Contemporary Fairy Tales: Narrating Women Academics Through Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the feminist literature that explores the vast landscape of metaphors on the professional experiences and identities of women academics found in scholarly works. In their now classic studies on the semantic content of these tropes, feminist scholars have identified one large cluster of metaphors that allude to structural barriers or natural phenomena (e.g., 'glass ceiling' and 'chilly climate'), criticised for overlooking human agency. This paper is novel in that identifies (and problematises) another ample cluster of shared meanings: 'tale and myth' metaphors drawing from *fairy tales, legends, sagas, folklore, mythology and religious imagery*. I argue that many such metaphors aim to capture the lower *status* of women academics (e.g., 'Cinderella'), and are characterised by: *liminality*, as they open up possible-worlds and untested social arrangements (e.g., 'Alice in Wonderland'); *ambivalence*, as they portray women as either monsters, or prodigies, or both (e.g., 'intellectual Frankenstein'); *reductionism*, in that they implicitly seek to subsume complex social phenomena under familiar fictional plots; and (relatedly) *normativity*, in that they create expectations as to the likely development of a situation and implicitly suggest a course of action. Particularly the latter two characteristics constitute significant limitations of 'tale and myth' metaphors: nonetheless, can there still be merit in their use? In the paper, I advance a suggestion.

Keywords: gender, discourse, higher education, organisations, metaphors

INTRODUCTION. METAPHORS, MYTHS AND TALES

Organisations are gendered (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1990; Gherardi, 1995; Benschop and Dooreward, 1998; Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Kvande, 2007) and academia is no exception (Husu, 2000; Bagilhole and Goode, 2001; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Thornton, 2013). The language we use reveals that. This paper is a meta-reflection problematising the literary and symbolic images, or *metaphors*, used in white papers, in the scholarly literature and the media to refer to the professional lives and experiences of women academics (Amery et al., 2015; Moratti, 2018). I situate my investigation within the gender, work and organisations scholarship discussing metaphors on women in organisations (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010; Smith et al., 2012; Kemp, 2016). The imagery we invoke brings in implicit meaning (Goatly, 2007; Zinken and Mulsolff, 2009) and conveys a particular interpretation of the nature of the professional hindrances that women encounter. The question has been discussed in the feminist literature with highly interdisciplinary and original approaches, following the 'linguistic turn' in feminist studies (Tolmach-Lakoff, 1973; Spender, 1980) and drawing on the seminal works by linguist George Lakoff (*Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 1987) and business theorist Gareth Morgan (*Images of Organizations*, 1986). Feminist scholars have produced an impressive body of knowledge and the use of metaphors on women in work organisations is now an important topic in feminism, but surprisingly not (yet) a core one. Key texts such as the *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (2016) and the *Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations* (2014) do not include a dedicated chapter on metaphor use. Even more remarkably, the word 'metaphor' is not listed in the index of either handbook. The indexes go into a considerable level of detail and respectively include 'men's rights movement' and 'merit', the latter encompassing as many as nine sub-entries (Kumra et al., 2014; Disch and Hawkesworth, 2018). However, the investigation of metaphor use is fertile intellectual terrain affording exceptional opportunities for creative and methodologically original inquiry leading to theoretical insights. It is foundational to feminist

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organisational studies rather than a mere line of investigation (Leonard, 2002). As a scholarly topic, it remains as timely as ever.

In their meta-reflection on metaphor use, feminist scholars have discussed the semantic content of these figurative expressions and identified patterns of meaning. Contributions that have now become foundational to the study of metaphors on women academics have pointed out that many such tropes hint to rigid exclusionary structures or natural hazards and draw from the terminology of engineering and architecture and the natural world. These expressions fail to capture agency. They conceptualise women as passive and they cloud the responsibility of fellow academics in creating and maintaining gender inequity (Husu, 2001; Benschop and Brouns, 2003). Examples are 'black hole' and 'leaking pipeline', alluding to the large proportion of women academics whose careers end before reaching tenure. 'Glass ceiling', 'sticky floor' and 'slippery paths' symbolise insidious impediments to professional advancement. 'Glass cliff' means that women get access to leadership roles in higher education (such as Department Head) as these jobs 'decline in status', 'become more time-consuming and harder to combine with a successful scholarly career' and entail a higher 'risk of failure' and 'interpersonal conflict' (Peterson, 2014: 41). 'Chilly climate' describes the atmosphere of ostracism and the isolation that women academics can experience in their daily work environment. However, gender inequity is not about floors and ceilings: it is about people. Women academics are not water drops dripping from a broken pipe, nor particles disappearing into a region of spacetime: they are persons with plans, opinions and strategies. Unwelcoming attitudes towards women colleagues have nothing to do with the weather conditions. Rather than 'paths', people's behaviour can be 'slippery' particularly when their own privilege is threatened by the advancement of historically marginalised groups. In essence, contrary to what nature- and engineering-inspired metaphors on women in academia seem to suggest, we are not trapped in gendered structures and much can be done to achieve change, as pointed out by the scholars who first identified and problematised this particular cluster of figurative expressions (Husu, 2001).

