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«I DIDN'T OFFER TO SHAKE HANDS; NO ONE WOULD SHAKE HANDS WITH A JEW»: ESCAPISM AND THE IDEOLOGICAL STANCE IN NAOMI NOVIK'S *SPINNING SILVER*

Sara González Bernárdez
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela
sara_padron@hotmail.es

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Abstract

Naomi Novik, an American writer of Lithuanian-Polish ascendency, is one of the most acclaimed voices in contemporary young-adult fantasy fiction. Her fantasies are heavily influenced by her cultural heritage, as well as by the fairy tale tradition, which becomes most obvious in her two standalone novels, *Uprooted* and the subject of this essay, *Spinning Silver*. As the quote chosen for this essay's title demonstrates, Novik's second standalone work constitutes one of the most obvious outward statements of an ideological stance as expressed within fantasy literature, as well as an example of what Jack Zipes (2006) called transfiguration: the rewriting and reworking of traditional tales in order to convey a different, more subversive message.

This paper considers how Novik's retelling takes advantage of traditional fairy-tale elements to create an implicit critique of gender-based oppression, while at the same time, and much more overtly, denouncing racial and religious prejudice. The ideological stance thus conveyed is shown to be intended to have consequences for the reader and the world outside of the fiction.

Key words: ideology, fantasy, the fantastic, fairy-tale, anti-Semitism, gender.

1. Introduction

Fantasy literature has considerably evolved throughout the years: the twentieth century marked the re-canonisation of fantasy through J. R. R. Tolkien's renowned work, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), and its inauguration of the epic or high fantasy subgenre, which would influence countless successors. The twenty-first century has seen the popularisation of a different kind of fantasy, known as young adult fantasy, whose popularity has consistently increased since the enormous success of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007). From Rowling's ground-breaking work onward, young adult fantasy has marked a significant shift in the perception and shapes of fantasy, especially in recent years. This shift can perhaps be traced back to efforts towards inclusivity which have surrounded this type of literature. For instance, a significant majority of young adult literature is written by female authors (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018: 392-393), unlike «adult» literature and particularly adult fantasy, which is greatly male-dominated. Statistics also show that the representation of diverse sexualities and gender identities has tended towards improvement as well: «in 2014, mainstream publishers published 47 LGBT YA [young adult] books. This is a 59% increase from 2013» (Lo, 2014). Sadly, this presence of women and LGBTQ authors and characters is counterbalanced by an overall decline in the number of publications by authors of colour (see Ramdarshan Bold, 2018: 398), and hence in the presence of non-white characters as well. Nonetheless, from 2017 onwards there has been a reappearance of non-white authors in the best-seller lists, two relevant examples being N. K. Jemisin (*The Stone Sky* earned this author her third consecutive Hugo Award in 2017) and Tomi Adeyemi (*Children of Blood and Bone*, 2018). Both of these authors stand out because, aside from including diverse racial representations within their fantasies, they also draw the inspiration for their fantasy worlds from non-Western cultures, kick-starting a new understanding of the possibilities of the genre. Although there is still much work to be done in this regard, the general tendency of young adult fiction is shown to angle towards subversion and disavowal of canonical elements and characters, which means that the final products are considerably varied. Young adult fantasies, especially, can range from epic hero (or, more often, heroine) journeys to urban supernatural fantasies, through fairy-tale retellings.

Spinning Silver (2019), the novel with which this paper is concerned, is a prime example of the latter; it is the second novel by American author Naomi Novik, a Hugo Award nominee and winner of the John W. Campbell and

Nebula Awards for her work. The objective of the following paper is to consider the explicit inclusion of ideological messages against discrimination within the aforementioned novel, and to regard the work as a representative example of the potential of fantasy fiction for social activism and for the subversion of hegemonic ideologies. To do so, the essay first introduces the hybridity of *Spinning Silver* as a re-telling of a traditional fairy-tale which mixes in fantastic elements, tropes, and settings, revising the common features of the fairy-tale and fantasy genres that make it possible to blend them together. A discussion of *Spinning Silver* as a fairy-tale retelling serves to introduce the topic of gender, as the author employs these traditional elements to create certain expectations around the female characters and their roles which are then subverted throughout the narrative. The subversion in terms of gender is complemented by a more explicit ideological message against anti-Semitism, which is analysed throughout the final section of this paper. This explicit inclusion of ideology within a fantastic tale expresses the potential of the fantasy genre to become a tool for marginalised groups to speak against the oppression they face, while subverting the expectations related to these marginalised identities and granting the readers a new perspective.

2. Ideology and escapism in *Spinning Silver*

Spinning Silver stands out among other young adult fantasies because it blends elements pertaining to both canonical fantasy and the traditional fairy-tale. This hybridity creates certain expectations stemming from the canonical features of each of these genres, expectations which are then disrupted in different ways; in order to understand their subversion, it is important to first outline such canonical features. Although fantasy and the fairy-tale are two distinct genres, they share a great many similarities that allow them to blend together at certain points. This is particularly well demonstrated by J. R. R. Tolkien's theory of fantasy, which he called the «fairy-story». Tolkien's premise was that, in order to be a «fairy-story», nothing in the tale must imply that it is merely an illusion — the magic within it «must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away» (Tolkien, 2014: 33). The two most significant concepts the writer employs to describe the other major features of this type of work apply exceptionally well to both of the genres that concern this essay. The first is the concept of «belief», which stems from the generalised association of both fantastic narratives and fairy-tales with chil-

dren's literature: children are the only audience «gullible» enough to accept this type of narrative as though it were true, and thus «the teller of marvellous tales to children must, or may, or at any rate does trade on their [children's] *credulity*, on the lack of experience which makes it less easy for children to distinguish fact from fiction» (Tolkien, 2014: 52). However, as Tolkien (2014: 54-55) very rightly refers, at no point is «the enjoyment of a story (...) dependent on belief that such things could happen, or had happened, in "real life"». Indeed, the element of belief is important only insofar as it allows the reader to partake of the fictional world, not in the ordinary sense of whether «a thing exists or can happen in the real (primary) world» (Tolkien, 2014: 52).

