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# Why Cinderella's Mother Becomes a Cow

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/25/ In an inspiring essay, “Hypertextual Gutenberg: The Textual and Hypertextual Life of Folktales and Fairy Tales in English-Language Popular Print Editions,” Donald Haase hails “a concept of textuality that views each tale not as a text assigned to a permanent place in a linear succession or hierarchy that takes us back to an original or primary form, but as a component in a larger web of texts that are linked to each other in multiple ways and have equal claim to our attention” (225). Perceptively, Haase associates the scholarly focus on variants as intertexts with a “renewed interpretive interest in tale types and variants” (224), and he submits that books that approximate hypertext “create the potential for a very different—more cerebral? more scholarly?—experience of the folktale” (228).

Haase is well aware that the intertextual approach he advocates for the digital age is of crucial importance in the study of oral folktales. As Alan Dundes (“Fairy Tales,” 261) insisted, oral narratives convey themes through multiple variations; therefore folklorists face the problem of “the remarkable stability of the essential story in the midst of continually shifting details,” as Stith Thompson (437) put it.

A famous attempt to explain this phenomenon—Walter Anderson’s law of self-correction (399–406)—assumes that there is somehow a benchmark for correctness. But, in fact, we do not find such benchmarks in oral traditions (I discuss this matter in “Tradition” 43). Folktales transform each other endlessly, none being more “correct” than the rest. Hence, explaining the remarkable stability of stories in the midst of continually shifting details requires a different approach.

/26/ In devising an alternative approach, I take a clue from Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev, who pointed out that in oral settings stories and motifs will die out if they are not retold over and over. Therefore, Jakobson and Bogatyrev argued, the creations of individual tale-tellers will endure only insofar as they are accepted and retold—insofar as they survive the “preventive censorship of the community,” which tends to prune

away anything not in line with the community-shared values and norms (38). Given this cumulative mechanism of selective appropriations by the community in oral settings, materials in the traditional chain will tend to comply with the extant norm. In other words, folktales will variously convey the values of the community. So it is relevant to ask, How do you grasp aspects of worldview embedded in the tales (as opposed to projecting your own worldview on the tales)?

To answer this question, I take a leaf out of Alan Dundes' script. I assume that a tale can only come in many variants, and yet remain stable, because the variants tell the same story by means of different (but equivalent) motifs. As Dundes pointed out that if a number of motifs can fill the same slot in a tale—if the story works with any of them—then a comparison of the available allomotifs should clarify why those motifs are permutable. In Dundes's words, if we examine a range of allomotifs "we may gain access to implicit native formulations of symbolic equivalences" (*Parsing*, 168; see also Dundes, *Meaning*, 319–24).

But in the following discussion I venture beyond a simple comparison of allomotifs in the variants of a given tale. One step ahead, I also compare motifs in tales and in correlated folk customs in order to catch glimpses of traditional notions informing the tales and the customs.

And here is my pretext. From the Iberian Peninsula to Greece and Turkey, folktales present Cinderella's dead mother as a horned animal—most often a cow, sometimes a sheep. The stability of this oral trait across Europe is remarkable. Certainly, it does not depend on a literary benchmark. What, then, is its *raison d'être*? To discover a nexus of shared assumptions that might explain this persistent image, I examine a number of "Cinderella" oral variants and some related folk materials across Europe.

### **Mother into Cow**

The Iberian tradition of "Cinderella" often presents a stepdaughter who is sent out to mind a cow while she performs impossible spinning tasks. The cow pities the girl, feeds her, and completes her spinning tasks. But then the stepmother has the cow slaughtered and sends the girl to wash the entrails, and the dead cow bestows something on the girl that sets her on her path to marriage. For example, a Portuguese variant called "The Hearth-Cat" states that a ball of gold coming out of the cow's entrails leads the heroine to meet helping fairies, /27/ who bestow on her the gift of producing pearls and gold as she speaks, along with "every blessing" (Pedroso, 76). The continu-

ity between the helpful cow and the fairies suggests that they are both emanations of the dead mother, although in Iberia this link tends to remain implicit.