The goal of this article is drawing attention to another major pattern in the vast landscape of metaphors on women and academia, one that has been there for a long time, but has so far not yet been adequately analysed in the literature. There is a large set of tropes that seem to draw directly from fairy tales and fantasy, legends and sagas, folklore, classical mythology and religious imagery. This is perhaps the largest cluster of metaphors on women academics, along with the above discussed expressions derived from the world of architecture, engineering and the natural world. This article offers a discussion of some 'myth and tale' metaphors and their conceptual implications, presenting original arguments. I contend that (1) 'myth and tale' metaphors aim to depict the unequal *status* of women in academia and are characterised by (2) *liminality* as they open up the possibility to move beyond a limited and familiar world and to imagine and explore alternative possible-worlds; (3) *ambivalence* in that they often conceptualise women as either monsters, or prodigies, or both, to capture their 'otherness' in traditionally men-dominated professions; (4) *reductionism*, as they evoke a limited number of familiar fictional plots and assume that those can reflect the complexity of social reality; (5) *normativity*, in that they trigger expectations as to the likely outcome of a situation and dictate a proper course of action. The latter two features constitute a limitation of 'myth and tale' metaphors, that is almost as big as the limits that have already been pointed out for nature and engineering inspired metaphors. The article ends with considerations on the possible role of 'myth and tale' metaphors in the debate, notwithstanding their limitations. I argue that the value of a feminist metaphor for purposes of social change is proportional to its capacity to unsettle, disrupt and question the taken for granted.

METHODS

What follows is a brief account of how the idea for this research came about, and the methods I have used. I started to discern a 'myth and tale' semantic pattern by serendipity, while researching metaphors on women academics (Moratti, 2018) and by reading scholarly material for a set of empirical studies on gender and tenure (Moratti, 2020a, 2020b). As my intuition gradually took shape, I further investigated the matter through internet-mediated qualitative content analysis (Hewson et al., 2016). I opted for qualitative text mining using Google Scholar, currently the most comprehensive academic search engine (Gusenbauer, 2019). Based on an understanding of 'social reality as conceptually mediated', I aimed to shed light on the 'relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities)' through critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2012: 9). I searched Google Scholar for 'metaphors women academia'. I ordered results by relevance and without setting a beginning or end date. I browsed the first twenty pages, comprising about 200 entries. Among my results, I retained and read comprehensive reviews of metaphors on women academics (such as Amery et al., 2015) as well as anthologies discussing the topic (such as Black and Garvis, 2018). In addition, I retained and read the papers that displayed striking, powerful metaphors already in their titles or abstracts (including Gallant and Cross, 1993; Harris et al., 2013). Taking these as a starting point in my investigation, I begun to collect my metaphors into a list and saw my intuition confirmed: there was indeed a major stream of metaphors based on fairy tales. At that point I also took notice of the many figurative expressions referencing sagas, legends,

folklore, classical myths and religious imagery. In a nutshell, I opted for theoretical sampling: 'a process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses … data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop … theory *as it emerges*' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 45, my italics).

