in Naples, Italy in 1634 and 1636 under the pseudonym Gian Alesio Abbatutis. It later became known as the *Pentamerone*. Although neglected for some time, the work received a great deal of attention after the Brothers Grimm praised it highly as the first *national* collection of fairy tales. Many of these fairy tales are the oldest known variants in existence.^[2] They include the earliest known versions of *Rapunzel* and *Cinderella*.

Giambattista Basile spent much time in the courts of the nobles of the kingdom of Naples; tales of *Pentamerone* are set in the woods and castles of the Basilicata, in particular the city of Acerenza.

Plot

The Queen

The first tale begins in the kingdom of Darkwood (Italian: *Selvascura*), where the King (John C. Reilly) and Queen (Salma Hayek) have tried everything to have a child, but are not successful. The King loves his Queen, but all she desires is a child. One night, a necromancer provides a risky alternative: the Queen must eat the heart of an aquatic dragon cooked by a virgin, which will make her instantly with child. However, this will also come at the cost of a life. The Queen does not care the price, and thus the King sets off to slay the aquatic dragon, and dies while doing so. The Queen does not mourn the loss of her husband, but only cares for the dragon's heart. Upon eating the heart, the queen bears a son, Elias (Christian Lees), in one day's time. Simultaneously, the virgin who cooked the heart for the Queen also gives birth to a boy, Jonah (Jonah Lees), who looks identical to the young prince, whose destiny will be intertwined with his putative twin.

As time passes, Elias's affections are not for the Queen, but for his friendship with Jonah. This greatly hurts the Queen, who eventually attempts to murder Jonah. One day, out of no where, Jonah leaves the kingdom, leaving his Mother and Elias behind. Elias is heart-broken, and tries to convince Jonah to stay, but Jonah informs him that he must go. Jonah takes a knife and plunges it into a tree's roots where a spring of water comes forth. Jonah tells Elias that so long as the tree continues to spout water, to know that he is well and alive.

One day, when Elias comes to the tree, he sees blood in the water and immediately leaves to find Jonah. When Elias arrives in Jonah's village, Jonah's sweetheart and friends mistake Elias for him. Elias

claims to have lost his memory, and discovers that Jonah has been missing in the woods for five days, and goes in search of him.

The Queen has the entire kingdom search for Elias, but he cannot be found. The following night, the same necromancer visits the Queen, and tells the Queen it is her fault for Elias's disappearance for trying to separate what could not be separated. However, the necromancer tells the Queen that Elias can be returned for a price that is violent. Without knowing the terms, the Queen accepts the necromancer's offer.

The next day, Elias finds Jonah in a cave, and kills a winged bat-like monster to save him. Elias returns Jonah to his family and departs. It is later revealed that the wretched bat-like creature was the Queen, implying that the necromancer had manipulated the predicament from the inception, based on the inevitable outcome.

The Flea

In the second segment, in the kingdom of Highmountain (Italian: Altomonte) the King (Toby Jones) lives with his daughter, Violet (Bebe Cave). Violet loves her Father and while rehearsing a song that she has written for him, the King notices a flea that mysteriously can travel from one hand to the other. Distracted by the flea, the King barely notices his daughter's performance. He then captures the flea and hides it in his room, making it his beloved pet, fed on blood and steaks. The flea gradually metamorphoses into a gigantic Kafkaesque domesticated creature. When the flea dies, the King is devastated and decides to skin it and give his daughter as a bride to whomever is able to guess the skin's provenance. An ogre (Guillaume Delaunay) solves the riddle and wins the princess as his bride. Violet, who has dreamed of marrying a handsome prince, attempts to commit suicide by plunging off the castle's tower to her death, but her father stops her, and says that she must go through with the marriage because he has made it his proclamation. In tears, Violet agrees, stating that her Father never loved her at all.

The Ogre takes Violet to his cave on top of a mountain, and the Princess is kept prisoner and raped by the Ogre. One day, while the Ogre is hunting, Violet spots a woman, who is an entertainer, on the other side of the cliff, whom she begs for help. The woman tells her she will return tomorrow, and brings her husband and sons to save the Princess by throwing her a rope that one of the sons uses as a tightrope to retrieve the Princess. While the entertainer's son is carrying the Princess on his back on the tightrope, the Ogre returns and is enraged by the Princess being taken from him. The entertainer's husband is able to cut the rope before the Ogre manages to get to them, and the Ogre falls to the depths below. However, the Ogre is not dead and finds the Princess and slays the entertainer's entire family. He is about to kill the Princess, but has a tender moment for her. The Princess pretends to give him a warm embrace and then slits his throat.

During the time that Violet was away, the King has grown ill. When Violet returns, the King breaks down in tears. Violet throws the ogre's head at her father's feet and informs him that this is the husband that he chose for his daughter. The subjects in the kingdom bow to her, including her Father, because now she is Queen. As her father is in tears, Violet too begins to cry.