The second concept discussed by Tolkien, common to both fairy-tales and fantasies, is «escapism». The belief that non-realist works have a so-called *escapist* function owes its perseverance to the simultaneous belief that the worlds of fantasy and reality are entirely separate. Escapism is thus at the root of the negative critical and academic perception of fantasy, because the genre seems to enable and encourage an «escape» from real issues by creating a fictitious and impossible world where said issues lose importance or disappear altogether.[1] However, Tolkien (2014: 69) himself made quite a spirited defence of the escapist function:

> Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than the jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics (...) are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter.

The distinction he makes provides us with a new, more positive understanding of the escapist function, where enabling a flight to a different world need not imply becoming unconcerned with one's own world or the issues that afflict it; it is rather a way to avoid becoming overwhelmed or defeated by the harshness of reality, to obtain a glimmer of hope in order to face it again. This is important, because it implies that the act of *escaping* into the world provided by the fantasy can actually have an effect over reality or

1 The word *escapism* «did not find its way into the OED till the 1972 Supplement», and, according to Tom Shipley (2012: 285), «the OED has yet to find a citation which is not pejorative». The given meaning is «the tendency to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured» (Shipley, 2012: 285). In other words, escapism would involve retreating into the world so handily provided by the literary work, or a movie, or any other work of fiction, in order to avoid dealing with real-life matters or their consequences, a function prototypically attributed to fantasy.

one's understanding of it. As Rosemary Jackson (1988: 20) established, «fantasy re-combines and invents the real, but it does not escape it (...). The fantastic cannot exist independently of that "real" world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite». As such, what fantasy does is *alter* the real, in order to help us — to use Tolkien's (2014: 67) words — «clean our windows, so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity — from possessiveness». By framing reality differently, we are able to come to a better understanding of it, or come to better know its true nature, away from our familiarised — and therefore distorted — perception of it; thus, fairy-tales and fantasies are capable of, and in fact a suitable medium to transmit ideological values.

In the case of *Spinning Silver*, in spite of the obvious inspiration taken from the fairy-tale, Novik employs elements and storytelling tropes that can be considered to be traditionally fantastic, such as the medievalist setting and the rigid social class system emblematic of the high fantasy subgenre. Another important fantastic element would be the existence of a humanoid race of supernatural creatures, the Staryk, ice creatures who possess an inordinate strength, have the power to control winter, and are famed for their cruelty and hostility to humans. They are known not only for their capacity for magic, but also for their thirst for «sun-warmed» gold (Novik, 2019: 411), which they cannot obtain for themselves and thus raid out of human settlements. There are also other magical creatures in Novik's world, such as demons, who have the ability to possess human beings through magical bargain. Not only that: high magic exists in the world of Lithvas, and the possibility to perform great spells becomes available to the protagonists — but it always comes at a cost. This is reminiscent of the conception of magic found in works such as Tolkien's, where the possibility of corruption is always warned against, and the price of power is always high. This conception stands in contrast against magic as presented in the fairy-tale, as a wondrous deed that appears costless to perform, although bargains could be asked for in return for the performance itself.

On the other hand, and despite their similarities, it is important to highlight the fairy-tale as a distinct genre from fantasy: fairy-tales, or *Märchen*, are much closer to the earlier, oral traditions of myths and folktales, and as a result possess a series of features which are lost or modified in current fantasy. Firstly, fairy-tales have a very marked structure and style, the «Once upon a time» formula being the obvious example: this formulaic beginning places the story in an undetermined moment of the distant past, so that it is possible to

consider that the events take place within the known world — the one Tolkien refers to as «Primary World». The beginning of the story usually does nothing to contradict this impression, showing a protagonist that is usually poor and/or orphaned who sets out on a quest for fortune or to fulfil a seemingly impossible deed. However, a magical event takes place, something unexplainable by natural means — the protagonist may be miraculously aided in their quest by a fairy or a talking creature, or cursed by the evil forces at play; whatever the case, these magical forces are simply taken in stride as part of the story's premise, never explained nor marked as strange. Even though these events contradict the initial impression that the tale takes place within the primary world, they are naturalised as part of the story's secondary world, which links the fairy-tale genre to fantasy in general.