The five interpretive categories I use in my analysis: 'status', 'liminality', 'ambivalence', 'reductionism' and 'normativity', unfolded gradually and inductively as my data collection progressed in 'an evolving process guided by the emerging theory' whereby 'analysis occurs *simultaneously* when identifying the sample and collecting the data' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 99, my italics). It first struck me that several of my metaphors instantiated the *gender as status* theory (presented below) by encapsulating it into a literary image. Thereafter, I became aware of their *semantic duality* reflected in what seem to me two clearly distinct characteristics: 'liminality' as the state of being in-between reality and possible worlds, and 'ambivalence' as the quality of simultaneously capturing two extremes, the prodigious and the monstrous. Finally, I reflected on the relationship between reality and 'tale and myth' metaphors, and the 'reductionism' and 'normativity' that can derive from using long-established plots as descriptors for real-life situations. In naming my interpretive categories, I did not seek to draw from the literature but rather chose the names that seemed most appropriate, based on my theoretical intuitions. I aimed for novelty and originality and avoided 'borrowed classification schemes' that could 'create a bias in the data analysis' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 212) and 'hinder the generation of new categories' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 37).

I enriched my list of metaphors by perusing articles referenced in the papers I had read, playing with the 'cited by' function in Google Scholar, and directly querying Scholar for tales or myths evoked by analogy (for example, after finding references to Cinderella, I searched 'Snow White women academia'). Once my catalogue of metaphors was compiled based on the procedure described above, further multiple queries of Google Scholar for related strings (such as 'metaphors women academia fairy tales' or 'metaphors women higher education myths') added nothing to my analysis and only a few entries to the catalogue, reported at the bottom of this paper (**Table 1**). I interpreted this as data saturation. I make no claims to completeness. This paper is not a comprehensive review or an analysis of the frequency of metaphors use in the literature (understood as a linguistic corpus). It is qualitative research and as such it does not ascribe meaning through counting. The thematic focus of this study rests on metaphors of women in higher education, with occasional mentions of figurative expressions used for women in other types of organisations where pertinent. The relevant metaphors are presented discursively, as examples to illustrate each interpretive category.

ANALYSIS

In my discussion of each interpretive category (presented below), I drew inspiration from a highly multi-disciplinary body of literature in Gender Studies, Sociology, Organisation Studies, Literary Studies and Psychology. No attempts are made in this paper to police the boundaries between fields of study: on the contrary, I deliberately create bridges, aiming for originality.

Status

Men have dominated academia ever since universities were established as independent institutions. In many countries and disciplinary areas, the upper echelons of academia are still predominantly men: the higher up in the hierarchy, the more male dominated it becomes. This situation reflects that of other high-status professions. One of the most intriguing explanations for this state of affairs is based on the theory of *gender as status*. People gender-categorise one another automatically and unconsciously, and associate gender with desirable characteristics including competence, very relevant in academia where evidence of expertise can be ambiguous and open to interpretation. This categorisation is based on conscious and unconscious assumptions that result from socialisation and reflect historical segregation. These socially diffuse beliefs create, legitimise and reinforce relations of hierarchy and inequality (Mackay et al., 2010; Ridgeway, 2011; Calas et al., 2014). Organisations (including higher education institutions) have a gender regime operating through a daily interplay of deeply held beliefs, patterns and routines that influence decision making in invisible ways, because they are so deeply entrenched and taken for granted that they have come to be regarded as the norm, as the natural state of affairs (Kanter, 1977; Cockburn, 1991; Connell, 2002; Acker, 2006; Van de Brink and Benschop, 2012; Grada et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2016; O'Connor, 2020). 'Tale and myth' metaphors often capture well the status inequality that historically exists between genders, particularly in the professional sphere. In the present section, I will offer some examples of such metaphors.

Some scholars have evoked one of the most classical fairy tale characters: Cinderella, to allude to unfair job tasks allocation in academia linked to the lower status of women. Cinderellas keep their Departments running by taking care of routine work, while being excluded from the most prestigious and rewarding opportunities (Dowling, 1981; Yoder, 1991; Tripp-Knowles, 1995). Some contributions introduce other characters from Perrault's tale as well. Occasionally, Cinderella is fortunate enough to encounter her 'fairy godmother', an experienced female