Elsewhere in Europe the link between the mother, the cow, and the fairies is explicit. A Corsican variant recounts that the girl murders her mother by dropping the lid of a big storage chest on her body. Thus she cuts her mother's body in two—the top half of the mother becomes a "saint," whereas the lower half becomes a cow. The saint provides the daughter with a golden star on her forehead, whereas the slaughtered cow's stomach yields three apples that help the girl (Giacomo-Marsellesi, 123–27). This split of the murdered mother into a cow and a saint precisely matches the direct link between the helping cow and fairies in the Portuguese tale.

By way of confirmation of this pattern, consider a third variant. In "The Black Cow," a Turkish text, a girl causes her mother to turn into a black cow. The prescient cow advises her daughter that after she is slaughtered the girl must keep her bones buried under a rosebush. From these bones, a fairy will emerge to provide the girl with everything she needs to go to a wedding feast (Kúnos, *Türk*, 164–67).<sup>1</sup>

Mutatis mutandis, the three variants tell the same story. In the Turkish story the mother becomes a black cow, and from her buried bones a fairy emerges who provides shining clothes and money; in the Corsican variant the mother's lower body becomes a cow whose stomach provides apples, whereas the upper body turns into a saint who provides the girl with a golden star on her forehead; and in the Portuguese tale the guts of the motherly cow yield a golden ball that takes the girl to the fairies who bestow on her the gift of producing gold and pearls. If we treat these parallel formulations of the mother's dual role toward her daughter as a set of allomotifs, a basic pattern emerges. The cow aspect of the mother appears variously linked to corruptible innards, the lower body, an earthly pit, and blackness, whereas her saintly or fairy form is associated with incorruptible bones, the upper body, elevation, and a golden shine.

This comparative sketch raises a fundamental question. After the mother dies she turns into a cow, which is slaughtered, and she is associated with a fairy or a saint. So, does the mother die twice? We are still not in a position to clarify the mother's

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1.:/35/ Şükriye Ruhi kindly translated this tale for me from the Turkish rendering of a collection first published in Hungarian by Ignác Kúnos as *Török népmesék* (1889). In this discussion I also peruse other tales from a partial English translation (Kúnos *Forty-Four Fairy Tales*) that does not contain "The Black Cow."

afterlife, but I will return to this matter.

In the meantime, let me focus on something more manageable. The dead cow provides a ball of gold, or bones, or apples to her daughter. It is clear that these items are allomotifs, but they do not appear to be of the same ilk. First, whereas bones and the ball of gold clearly have in common being incorruptible materials (in contrast with the cow's flesh and entrails), the apples do not /28/ share this attribute. So one may ask, Why are apples permutable with bones and the golden ball? Second, the two incorruptible items seem hardly comparable, because the bones are buried in a dark pit and the golden ball has a solar hue. Why, then, are buried bones interchangeable with a heavenly-oriented ball? Let me take up the two problems, one after the other, and see what the emerging solutions may have in common.

### **Apples and Roses**

The fact that in the Turkish tale the mother's bones are buried under a rosebush is relevant to this discussion. Given the close association between roses and apples in fairy tales, checking what there is in common between apples and roses may help us to understand their shared connection with bones. Take a few examples. A dream told by a woman in a Sicilian tale firmly places apples in a field of juicy redness and fragrant flowers: "Oh! Oh! What a dream I had! It was [as] if many cherries and apples were hanging before my mouth. I saw lots of roses, pink carnations, jasmine, and other flowers" (Zipes and Russo, 154). In another story, two princesses respectively give their savior an apple and a pomegranate as a token of themselves (Zipes and Russo, 351). In Turkish tales, apples likewise represent maidens, young women turn into apples, and these fruits bestow fertility on sterile couples (Kúnos, *Forty-Four Fairy Tales*, 19, 73, 78, 117–25, 161, 217, 312). In a Turkish variant of the *Snow White* theme (ATU 709), a young woman named Pomegranate bleeds and then roses spring from her blood (Kúnos, *Forty-Four Fairy Tales*, 178). And in Giambattista Basile's "The Little Slave Girl," a young woman who jumped over a rose bush and ate a rose petal becomes pregnant (Basile, 195–96).