The fairy-tale is also traditionally expected to have a happy ending, although the original versions, directly compiled from oral tradition, are usually rather grim — fittingly with their didactic intent, as fairy-tales were meant to reward good behaviour and punish evil or disobedience. In spite of this, the «Consolation of the Happy Ending» (Tolkien, 2014: 75) is considered to be one of the hallmarks of the fairy-tale, and the reason why it is considered unrealistic or childish wish-fulfilment. I would, once again, cite Tolkien (2014: 75) on this subject: he holds that the happy ending or *eucatastrophe* «is not essentially "escapist", nor "fugitive". In this fairy-tale — or otherworld — setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace (...). It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance», meaning that a very present risk of failure is always necessary for the happy ending to be satisfactory at all. This tenet is also applicable to fantasy, especially high fantasy, which usually offers the deliverance of victory of the forces of good against evil after a difficult and seemingly hopeless battle; however, fantasies need not comply with the expectation of *eucatastrophe*, which is much more established in the case of the fairy-tale due to its stronger association with children.

In spite of the fantasy features mentioned above, these fairy-tale characteristics can also be traced within *Spinning Silver*, making it a hybrid form that never quite leans entirely towards one of the two genres. In fact, at times, the novel fits very closely with the fairy-tale mould in its development and style; Novik employs this mould to create certain expectations regarding her three female protagonists, which she then subtly yet firmly defies in order to turn the fairy-tale's original image of woman on its head.

2.1. *Spinning Silver* as feminist fairy-tale

Spinning Silver develops its plot through the narrations of three protagonists: Miryem, Wanda, and Irina. Of these, Miryem's parts resemble a fairy-tale the most, as they retell and reinvent the traditional fairy-tale of Rumpelstiltskin. Her narration follows the same plotline, with a few modifications: the poor, young protagonist lives in a very small village, and must keep her family from sinking into destitution. Hence, she takes over her father's job as a moneylender and sets out to provide for them, becoming wealthy in the process. This deed attracts the attention of the Staryk king, who commands that she turn silver into gold thrice over for him, promising his hand if she succeeds and death if she should fail. She thus unwittingly enters a bargain for her life and succeeds *without* any magical aid, but earns only the dubious reward of becoming queen to a kingdom she has never seen, wed to a man she does not know and in fact hates, much like the peasant girl in «Rumpelstiltskin».

Later on in the story, Miryem willingly makes a bargain with the Staryk, setting herself on another formulaic quest to turn every piece of silver within his three storerooms to gold, nearly exactly what «Rumpelstiltskin»'s peasant girl was made to do; the number three is prevalent in both the original and Novik's retelling, inherited from even more ancient folklore which establishes three as a magical number. The importance of bargains is also retained from «Rumpelstiltskin», where the imp turns straw into gold in exchange for the peasant girl's necklace, ring, and firstborn child. However, in this tale, the girl avoids the latter bargain by correctly guessing the imp's name; in Novik's work, the importance of upholding one's end of a bargain and making fair returns for a service given is much more emphasised, as it is vital to the Staryk people and is the basis by which their society functions. Finally, another interesting element which *Spinning Silver* preserves from «Rumpelstiltskin» is the importance of names, which stems from the popular belief that knowing the true names of things means having power over them.[2] When Miryem panics as the Staryk king forcibly takes her away to be his wife, she says «I don't even know your name!», to which he replies, enraged: «My *name*? You think to have my *name*? You shall have my hand, and my crown, and content yourself therewith; how dare you still demand more of me?» (Novik, 2019: 120-121). These features, carried over from «Rumpelstiltskin», are employed to subvert the possible anti-Semitic messages of the original tale. However, and interest-

2 This belief has featured prominently in several fantasies, a particularly well-known example being Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy.

ingly, Novik also uses these traditional fairy-tale elements to subvert expectations surrounding the gender of her characters, and therefore implicitly criticise the social oppression of women.

The fairy-tale has been considered a tool with the potential for feminist subversion ever since Alison Lurie first published her well-known «Folktale Liberation» (1991). Here, Lurie (1991: 32) argued that fairy-tales «are among the most subversive texts in children's literature. Often, though usually in disguised form, they support the rights of disadvantaged members of the population (...) against the establishment». Lurie's argument follows the logic that fairy-tales, as texts stemming from orally transmitted folklore, have always been in contact with the lower, discriminated spheres of society. Fairy-tales showed protagonists that belonged to marginalised groups (often women of humble origins) and included «sex, death, low humor, and especially female initiative» (Lurie, 1991: 37), which made them automatically dangerous for the status quo. Lurie's argument has prevailed throughout feminist fairy-tale scholarship,[3] although later feminist criticism was rather more critical with the fairy-tale format than this writer and scholar. Cristina Bacchilega, for instance, notes how fairy-tales tend to reproduce gendered myths and perpetuate archetypal images of femininity through technologies specific to the genre. This «naturalizing technology» of fairy-tales normalises «ideological expectations and unspoken norms», and reproduces «"Woman" as the mirror image of masculine desire» (Bacchilega, 1997: 29). She takes Snow White as a particularly fixed and pervasive example of the image of this «"natural" woman», although she believes it is possible to create postmodern reinventions of traditional fairy-tales which play «with its [the fairy tale's] framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices» (Bacchilega, 1997: 29, 23); interestingly, she adds that «gender is almost inevitably the privileged place for articulating these de-naturalizing strategies» (Bacchilega 1997: 23-24), meaning that gender is very often the site in which the subversion of the fairy-tale's archetypical, normalised images takes place.