mentor who helps her to navigate 'the kingdom' of academia (Harris et al., 2013). Cinderella echoes other popular metaphors on female academics, such as 'housekeeper' and 'housewife' (Delamont, 1989; Suspitsina, 2000; Bagilhole, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2014; Amery et al., 2015). Interestingly, I found that the Cinderella metaphor is used also in academic medicine for under-researched, under-diagnosed and under-treated diseases and low-status branches of medical science: unsurprising, these encompass female sexual dysfunctions, and family and community medicine where women are well-represented. The use of this metaphor is becoming so frequent that some medical scholars ironically refer to the phenomenon as 'cinderology' (Hazelton and Hickey, 2004; Cameron, 2005). Next to the fairy godmother, another central element in Cinderella's story are her magical glass slippers that would only fit her foot and no one else's. In management and diversity studies and in contributions discussing women in the legal profession, a 'glass slippers' metaphor has been introduced to refer to the intersection between occupational and gender identity. Particular jobs and tasks – typically of low status – are socially perceived as 'natural' for women, which reinforces occupational segregation by gender (Skordaki, 1996; Ashcraft, 2013). While not directly used as a metaphor, Cinderella's glass slippers have been hinted at in the literature on gender inequality in academia (Harris et al., 2013). Glass, in various declinations, keeps recurring in the metaphors that seek to describe women's situation in academia by alluding to unequal status. The association between women and glass is time-honoured; glass is invisible and fragile: 'women and glass are always in danger', so goes a well-known old English proverb.

Poor Cinderella will ultimately become the Prince's wife. Royalty, the epitome of status inequality, features prominently in fairy tales and in metaphors on academics, for once including also men. The 'princess' advances professionally thanks to a male protector (Williams, 2005). The 'crown prince' is chosen by influential men for an upcoming professorship or a leadership role, through a covert institutional pre-selection process; his induction is an open secret (Still, 1989; Pullan and Abendstern, 2018).

In essence, I believe 'myth and tale' metaphors offer powerful depictions of the low-visibility gender regime that governs higher education institutions, ultimately founded on a conceptual understanding of gender as *status*. I will now proceed to discuss other equally striking features of such metaphors.

Liminality

Unlike metaphors that draw from the natural world or from terminology of engineering and architecture, 'myth and tale' metaphors typically do not imply that women are imprisoned in rigid, unchangeable structures. Myths and tales often open up a liminal, transformational space where 'characters… imagine and construct alternative possibilities from existing precedents' (Nowlin, 2006: 49). Cinderella went from rags to riches, through perils and uncertainty. In the realm of *liminality*, the 'middle space' between reality and possible-worlds, 'the possibility exists of standing aside… from one's own social position… and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements' (Turner, 1974: 14). Lord and Robb (2010) spoke of 'The Canterbury Tales' to designate women academics' first-hand accounts of a traditionally male-dominated field at the University of Canterbury, UK. The *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of fictional stories, written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century. Most are fables, centring around discovery, pilgrimage, encounters with fabulous creatures and other liminal, transformational experiences. Academia itself has been described as a 'candied cottage' that lures 'Hansel and Gretel' (Barnard, 2019); an 'ivory tower' where the privileged prosper (Benschop and Brouns 2003; Eveline, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2012; Harris et al., 2013); a 'pyramid' (Morley, 1994); a 'maze' (European Commission, 2008) or 'labyrinth' (Gonzales et al., 2013) where the rules for career progression are not clear, particularly for women. For women, having a tenured academic position and a family is the 'holy grail' (Harris et al., 2013): a sacred, elusive treasure that brings about eternal abundance and happiness. Some of these images are psychological archetypes with a strong symbolic significance, and portals to the dimension of the sacred. 'Ivory tower' is one of the attributes of Mary since the 1587 *Litany of the Blessed Virgin*. In Egyptian culture, the pyramid is a symbol of creation and resurrection, connecting Earth with the Otherworld. The 'holy' grail sought after by the knights in the Arthurian saga is a reference to Jesus' cup at the Last Supper. The labyrinth evokes the ancient Greek myth of Theseus who found his way in the maze and killed the monstrous Minotaur: some feminist contributions on gendered violence and race actually go as far as using 'minotaur' as a metaphor (Dinnerstein, 1976; Martin, 2014). In several religions, maze emblems are used in meditation and prayer; in psychology, the maze represents the human learning experience, the tortuous but meaningful journey to one's spiritual centre and back into the world. The biblical myth of the Creation is evoked as some contributions refer to historically all-female higher education institutions as 'Adamless Eden' (Palmieri, 1995) and others liken women academics to 'Eve' who was 'punished for having an appetite for knowledge' (Robbins et al., 2008: 50). God's apple is tempting yet dangerous: eating it can only be a transformative experience. Female students who embrace higher education, and particularly Women's Studies, are 'kissing the frog' (Griffin, 2003). Remarkably, even 'Princess Diana' was mentioned in the context of metaphors on women in academia (Griffin, 2003): an actual person whose life and style got so romanticised that she became an icon, the real-life embodiment of the fairy tale princess and a good example of liminality. Even more recurrent are references to the looking glass, which echoes Virginia Woolf's words in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