In these examples roses and apples are linked to maidens in bloom and to pregnancy, which suggests that they represent the fertile blood of womanhood. This conjecture actually helps us to grasp why the Turkish black cow transmits to her daughter the ability to get married under, specifically, roses. In the same vein a Portuguese variant of the *Snow White* theme, "The Flower of the Rose," specifies that the mother is named Rose and that the daughter is the Flower of the Rose (Barbosa, 107–08). So, in both

the Turkish and the Portuguese variants we find a rosebush linking a mother and her daughter.

This is not really surprising, because roses and other flowers are a widespread metaphor for feminine blood—a metaphor we use when we call the first sexual act a “deflowering.” Seemingly, the rationale for this quite widespread metaphor is that the appearance of blood foreshadows procreation, just as in plants the flower precedes the fruit (see a fuller discussion and sources in Vaz da Silva *Archeology* 63–65). Granted, the Portuguese and the Turkish variants /29/ address this metaphor from different points of view. “The Flower of the Rose” recounts that the envious mother resents her daughter for taking over the rose bloom position (as befits the Snow White theme), whereas “The Black Cow” depicts the devoted mother passing on to her daughter the means for marriage (as suits the Cinderella theme). Still, both variants convey by means of roses the notion of fertility as a link between a mother and her daughter. And in the Corsican tale the mother/cow leaves three apples to her daughter and instructs the girl to eat one, which also fits the pattern of a transmission of fertility.

In short, both the apples and the rosebush arguably connote a transmission of fertility between the dead mother and her nubile daughter. But we are still clueless regarding the role of bones in this transmission. How do osseous remains compare to roses and apples?

### **Bones and Seed**

In an interesting paper on a Turkish variant of ATU 123, “The Wolf and the Kids,” Şükriye Ruhi addresses to some extent “the belief in the power of bones in Turkish communities” (63). She notes that in the tale, “the bone motif is closely related to ideas regarding protection, rejuvenation, and conception” (67). Ruhi mentions that the “worst kind of swear words to be uttered to a person in Eastern Anatolia is one directed to the bones of a deceased parent” (72), and she quotes the belief “that the bones are the last to rot since the soul will be reborn by entering the bones” (67). In another formulation, bones are the container of “the most important soul” (67). From these data it seems safe to conclude that bones contain the soul essence of lineages, that they represent the continuity of a kin group, its rejuvenation over time.

The notion that bones contain the soul is quite ancient. Plato, in *Timaeus* (73b–91b), states that the life bonds that unite the soul and the body are in the marrow of bones, “and they are the root and foundation of the human race.” Such marrow containing

the soul he calls “seed”—and this is to be taken literally, for Plato specifies that the “marrow of generation” flows down from the most celestial part of the body, the head, along the backbone and into the organs of procreation. This image of bones containing the seed of procreation certainly preexists Plato, for there are testimonies to its existence in ancient Babylon and in Egypt (Sauneron; Yoyotte). Anthropologist Françoise Héritier draws on such data to summarize the underlying notion. As she puts it, “The living are the fruit of their ancestors’ seed... In the bones lies the principle of uninterrupted transmission of life” (“Semen,” 170).

To get back to the bones motif in the *Cinderella* theme, consider a Greek variant from southern Peloponnese. This text presents Cinderella as the /30/ youngest of three sisters who spin thread along with their mother. After the mother breaks her thread three times, the two elder sisters turn her into a cow. Cinderella keeps the cow company in the fields until the elder sisters slaughter and eat the animal. But Cinderella abstains from eating the cow’s flesh; instead she buries the bones and incenses them every day for forty days afterward. Then the mother tells her daughter in a dream that the finery she will need for getting married is inside of nuts buried along with the bones. Another Greek variant from the same region specifies that the magic items are to be found inside the mother’s bones (Xanthakou 9–13, 23).

So we meet again the contrast between flesh and bones. But now we are in a position to realize that this contrast is part and parcel of an ancient folk model of procreation, of which Aristotle provides an early example. In *Generation of Animals* Aristotle argues that womb blood is the “nutriment or material from which the foetus can be framed by the power coming from the male” (727b), whose seed contains “soul or a part of soul, or something containing soul” (734a). Plato in *Timaeus* (73b–74a) likewise refers to the soul as “the divine seed” that God “planted” in the brain marrow like in a “field.” And, just as God creates in men, so men procreate in women. As anthropologist Carol Delaney (“Mortal Flow,” 86) reports, modern Turkish villagers maintain that the male “seed” carries “the spark of life,” whereas the female body is “life-supporting and sustaining like the earth.”