This type of experimentation was later classified by Jack Zipes (2006: 178) into two different categories: in the first, called «transfiguration», «the author assumes that the young reader is already familiar with the classical tale and depicts the familiar in an estranging fashion. (...) The tendency is to break, shift, debunk, or rearrange the traditional motifs to liberate the reader from (...) the programmed mode of literary reception». The second category

3 Donald Haase (2000) offers an in-depth overview of significant works after Lurie.

he calls «fusion», which consists, as its name indicates, on «the fusion of traditional configurations with contemporary references within settings and plotlines unfamiliar to readers yet designed to arouse their curiosity and interest» (Zipes 2006: 178). Nonetheless, Zipes (2006: 178-179) underlines that, regardless of which type of experimentation is chosen, «what distinguishes the contemporary writers of liberating tales is their strident antisexist and antiauthoritarian perspective». I would classify *Spinning Silver* as a transfiguration experiment, as it preserves the features of the original fairy-tale while giving them a new, disruptive purpose.

This disruption plays on the overall structure of the fairy-tale and prototypical roles of its protagonist to set up certain expectations on the reader as to the story's development; these expectations are then dashed as Novik's protagonists leave behind the fairy-tale's image of «"natural" woman». This section thus intends to flesh out the fairy-tale features with which Novik plays in order to make an ideological statement regarding gender and female agency.

One possible example is the use of rhyme: at particularly dramatic or significant moments, the magical characters will repeat names in invocation and/or speak in rhyme, much like Rumpelstiltskin as he unknowingly reveals his name. The demon Chernobog usually speaks in rhymes: «*A chain of silver to bind him tight, a ring of fire to quench his might*» (Novik, 2019: 353), «Irina, Irina, what will you have? Name a gift, it shall be yours, name even two or three! Only take a payment from my hands and *give him true to me*»[4] (Novik, 2019: 355). The Staryk, on the other hand, tends to use the rhyming speech only at certain moments, which shows the particular importance bestowed on them: «As you have been true, so will I be, and in no lesser degree (...) I will lay my hand upon the flow of time, if need be, that you shall have however much of it you seek» (Novik, 2019: 274). The protagonists, however, do not do so; only Miryem does once, at one particular moment during her final battle against the demon. «Chernobog! Chernobog!», she says, «Chernobog, I give you my word! By high magic I'm going to close this mountain crack now, and shut you out for good!» (Novik, 2019: 447). This first time she uses this lyrical mode of speech could simply be an imitation of how she has seen these magical creatures speak, in order to give her words the quality of a spell; however, it could also be considered indicative that Miryem has become powerful enough to match the magical creatures who have thus far been using the rhyme. The second hypothesis seems more likely, given that her power has

4 Emphasis in both quotes in original.

grown so great that she performs the considerable deed of defeating Chernobog at the height of his power single-handedly, without help, and thus becomes the heroine of the Staryk.

This is only one example, but all three female characters deviate from the expectations which the fairy-tale settings place upon them. Wanda, the poor and drunken farmer's daughter, must work to earn her family's living; to buy himself more alcohol and food, her father tries to sell her off to a man to marry, but instead of complying, Wanda refuses, in her first true act of will. Irina, the duke's daughter, fails her father's initial expectations of a beautiful and elegant daughter who could marry well; however, she does not end up a burdensome lonely spinster as he expected, either, as she manages to marry the tsar Mirnatius and become tsarina. Her intelligence and wit enable her to escape having her soul consumed by Chernobog, and she demonstrates being an excellent tactical thinker, a skilled people-reader and careful manipulator. Finally, Miryem, the moneylender's daughter, must also take work to save her family from poverty; but she does so by taking over her father's business, a traditionally male occupation, and even becomes rich in the process. None of the three female protagonists receive the fortuitous magical aid characteristic of fairy-tales: they all either work for their power, or achieve it on their own. For instance, Miryem is able to «turn» the silver to gold without bargaining with a magical imp: she takes the Staryk's silver to a jeweller, who makes a ring, a necklace[5] and a crown out of it, and sells them to the duke for gold (hence how Irina comes to have them). It is by making this seemingly impossible task possible that Miryem *earns* the power to turn things into gold by sheer will once she is in the Staryk's realm.

There is also the fact that most characters and actions in the story are morally grey, including the protagonists. There are very few characters that could be considered purely good or purely evil (such as Miryem's parents or Chernobog), which means the straightforward simplicity of the fairy-tale is nowhere to be found. There is no pure right or wrong: the Staryk appear to be hostile forces of evil, but are actually simply people seeking to protect themselves from extinction; the tsar Mirnatius, of famed beauty and cruelty, is actually possessed by the demon Chernobog, who can in fact erase the tsar's mind and will completely. Irina believes Mirnatius bargained with the creature to become tsar, but he reveals that he «never had the chance to bargain for a thing» (Novik, 2019: 367), as it was his mother who bargained with

5 These two items match exactly with the ones that Rumpelstiltskin asked the peasant girl for in payment for his deeds.

the demon and used her son as payment. Mirnatius thus becomes the parallel to the child that «Rumpelstiltskin» bargained with the peasant girl for, and an example of the overall lack of clear-cut good and evil factions. This lack forces the protagonists to face difficult moral decisions, and hence become morally grey themselves. Irina, trapped between two evils, chooses the lesser one and tries to save the people of Lithvas by sacrificing the Staryk and his people to Chernobog's hunger, planning to get Mirnatius burned at the stake afterwards to rid the kingdom of the demon's influence. She owes herself to her duty as a ruler, and therefore does not hesitate, but her inner monologue betrays the conflict brought on by her decision: «I knew all of it would happen, and I wouldn't put out my hand to stop it, even now that I knew Mirnatius himself was innocent. I still wouldn't save him (...) and condemn Lithvas to the flame in his place (...). But it would leave me cold inside again, too» (Novik, 2019: 405).