'women have served all these centuries as *looking glasses* possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (Woolf 1998[1929]: 45, my italics). There is a powerful symbology associated with the looking glass, threshold of change, portal of discovery bridging reality and the marvellous (Arlandis and Reyes-Torres, 2018). Drawing inspiration from Deleuze (1969), women academics have been compared to Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* as well as *Alice in Wonderland* (Patterson, 1971; Chouinard, 1995; McMillan and Price, 2010; Netolicky et al., 2018). By eating magical food, Alice repeatedly adjusts her size to enter doors that are too small for her, or to reach tables that are too high. The metaphor alludes to 'academia… designed through time to routinely accommodate the work needs of the male professional' and demanding strenuous adjustment efforts from women, that are however possible, albeit difficult (Patterson, 1971: 227). The 'Alice through the looking-glass' metaphor is also used to refer to gendered gatekeeping practices in the allocation of prestigious job tasks in higher education institutions, made by manipulating 'perceptions of what constitutes legitimate research' (McMillan and Price, 2010: 145). When used in this sense, the metaphor manages to capture both status inequality and liminality.

The two features of 'myth and tale' metaphors discussed so far, their capacity to represent status inequality while at the same time not portraying women as trapped, make them better depictions of gender inequity in higher education than their engineering, architecture and natural world-based counterparts. However, 'myth and tale' metaphors have limitations too. They contribute to othering women scholars, as explained in the next section.

Ambivalence

Another central element in metaphors based on fairy tales and fantasy, legends and sagas, folklore, mythology and religious imagery is *ambivalence*. The 'otherness' of women academics, their non-conformity in traditional male-dominated professions led to conceptualising them as monsters or prodigies, with metaphors such as 'intellectual Frankenstein' (Palmieri, 1995; Netolicky et al., 2018); 'Superwoman' (Suspitsina, 2000); 'Wonder Woman' (Martimianakis, 2008; Bozzon et al., 2017); 'mermaid' (Anderson, 2008). The very term 'monster' is semantically ambiguous in Latin (*monstrum*) and ancient Greek (*τέρας*). It can mean marvel, wonder, prodigy, freak or demon with a negative aesthetic and moral connotation. Along with ambiguity, magic and horror surface often in 'myth and tale' metaphors on women academics, that include 'witch' and 'witches' coven' for panels or groups (Fisher, 2007; Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). Women live in the 'academic twilight zone' (Kroll, 2006), particularly if they are foreigners (Cheng, 2005). Female academics are 'outsiders in the sacred grove' (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988) and 'strangers', a metaphor 'developed from the Wandering Jew' (Czarniawska and Sevón 2008: 237; also see Simmel, 1950[1909]). The tale of women walking the 'hallowed halls of academia' can turn into 'a horror story' (Procopio et al., 2016). Academia, the 'greedy institution' that demands 'undivided commitment' (Coser, 1974), has been metaphorically described as a 'vampire' for its impact on the lives of women (Kroll, 2006). In her auto-ethnography, a young academic referred to herself as 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (Netolicky et al., 2018). 'Iron maiden' is used for 'competent and forthright' women academics (Kanter, 1977). The reference to iron here symbolises permanence and the suppression of the emotional sphere. The ambivalence built into 'myth and tale' metaphors extends beyond the portrayal of individual female academics. These metaphors also narrate 'female experience under patriarchy, a world in which innocent young women are set against their sisters and mothers in rivalry for the prince's favour' (Fisher and Silber, 2000: 121). The 'queen bee' (Ellemers et al., 2004; Kinney, 2009; Cummins, 2012; Mansingh and Khan, 2020), consumed by 'Venus' envy' (Mavin, 2006: 264), actively keeps more junior female colleagues from advancing professionally in her 'queendom' (Ballif et al., 2008: 119).

I believe the ambivalence of many 'myth and tale' metaphors is a shortcoming of this cluster of figurative expressions. They contribute to othering women: by depicting women academics as an *anomaly*, these metaphors ultimately *normalise* women's traditional condition of non-belonging in academia. The same considerations hold for portraying academic rivalry as a specifically feminine deficiency, when the people involved happen to be women. In the subsequent sections, I will discuss two more important limitations that I see in metaphors falling under this cluster.