Delaney, in line with feminist anthropological critiques of Aristotle’s model of procreation (see, e.g., Héritier-Augé, “Older Women”), highlights the extreme androcentric bias underlying the notion that women are like mere nurturing fields, whereas men provide the seed containing the child. She also argues that the metaphor of feminine earthly fields and masculine heavenly

seeds has been the dominant folk theory in the West (“Seeds of Honor,” 38; *Seed*, 8–13). As we will see, though, fairy-tale allomotifs hint at tantalizing counter-dominant uses of this hegemonic model.

But here is my point. The ancient notion that bones are on the side of heaven and contain the soul provides, at long last, an explanation as to why the buried bones in the Turkish tale are an allomotif of the ball of gold in the Portuguese text. To clarify this point, let me take a broader view for a moment. In his magnum opus on kinship, Claude Lévi-Strauss (454) drew attention to what he called the leitmotif of theories of procreation extant in East Asia, between India and Siberia, which assume that a person’s bones come from the father and that the flesh comes from the mother. But, in fact, the ethnographic span of this idea is much wider. Anthropologist Sandra Ott (703–06) found a variation of the Aristotelian model of procreation among a Pyrenean community of Basque shepherds in the 1970s. She was told that procreation—likened /31/ to cheese making, whereby rennet coagulates the milk and then hardens into the “bones” of cheese—is the result of the father’s white blood acting on the mother’s red blood. So the model of procreation that Lévi-Strauss calls attention to has been noted at the western tip of Eurasia too. It comprises the two aspects of procreation we have met so far. On the one hand, women contribute their blood to the fetus, which implies that the soft and red parts in a body come from the mother; on the other, bones contain seed because semen supposedly makes bones, and so the hard white parts of the body are inherited from the father.

So it would seem that the bones of Cinderella’s mother pass on to her daughter the male essence of the lineage, which agrees with the agnatic ideology extant in the Peloponnese and in Anatolia. According to the extant agricultural metaphor of procreation, babies come from the male seed nurtured in the womb; or the male seed bestows the soul principle that organizes the formless substance provided by women; or the male seed imparts the bones that shape up the flesh contributed by women. These are variants of a strongly agnatic model of procreation that emphasizes the male conceptive role at the expense of the female contribution (see Delaney, *Seed*, 54; cf. Xanthakou 20). Even so, Cinderella gets to extend her male-deprived family thanks to the bones received from her mother, and the Turkish variant specifies that the bones are buried under a rosebush. These tales certainly convey the dominant association between semen and heavenly spark in the image of bones yielding all the glittering finery needed to attract the prince. And yet, tantalizingly, they depict women transmitting among themselves the



seed of the lineage along with their own “roses,” which offers a glimpse of symbolic counterpoints to the discourse of male monopoly over procreation.

### **Greek Tales: Helping Cow as Wandering Soul**

However this may be, it is time to face the big question: Why does Cinderella’s mother become a cow? Becoming a cow amounts to dying, but afterward the cow is slaughtered—so, does Cinderella’s mother die twice? We are back to the main problem underlying this discussion: What does the image of Cinderella’s mother becoming a cow express about her afterlife?

I can now address this question because the Peloponnese variants that describe the bones of the cow being incensed for a period of forty days, and then exhumed, broach the subject of the mother’s afterlife. Ethnologist Margarita Xanthakou (25, 27–28) clarifies that the forty-day period expresses the belief in an intermediate period in which the soul of the deceased is deemed particularly dangerous because it lingers around the living while the corpse decays. /32/ Supposedly, on the fortieth day the bones are freed from flesh and the soul is free to depart to its final destination in Hades. Moreover, says Xanthakou, the exhumation of the bones corresponds to an actual custom of second burial in connection with this belief. Three years after someone’s death, the bones are exhumed, washed, and then buried in their final grave.