Miryem, on the other hand, knows Irina's plan, and is thus faced with the choice of helping the Staryk against Chernobog while putting her family and home world at risk, or leaving the Staryk to die at the demon's hands and carry their deaths on her conscience. Her moral conflict is also carefully depicted throughout her narration: «I didn't have a country to do it for [like Irina]. I only had people, so what about *those* people: what about Flek, and Tsop, and Shofer, whose lives I'd bound to mine, and a little girl I'd given a Jewish name like a gift, before I'd gone away to destroy her home?» (Novik, 2019: 377). The complexity of the moral decisions faced by the protagonists sets *Spinning Silver* apart from the fairy-tale genre, and indeed from most of high fantasy; not only that, the presence of moral ambiguities forbids the fairy-tale moral that the protagonists are rewarded with a happy ending only because of their inherent goodness. Furthermore, as Bacchilega had explained, fairy-tales were initially built for the preservation and perpetuation of an image of woman which lived up to male desires, as well as to uphold the status quo of the social relationship male/female. Novik's transfigured fairy-tale puts a stop to this perpetuation; her use of traits from the original material creates expectations regarding the characters and their paths, expectations which are consistently defied and re-built as the three girls seize control of their own fate, defying patriarchal constrictions surrounding them without putting any special powers to use. Wanda works to protect herself and her brothers, and ends up living the independent life she had wished for; Irina holds a position of power that defies standards of male domination, and uses it selflessly to protect others; and Miryem defies the boundaries of what was possible for

her, earning a magic beyond her wildest dreams, and ends by making herself and her wishes respected — marrying only when she wishes to do so, and in her own terms.

The above are examples of *Spinning Silver*'s subversion of gender roles, and of the image of women in canonical fantasies and classic fairy-tales, a subversion implicit in the treatment and development of her three protagonists. However, the ideological message of the tale does not end here, as Novik pointedly includes Judaism within the fantasy world of Lithvas and gives it a significant role in Miryem's life. The religious situation in Lithvas is similar to that of the real world: Christian mythology and imagery characterise the major religion (although its name is never stated), whereas Judaism is included as a minority religion belonging to a minority group. This inclusion makes the expression of ideology and the denunciation of real oppressions move from the implicit to the explicit in Novik's fantasy; I would, therefore, like to discuss the rejection of anti-Semitism separately in the next section.

2.2. Judaism in *Spinning Silver*

As has been explained, *Spinning Silver* encourages the reader's expectations towards a pure fantasy by its narrative style and the inclusion of its classic elements; this expectation is afterwards overturned by the atypical inclusion of Judaism, which stands out very clearly and even jarringly against the traditional, fantastic fairy-tale background of the story, as it is a religion that belongs directly to the reader's primary world. The decision to include this religion as part of the tale was prompted partly by the fact that this is a retelling of «Rumpelstiltskin», a tale which — as Novik is well aware — presents certain traits that can be read as anti-Semitic, especially the premise of an impish, ugly little man who greedily bargains for riches and tries to steal children.

Novik explicitly states that, through her retelling, she wanted to argue against these tropes: «Fairy tales are not set in stone, (...) they are meant to be re-told. But sometimes it's also an impulse to argue and I think that's probably evident in *Spinning Silver*; I wasn't just re-telling Rumpelstiltskin, I was yelling at Rumpelstiltskin» (Greengrass, 2018). This overt desire not only to retell, but also to respond to the original tale, prompted Novik's choice to make Miryem Jewish and to make her explicitly contest the fairy-tale itself. At the beginning of the novel, Miryem addresses the reader directly with «The real story isn't half as pretty as the one you've heard» (Novik, 2019: 3), and proceeds to retell

«Rumpelstiltskin» from her point of view, wherein a moneylender takes the place of the fabled imp: the miller's daughter borrows from the moneylender to buy jewellery and make a rich lord notice her; he then «tumbles her in a quiet hayloft, and afterwards he goes home and marries the rich woman his family has picked out for him» (Novik, 2019: 3); the miller's daughter then proceeds to tell everyone the moneylender's a servant of the devil so that «the village runs him out or maybe even stones him, so at least she gets to keep the jewels for a dowry» (Novik, 2019: 3). This makes it very clear what the moral of the story actually is, to Miryem at least: «getting out of paying your debts» (2019: 3). Miryem grows up hearing this altered version of Rumpelstiltskin's tale, as the people who owed her father money «told the story often, even or especially when [she] could hear it» (Novik 2019, p. 4); the writer points out that she therefore experiences a «sense of being oppressed by stories around [her]» (Pols, 2018), growing up hearing folk stories that create a stereotype around her and her people and which are meant to hurt them.