The Two Old Women

In the third segment, in the kingdom of Stronghold (Italian: Roccaforte), the lustful king (Vincent Cassel) is intrigued by a mysterious woman's celestial singing. Adamant in seducing her, he courts her outside her home, unaware that she is one of the two elderly dyer sisters Imma (Shirley Henderson) and Dora (Hayley Carmichael). The lustful king is persistent, so Dora agrees to spend the night with the king, as long as it is in complete darkness, so to hide her appearance from him. However, the King's curiosity gets the better of him and he lights a candle to see Dora's face. When he discovers her true appearance

he is horrified at having slept with such an ugly hag. The King calls for his guards, who toss Dora out of the King's bed chamber window to her death. However, before Dora reaches the ground, the bed sheets become entangled in a tree. A witch rescues her from the tree, and casts a spell where she turns into a beautiful maiden. Later, the king sees the now young and beautiful Dora (Stacy Martin) and decides to make her his Queen.

Enjoying her new appearance, Dora sends Imma a dress and a wedding invitation to the castle. When Imma sees her at the castle feast, Dora tells her she mustn't tell a soul who she is, as no-one would believe her. At the end of the evening, Imma does not want to leave her sister and refuses to leave. She wants to know the secret to her sister's youthful looks, but Dora says she woke up that way after her fall from the window. Imma doesn't believe her and badgers her for the truth. In a fit of anger, Dora says she flayed herself and grew new skin. Then Dora hears the King coming and hides Imma behind a screen while she and the King consummate their marriage. Imma is fascinated and reveals herself while watching the couple make love. The King believes Imma to be the "witch" he slept with and calls for his guards to take her away. Dora tells the King that Imma is her old neighbour and begs him not to hurt her. Once outside the castle, Imma tries to find someone who will flay her. She eventually finds a knife sharpener willing to do the job, for a price. This leaves Imma bloody and disfigured.

The Ending

In the end, Elias, Dora and her lustful King are among the guests present at Kingdom Highmountain for Violet's official coronation as Queen. As Violet's father walks her to the throne, everyone in the crowd looks up to the sky, where an entertainer is walking across a tightrope that is on fire. At this time, Dora's beauty begins to fade and she begins to return to her former state. Before anyone notices what is happening to her, she manages to flee the Highmountain castle to live the rest of her days alone.

Philosophical Meanings

In all three tales, the selfishness of the characters led to their ultimate destruction based on their fixation of lustful desire rather than true love. The Queen of Darkwood's desire for a child consumed her, but she also wished for that love to be reciprocated by the child to her. When Elias did not reciprocate her love, she tried to murder Jonah, which was the person who made Elias happy. Rather than sacrificing her happiness knowing Elias had a soulmate friend, she tried to remove that relationship in hope it would further her relationship with her son. That desire ultimately led to her death by the hands of her own son, who was a product of her own desire.

The King of Highmountain was so fixated on the flea that he lost sight of being a Father and sacrificed his daughter, who looked up to him and loved him. The flea was a gross creature and meant to symbolize a hobby or other small, unimportant matter that a parent may indulge rather than focusing on their children. In the end, this mistake stripped the King of both his royal and paternal title. Unlike all the other characters, the King seemed truly repentant for what he had done and was consumed by grief and illness until his daughter's return. However, his prior actions and fixation on the flea can never erase the trauma Violet had to undergo with losing her virginity and innocence to the hands of an ogre. Further, the entertainer's entire family were killed by the ogre in an attempt to save the Princess when the King himself did nothing to rescue her and whose lack of regard and foolishness led to his daughter's plight. It was his daughter who ultimately had to save herself, disgracing the King not only as a King, but as a Father as well.

The Lustful King of Strongmountain desired sexual gratification and used his subjects to that regard. However, this addiction led him to sleep with Dora, who was an old hag, based on the illusion of what is beautiful. The reality of the lustful king having slept with Dora as an old maid disgusts the King so much that he attempts to throw Dora to her death, claiming that she is a witch. Yet, Dora protests that the

Lustful King demanded her presence, which was true. Yet, he falls in love with Dora and makes her his Queen once she is transformed into a beautiful maiden. The moral of the story is that the eyes can be misleading and what you see or believe you see should not be substituted for the truth of what is. On the flipside, Dora is no different than the Lustful King she eventually marries - she desires wealth, title and sexual passions. When she receives youth, Dora traded Imma, who had been with her forever, for the man who had cast her to her death days before. This leads to Dora's condemnation to live the rest of her days alone and without Imma. For the Lustful King, he will never stop searching for his Queen who appeared to be the cure for his lustful addiction, when in fact, Dora was merely a reflection of himself that he could not see.