Reductionism

'Myth and tale' metaphors are certainly fascinating. Notwithstanding their 'predictable narrative thread', 'traditional depictions of gender' have a 'palpable fairy tale appeal' (Kinney 2009: 151; see also Ballif et al., 2008). Prominent psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim suggested that fairy tales and myths 'help readers see themselves in stories of conflict, and thus move them closer to naming their anxieties' (Bettelheim, 1976, cited in Kinney 2009: 151; also see Dundes, 1980). The benefits of identification may extend to feeling less isolated: one is, in essence, re-living a familiar plot that is being experienced by other members of one's same group – *assuming that the degrees of complexity of reality and fiction are comparable*. I believe this assumption is problematic. It has been convincingly argued that there are a limited number of plots in fiction. Indexes have been compiled for fairy tales and folklore (for example, the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index: Thompson, 1989; Uther 2004). In his relatively recent but

already classic theorisation, Booker (2004) compellingly argued that there exist only seven basic plots in fiction: overcoming the monster; rags to riches; the quest; voyage and return; rebirth; and comedy or tragedy (depending on whether the main character gets his or her hopes fulfilled). The reader can easily fit each of our above-discussed metaphors into one of these archetypal plots: the interesting question is whether people's lives and experiences can also be fitted into a limited number of plots, or patterns of plots. The use of 'myth and tale' metaphors could amount to taking a cognitive shortcut by relying on an already familiar storyline, an *a-priori explanation of social phenomena*. In this way, metaphors could obfuscate the complexity of social phenomena rather than illuminate it. Interestingly, an 'archetypal plots' approach is used in career counselling: the same seven basic plots that underlie 'the greatest works of the human imagination in the arts and humanities' also offer 'a conceptually coherent account of the role of unplanned events in individuals' experiences and careers' (Pryor and Bright, 2008: 76). 'Society's *grand narrative* of a career' (Savickas, 2005: 49, my italics) guides people's interpretation of their own professional hurdles: by problematising such interpretations, the counsellor opens up new perspectives for the individual client. In essence, 'what individuals often attempt to do is to use *closed-systems thinking… to deal with an open-systems reality*' (Pryor and Bright, 2008: 78, my italics). I believe that is, in essence, a form of *reductionism*, and it constitutes a major limitation of 'myth and tale' metaphors.

In conclusion, attempts to fit real-world situations into a limited number of plots (*reductionism*) can be a way of eluding the complexities of life, by embracing a familiar and predictable narrative in which to evade. The possible world generated by the 'myth and tale' metaphor can become a refuge from engaging with reality. In the subsequent section, I will further develop my argument and contend that reductionism is closely linked with normativity, another limitation of 'myth and tale' metaphors.

Normativity

Some fictional stories have a great power of mental attraction, particularly religious and ancient myths with their elegance and charm. Their roots run deep in our collective subconscious. Metaphors based on them can become *normative*, by creating expectations as to the likely outcome of a situation and implicitly suggesting a course of action. This is true even for metaphors based on children' tales such as Cinderella, Alice or Snow White (Trahar, 2019), and it is even more true for myths with their solemnity and magnetism.

I, for one, am guilty as charged: myth-based metaphors are so captivating that I considered using one myself. I studied one decade of professorial hiring through open calls at one Faculty of the biggest University in Norway, attracting over a thousand applicants overall. I found that women (and only women) are advantaged when already working at the institution (internal applicants) and disadvantaged when external applicants. Women apply as external applicants nearly as much as men do, but tend not to be preferred (Moratti, 2020b). This is especially true for women applicants affiliated with a non-Norwegian institution. I considered calling this pattern of findings 'the Ulysses-Penelope effect'. Ulysses was a king, a war hero and a traveller: a 'man skilled in all ways of contending' who 'saw the townlands and learned the minds of many distant men' (Homer, 1961: 273). While he explored and conquered, his wife Penelope, the epitome of loyalty, patience and perseverance, waited at home for decades. Her wanderer husband was not faithful, but Penelope was. I hypothesised that evaluators may be influenced by traditional gender roles. The feminine role is that of the faithful Penelope, who can be retained after her loyalty has been duly tried and tested: women, with respect to men, may have to work harder to build institutional rapport before they are hired permanently. Unsurprisingly, I also found that women held the vast majority of temporary senior lecturer contracts at that Faculty in the decade considered and in the years that preceded it ('senior' means reserved to candidates with a PhD). Ulysses, the conqueror, the discoverer, the prestigious international scholar, is a symbol for masculinity. Ulysses' qualities are seen as prerogatives of the masculine: when women try to perform those exact same masculinities, they are received differently.