Nonetheless, even leaving «Rumpelstiltskin» aside, the presence of Judaism is very prevalent and in fact plays several significant roles in the tale. Miryem is very proud of her and her family's religious heritage, which is depicted in a very positive light throughout: for instance, Miryem's own name is a variation of the Hebrew name Miriam, and she names the Staryk child Rebekah, both very popular Jewish names. In addition, the religion itself is, in its entirety, taken out of its real-world context to be placed within the fantasy world: Miryem and her family pray together, read from the Torah, and observe Shabbat; they speak Hebrew with other Jews and use that language to pray; there are Jewish quarters in the cities, and so on. The religion Miryem and her family practice has no fictional element to it whatever. Neither does the discrimination they face from their neighbours, who are quite obviously — and unapologetically — anti-Semitic, to the point that even when Miryem is being spirited away to an unknown kingdom with a king she's deathly afraid of, she is not sorry to be leaving anyone other than her own family:

> I loved nothing about the town or any of them (...). I wasn't sorry they didn't like me, I wasn't sorry I had been hard to them. I was glad, fiercely glad. They had wanted me to bury my mother and leave my father behind to die alone. They had wanted me to go be a beggar in my grandfather's house and live the rest of my days a quiet mouse in the kitchen. They would have devoured my family and picked their teeth with the bones, and never been sorry at all. Better to be turned to ice by the Staryk, who didn't pretend to be a neighbor. (Novik, 2019: 103)

It is also worth mentioning that this discrimination extends well beyond Miryem's village and family. For instance, when Miryem does not understand why she is forbidden from telling anyone about the Staryk coming to her home, her mother tells her how the Staryk had once raided several villages, but «rode past Yazuda village, where the Jews lived, and they did not burn their houses. So the people said the Jews had made a pact with the Staryk. And now there are no Jews in Yazuda. Do you understand, Miryem?» (Novik, 2019: 42). This incident combines with others which are told in this fantasy world through Jewish oral lore — myths and folk stories that are generations old, and likely inspired by real events. One instance of this is the story Miryem recounts as told by her grandmother, who in turn had learned it from her own grandmother: a Jewish woman found a wounded fox and tended to it, and the fox promised to repay the favour; years later, the fox came back and told the woman to take all of her money and hide with her family in the cellar. Upon coming out, they «found their house and the synagogue and all their neighbor's houses on every side burned down», and ran away to the great city of «Vysnia, where the duke then had opened the doors to the Jews, if they came with money» (Novik, 2019: 57). This story, with its fairy-tale like structure, is probably inspired by the slaughtering and burning of Jewish families and their houses that actually took place within this world, which is reminiscent of the events taking place during the Holocaust. It also explains the existence of the Jewish quarter in Vysnia, where Miryem's grandparents and extended family live.

The realistic depiction of Judaism extends further to the religious and social hierarchy of these Jewish quarters: the rabbis are mentioned several times as respected religious leaders, and reunite with other important wealthy people in order to discuss political matters and consult each other on significant decisions: «people addressed him [Miryem's grandfather] formally (...), and at the table he and several other men discussed seriously the politics of the quarter, and often settled arguments there, among themselves, as though they had a right to do it» (Novik, 2019: 35). This means, in turn, that Jewish traditions are very present in Miryem's life, particularly that of matchmaking. Since Miryem is automatically forced to marry the Staryk king after succeeding in the task he set her, she does not get the chance to visit a matchmaker to consider and perhaps approve of the match, but she does go to her grandfather seeking advice. To Miryem's surprise, he is unfazed and in fact reacts quite naturally: «At least he's not a fool, this Staryk, to want a wife for such a reason» he says, referring to her skill in turning silver into gold. Upon noticing Miryem's surprise, he explains «It's not what you would have looked for,

but there's worse things in life than to be a queen» (Novik, 2019: 109). By doing so, he acts as an unprofessional matchmaker for Miryem, which reassures her, because it makes being kidnapped and forced into marriage become «an ordinary match, to be discussed and considered, even if it wasn't really. (...) After all, in cold hard terms it *was* a catch, for a poor man's daughter» (Novik, 2019: 109). Thus, the matchmaking tradition — which considers the suitability of the match in terms of what each prospective spouse can bring to it — acts as a kind of refuge for Miryem when faced with the inability to choose whether she wants to marry the Staryk at all. At the end of the tale, however, when she *does* choose to marry him willingly, she is adamant that the king follow the traditions of her people or not marry her at all:

> «If you really wanted to court me,» I said, «you'd have to do it by *my* family's laws, and you'd have to marry me the same way (...).» (...) I wouldn't regret any man who wouldn't do that, no matter what else he was or offered me; that much had lived in my heart all my life, a promise between me and my people, that my children would still be Israel no matter where they lived (...).
>
> We were married two weeks later: a small wedding only in that little house, but my grandfather and grandmother came from Vysnia with the rabbi (...). And my husband held my hands under the canopy, and drank the wine with me, and broke the glass. (Novik, 2019: 465-466)

These are, however, not the only times where Miryem adheres to her religious tradition. For instance, when she and Irina conceive a plan to have the Staryk and Chernobog fight (and hopefully kill each other). As Miryem grows apprehensive, she recalls the myth of Judith and Holofernes to reassure herself of the righteousness of her actions:

> It felt like murder — no, I wouldn't lie to myself; it *was* murder, if it worked. But after all, the Staryk seemed to think it perfectly reasonable to murder *me*, and (...) I wasn't sure I was even really married. I'd ask a rabbi, if I ever had the chance to talk to one again. But married or not, I was reasonably sure that the rabbis would tell me that I might justly take Judith for my model, and take off the Staryk's head if he gave me the opportunity. He was the enemy of my people, not just me alone. (Novik, 2019: 216)

The parallelism with Judith resurfaces anew later on, when Miryem finds out the Staryk uses the gold raided from human villages — and obtained from her own power — in order to hold the winter over the land, thus making Miryem an agent in the slow destruction of her own home:

> He was still holding my hand in his. I left it there deliberately, thinking of Judith singing in her sweet voice to make Holofernes's eyes go heavy in his tent, and what else she'd endured there first. I could bear this. (...) *Let* him think he had me, and could have my heart for the lifting of his finger. *Let* him think I would betray my people and my home just to be a queen beside him. (...) I'd lost even the slightest qualm about killing him. (Novik, 2019: 325)

Miryem is even able to utilise the traditional Jewish customs resourcefully when she is trapped in the Staryk's kingdom: she wants to know the time in her own world, and explains to the king that she needs to know in order to celebrate Shabbat. When he is unconcerned, she threatens to keep Shabbat every day in that case: «It's forbidden to do work on Shabbat, and I'm quite sure that turning silver to gold counts as work» (Novik, 2019: 179). Of course, the king threatens her life in return, since withholding her gift makes her automatically not valuable to him, but Miryem stands her ground and uses a supposed unwavering fidelity to religious belief in order to get her way:

> I looked him squarely in the face. «It's a commandment of my people, and if I haven't broken it to cook food when I was hungry, or to wake a fire when I was cold, or to accept money when I was poor, you needn't expect me to break it for *you*.»
>
> Of course that was nonsense (...). My people didn't make a special virtue of dying for our religion (...) and you were supposed to break Shabbat to save a life, including your own. But he didn't need to know that. (Novik, 2019: 179)

Thus, through scenes such as the examples above, Judaism as a religion, as well as the adherence to and respect for its belief and tradition, are depicted very positively. Novik does not stop here, however: she goes even further, seizing one of the main stereotypes regarding Jews — greediness and money-hunger, to the point of indifference and cruelty — and applying it throughout the tale, starting from the fact that Miryem belongs to a family of moneylenders. Her grandfather would, initially, correspond to the stereotype: he is one of the most successful and better known moneylenders of the country, has a big trading business on top of it and has a strong influence in the city. In turn, this means he looks at the hardships of others from a hardened, business-like point of view. Miryem herself begins to take after him, as she handles the business herself and becomes cold-hearted in order to reclaim the money that is owed to her father without remorse. Indeed, the stereotype becomes almost true in her character, as Miryem proves to be extremely business-savvy, and grows proud of her ability to sell for gold the things she had bought for silver.

On the other hand, Miryem's mother and father are depicted as kind and generous, in spite of her father also being in the moneylending business; he is in fact *too* generous, as his lenience with his clients ended up driving the family to poverty. In spite of this, and very significantly, the Jewish family is portrayed as being much more kind-hearted than the non-Jewish village people: Miryem's parents are one of the few people to treat Wanda and her brothers (whose father is an abusive drunkard) with the affection and respect that they so sorely need, and they never repay the vile treatment of their neighbours in kind, responding instead with civility and benevolence. In making Miryem's parents genuinely kind-hearted and warm people, Novik indeed subverts the greedy-and-cruel Jew stereotype, but the author does not shy away from showing the more complex sides of it, either: though the parents' goodness and generosity are portrayed positively, they also cause Miryem's father to be taken advantage of, which ends up driving the family into near-destitution. Conversely, Miryem's apparent cold-heartedness and indifference to others anger the villagers and sadden her parents, who loathe to see Miryem turning herself to ice for the sake of gold; however, Miryem's goal in doing so is saving her family from poverty and starvation, which is depicted as not simply the logical course of action, but the honourable one. Furthermore, she takes over the business because she does not want to be a source of shame for her grandfather, or to see her grandmother weep for them when they visit, or to accept the charity of her mother's family; she wants health and comfort for herself and her parents, so that rather than being seen as selfish or greedy, it is depicted as a worthy and respectable goal. An interesting fact about Miryem taking over the business in the exact same period when her home begins to be stalked by the Staryk is that Miryem actually becomes better able to understand her father's meekness in his job: «For a single sharp moment I thought of letting the dresses go cheap, to leave a friendly feeling behind me, a feeling that might argue for me if someone began to speak of the Staryk road and how near it was to our house» (Novik, 2019: 52). Her father was already concerned about the ostracising their religion provoked, so he likely did not wish to further antagonise the villagers by collecting their money — even if it was justly owed to him —, a feeling which Miryem only understands when she is placed in the same position.