However, I paused, and eventually dropped the idea of making reference to Ulysses and Penelope in my interpretation. Was I merely photographing the existent, or was I contributing to perpetuating stereotypes? Was I illuminating the phenomenon I was investigating, or rather clouding it by activating imaginaries linked to gender-role clichés? More importantly, I questioned my fascination with myth and ancient tales. I was constructing a reductionist and normative fictional world, to constrain complex social phenomena into a familiar narrative borrowed from one of the greatest storytellers in human history. The magnetism of the Odyssey's plot enchants the reader, leaving little room for divergent interpretations of trends in the data.

Some of the most fascinating metaphors on gender equality work in academia are based on myths: such work has been described as 'arming Athena', after the goddess of knowledge, arts and military strategies (Stalker, 1994; Collins et al., 1998). Athena was the favourite daughter of Zeus, born adult and fully armed from the head of her father. No uterus or vagina were involved in her birth, she never had a childhood, she was portrayed as a virgin, and brains and pugnacity were her key features: while interesting, this metaphor is certainly suggestive as to the imageries of the 'ideal academic' (Thornton, 2013), and their poor compatibility with the female body, the emotional sphere and traditional feminine social roles, including care and motherhood. Gender equality work has

also been compared to a mythical 'quest': that of slaying the seven-headed dragon' (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012: 71). The phrase implicitly alludes to the Beast with seven heads in the Book of Revelation, and evokes the Greek myth of the seven-headed Hydra. The Beast was defeated by Saint Michael and his angels, and the mythical god-hero Hercules eventually triumphed over the Hydra, notwithstanding the extreme resilience of the monster: every time one of its heads got severed, two new heads grew, so the legend goes. Does such a metaphor, however elegant and captivating, suggest that only saints or heroes can hope to successfully resist structural inequality? Myth-based metaphors have been used also for gender equality work in organisations in general, not limited to academia. Women who do such work are 'Sisyphus' sisters' (Benschop and Verloo, 2006). Sisyphus was the mythological king of Corinth, punished by Zeus with the torture of forever pushing a rock up a hill, only for it to roll back down again. Gender regimes in organisations are highly resilient; but unlike Sisyphus, his sisters make tangible progress and start from a slightly improved position each time. However, the mythological Sisyphus did not have sisters. This particular metaphor has the merit of playing creatively with an existing myth, effectively re-inventing it and re-defining its meaning: this considerably weakens (but still, does not manage to eliminate) the reductionist and normative force of the myth-based metaphor.

Normativity is the direct consequence of reductionism, interpreted (as I do) as the attempt to understand a social phenomenon through an existing fictional plot. By normativity, I mean that 'myth and tale' metaphors can prescribe behaviour: one may be inclined to draw inspiration from the actions of the hero in the story, and believe that therein lies the solution to the social problem that the metaphor alludes to – but that is not necessarily the case.

CONCLUSIONS

I have pointed out the main limitations of the use of 'myth and tale' metaphors to refer to women academics, or to academia and women's position in it. I have acknowledged the interesting and convincing features of such metaphors, too: many of them convey well the *status* disparity between genders that has historically characterised the academic profession, and hint to a dimension of possibility (*liminality*) that goes beyond the current state of affairs, a possible-world where women scholars, their aspirations and talents are nurtured and fully valued. However, 'myth and tale' metaphors are typically othering women who trespass into the traditional male territory of academia, by depicting them as monsters or wonders far removed from the human sphere: this seems to express a degree of suspicion (*ambivalence*). Even more importantly, there is evidence that myths and tales, ancient and modern, can be subsumed under a limited number of storylines, the so-called archetypal plots: but real-life social phenomena do not necessarily adhere to such plots (*reductionism*). Images borrowed from myths and tales reconduct us to familiar narratives, possibly to evade from too incomprehensible and intricate a reality. They trigger expectations as to the outcome of a situation and implicitly prescribe behaviour: do as the hero in the story and you will get out of your predicament; or, if the hero acted foolishly, do not make that same mistake (*normativity*). It is easy to see where the intersection between reductionism and normativity can lead: implicit behavioural prescriptions that, when followed in practice, do not lead to the intended result.