To finish off the discussion, it is important to mention that the author herself is open about her wish to convey the feeling of persecution that comes alongside being Jewish: «I wanted to capture that sense that in your everyday life you're constantly on guard and you're constantly suspicious of the people in your community and you feel yourself disliked by them; that sense of a kind

of everyday oppression» (Greengrass, 2018). Such wish undoubtedly stems from her own parental background, which she used as inspiration for her fictional stories, as she explains in her interviews: «*Spinning Silver* is about my father's family, and they were Lithuanian Jews who had to escape persecution — not just from the Nazis, but from their own neighbours» (Jackson, 2018). Knowing this makes it rather obvious why the story is so deliberately charged with an ideological message against anti-Semitism. However, in spite of the fact that she takes inspiration from these real events, Novik places the story «in a deliberately unrealistic world — in a fairy tale world — because that's what the place they [her parents' stories] came from was to me» (Jackson, 2018). It must be taken into account that Novik herself was born in America and therefore removed from the original context of her parents' countries. Never having experienced these events directly, she takes the primary-world experience of Judaism and uses fantasy in order to translate it to readers who, like herself, were never directly faced with this type of discrimination. In doing so, Novik disavows the universality of the fantasy hero in order to focus on the very specific circumstances which surround a marginalised protagonist; she almost entirely leaves metaphor aside in favour of revealing the often invisible everyday struggles of an oppressed collective, while utilising the fantasy elements to enhance the criticism of stereotypes and of widespread anti-Semitism. This belies the so-called escapism of fantasy, and indeed proves that it is very much possible to employ a fantastic story in a socially conscious and subversive manner: while the fiction itself does allow the reader to «escape» into a fantasy world where a simple, human girl is capable of developing a magical power that allows her to take control of the fate not just of her family, but of her whole world, the reality of Miryem's belonging to a marginalised group is never far out of sight, neither for herself nor for others. The reality of anti-Semitism and of the oppression which Jewish people face, not simply from the ruling classes but also from their neighbours and clients, is neither hidden nor denied within Novik's fantasy world; it is explicitly presented, and further, explicitly condemned, both within the fiction and, by extension, outside of it by the author herself.

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to observe the expression of explicit ideology within the contemporary, young adult fantasy novel *Spinning Silver*. Firstly, the two main points in common of fantasy and fairy-tale were consid-

ered: (1) the unexplained presence of magical events and creatures, which leads to its perception as a children's genre; and (2) its escapist function, which implies that fantasy fiction runs away from real-world problems instead of having the fictional world confront them. The fairy-tale, on the other hand, shares the unexplained magic with fantasy, but is more characterised by its formulaic plots, simplistic style, and didactic intent, by which the stories punish disobedient or bad behaviour and reward goodness; the fairy-tale is also expected to have a happy ending in spite of the protagonists' vicissitudes, something which it shares with epic fantasy. *Spinning Silver* distinguishes itself by the mixture and interplay of the features of both genres in its plot and style: it introduces a world where magic and magical creatures exist, as well as limited protagonists who must battle against incredible powers. On the other hand, because it is a retelling of «Rumpelstiltskin», Novik's novel retains several fairy-tale elements, which encourage a set of expectations in the reader towards certain developments as concerns the plot; expectations which the novel then proceeds to subvert. The three main female characters deviate from the usual moulds of both genres; they receive no miraculous aid that they have not earned themselves. Furthermore, they face difficult moral decisions, a moral ambiguity which sets the tale apart from the apparent simplicity of the fairy-tale. In this way, the novel deviates from fantasy and fairy-tale canons regarding women and their roles, defying the reader's assumptions; this play with canonical features allows to create an effective social critique through a seemingly entirely fantastic narrative. This critique is implicitly directed towards the patriarchal institutions which created the canonical images of women against which this novel works, but it is driven home most especially by the inclusion of a real-world religion within the fantasy and the explicit denunciation of the discrimination it entails.

Thus, the generalised regard of fantasies (and fairy-tales) as either unconcerned with reality, or concerned with it only in an indirect and metaphorical manner, ignores the real scope of possibility which fantasy provides for the expression of ideological stances and the subversion of hegemonic social conceptions. This is not to say that the use of fantasy as a metaphor for truthful human experiences cannot be just as effective in this regard; however, it is also possible for fantasy to be much more explicit about its position when it comes to social controversies, instead of using the fictional elements as a substitute or stand-in for their real counterparts. *Spinning Silver* proves this by directly including Judaism within its world, and having one of its protagonists face discrimination on the basis of her religion. Novik does not create a fictional, fantastic religion to use it as a stand-in for Judaism, nor does she

explore anti-Semitism in a veiled or roundabout manner. Instead, Miryem and her family are unambiguously Jewish, use the Jewish language and follow and respect Jewish religious traditions, which makes an equivocal reading rather difficult. As such, they practice a real-world religion and confront real-world struggles, only within a different context. This explicit inclusion of religion serves to exploit the ideological possibilities of fantasy, perhaps more profitably than metaphor or the creation of fictional practices to act as metaphors for the real ones: Novik's development of a fantasy world in order to stage a real-world problem eliminates the reader's initial preconceptions about Judaism, deconstructing stereotypes and familiarising the religion to them, thus opening the door for the readers to empathise with the struggles faced by the protagonist — and hence, perhaps, to the realisation of their own prejudice and the part they play in oppressive power dynamics.

It is thus through fantasy that Naomi Novik «cleans our windows», as Tolkien (2014: 67) had put it. *Spinning Silver* constitutes, in conclusion, a relevant example of how it is very much possible to employ fantasy as an ideological weapon to speak out against the oppression and unfairness that marginalised communities face within the real world; Novik's tale demonstrates that it is possible to carry out this ideological message overtly within and through fantasy, hence making fantasy's involvement with reality obvious and disproving the claims of escapism which surround the genre. The increasing popularity of young adult fantasy in the contemporary literary scene, both with authors and with the general public, is proof that marginalised communities are finding in this genre the possibility to counteract the hegemonic ideologies which placed them in this marginalised position in the first place.

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