What remains to be seen is whether there can still be merit in the use of 'myth and tale' metaphors, despite their limitations. I would like to put forward two suggestions. Firstly, it is perhaps wise to be sceptical of attempts to create yet another grand narrative that claims to apply to *all* women academics. Rather than postulating general models aspiring to universal validity, it is preferable that women actively recount their *own* stories and the meaning they attribute to them (for instance, through auto-ethnography) and coin metaphors they feel apply to their own experiences, such as 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (Netolicky et al., 2018). Secondly, playing creatively with an existing tale or myth is more interesting than merely borrowing one of its elements. For example, one could re-tell the tale by adding characters or plot twists that are not part of the fictional story alluded to. In addition to making the metaphor more original, this unorthodox and creative editing weakens the normative and reductionist effect of the metaphor (see as an example Benschop and Verloo, 2006). More generally, feminist thinkers see value in unsettling conventional categories and questioning the taken for granted, possibly through irony and paradox (Butler, 1990; Ahmed, 2003). The mission of the feminist metaphor is to trouble received wisdom, and the value of a metaphor for purposes of social change is proportional to its potential to *disrupt and unsettle* conventional thinking.

Table 1. Metaphors derived from fairy tales, fantasy, sagas, mythology and religious imagery, and referring to women academics as individuals; their institutions, success models and experiences; and to the study of gender as a field of knowledge as well as gender equality work in academia

	On individuals	On institutions, success models and experiences	On studying gender and on gender equality work
Fairy tales and fantasy	*Cinderella* (Dowling, 1981; Yoder, 1991; Tripp-Knowles, 1995) *The Fairy Godmother* (Harris et al., 2013) *Witch* (Fisher, 2007) *Alice* (Patterson, 1971; Chouinard, 1995; McMillan and Price, 2010; Netolicky et al., 2018) *Snow White* (Trahar, 2019) *Queen Bee* (Ellemers et al., 2004; Mavin, 2006; Kinney, 2009; Cummins, 2012; Mansingh and Khan 2020) *Princess* (Griffin, 2003; Williams, 2005) *Crown Prince* (Still, 1986; Pullan and Abendstern, 2018) *Pollyanna* (Ferree and Zippel, 2015) *Intellectual Frankenstein* (Palmieri, 1995; Netolicky et al., 2018) *Superwoman* (Suspitsina, 2010) *Wonder Woman* (Martimianakis, 2008; Bozzon et al., 2017) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Netolicky et al., 2018)	*Glass slippers* (Skordaki, 1996; Ashcraft, 2013) *The Kingdom* (Harris et al., 2013) *The Queendom* (of Queen Bee) (Ballif et al., 2008) *Candied cottage* (Barnard, 2019) *Vampire (greedy institution)* (Kroll, 2006) *The academic twilight zone* (Cheng, 2005; Kroll, 2006)	*Kissing the frog* (Griffin, 2003) *Witches' coven* (Fisher, 2007) *Seeking Yoda* (Hutchinson, 2002)
Sagas, mythology, religious imagery	*Iron maiden* (Kanter, 1977) *Mermaid* (Anderson, 2008) *Cassandra* (Ferree and Zippel, 2015) *Venus envy* (Marvin, 2006) *Eve* (Robbins et al., 2008) *Strangers (developed from the Wandering Jew)* (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2008; Amery et al., 2015) *Martyrs* (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2008) *Wayward puritans* (Gallant and Cross, 1993)	*The hallowed halls of academia* (Procopio et al., 2016) *Iron cage (refers to "Victorian literary heroines")* (Morley, 1994) *Holy Grail* (Harris et al., 2013) *Canterbury Tales* (Lord and Robb, 2010) *Pyramid* (Morley, 1994) *Maze, labyrinth (evokes myth of Theseus)* (European Commission, 2008; Gonzales et al., 2013) *Eden* (Palmieri, 1995) *Ivory tower (comes from the Bible)* (Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Harris et al., 2013) *Sacred grove* (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988)	*Slaying the seven-headed dragon (evokes myth of Hydra and Bible)* (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012) *Arming Athena* (Stalker, 1994; Collins et al., 1998) *Sisyphus' sisters* (Benschop and Verloo, 2006)

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