So, here we are. According to a folk belief reflected in the tale, between the first and the second burial there is an intermediate period in which the soul wanders close to the living while the corpse decays. In other words, there are two stages of death: the first burial starts the wandering period of the soul, and the second burial marks its final installation in the beyond. Now, the tale does not mention the burial of the dead mother; instead, it shows the mother turning into a cow. So the mother’s lingering in a cow shape corresponds to the post-mortem phase of wandering souls, and the final cleaning of the cow’s bones corresponds to the final release of the soul. If this view is correct, then Cinderella’s mother does not die twice—she dies in two stages, in accordance with a representation of death crystallized in the custom of second funerals.

### **Asturian Custom: Second funerals and Cow Sacrifice**

The fact that the Greek variants reflect a custom of second funerals opens up a promising comparative thread, because in Iberia a custom of second funerals has been reported in connection with cow sacrifices. Let us check this clue, which brings our

attention back to Western Europe for a moment.

Maria Cátedra, a Spanish ethnographer, described in 1988 how a community of cattle herders in the Asturias region used to celebrate so-called second funerals one year after someone's burial. At about this time the soul of the deceased would supposedly demand the sacrifice of a cow—or some other substitute livestock<sup>2</sup>—in order to hold a feast for the local community. Sometimes, because the living members of the household might balk at the huge expense involved in the second-funeral celebration, the deceased ancestor would force their hand by inflicting sickness and damage on the family or by breaking a cow's leg (Cátedra, 247–53).

Cátedra fails to clarify why a custom involving slaying cows on the anniversary of someone's death should be called a second funeral. But perhaps my comparative standpoint will allow me to do so. Most obviously, the idea that a dead person commands that a cow be slaughtered for his or her second funeral brings to mind the image of Cinderella's dead mother being slaughtered as a cow. In both cases the dead person is assimilated to a cow before the second funeral takes place. The Asturian custom does rest on the assumption that the recent dead haunt their living quarters until the second funeral takes place. /33/ Then and only then are souls free to depart to their otherworldly destination (Cátedra, 253, 337–40). Cátedra notes that roaming spirits are prone to appear in animal shapes, and she comments that “the metonymic association *ánima*/animal is not accidental” (326). Moreover, she remarks that cows supposedly communicate with the dead (329–31). All this suggests that the dead are bound to haunt the living in the shape of cows (or other animals) until the animal form is slaughtered and eaten. Then and only then can the detached soul join the otherworld for good.

In fact, this proposed rationale for the Asturian custom fits the *raison d'être* of second funerals worldwide. The French sociologist and folklorist Robert Hertz, in a far-ranging essay, took notice of a perceived connection between the condition of the bones and the fate of the soul. He noted that many cultures assume that the soul continues to wander around the grave and the familiar landscape while the corpse is rotting. There is a basic analogy at play here. Because the bones are still not free from the corruptible flesh, so the soul is not yet free from its

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2. /35/ Cátedra (247) specifies that “rams or sheep” are also appropriate for sacrifice at Asturian second funerals. This is all the more interesting because Cinderella's mother can actually appear to her daughter in the guise of such animals. In two Scottish variants of this theme, the mother appears as a sharp gray sheep or as a black lamb (Blind, 25; Campbell, 286–92).

worldly attachment. At this stage the wandering soul often takes animal shapes (Hertz 28–29, 58–59). Second funerals—the exhumation and cleaning of the bones, which are then laid down in their final resting place—allow the soul to break its bonds with material life and depart to the otherworld, while in the preserved bones the lineage seed is kept in store (61–64).

In short, second funerals are the hinge of a two-step process. First the soul wanders among the living, often in animal shapes, and then it is released to the beyond. But Hertz acknowledges that the actual exhumation of bones is often not required; a simple ceremony to commemorate the release of the soul and the end of mourning may be all there is to it (36, 68). And, of course, the exhumation of bones can be enacted symbolically. I think this possibility best explains the Asturian custom.

Indeed, Catedra does not mention an actual exhumation of bones that would justify the notion of holding a second funeral; instead, it is the communal feasting on the slaughtered animal that is called a second funeral. Everyone in the community is supposed to attend the event—even neighbors who are not on speaking terms with the family—for the gargantuan feast is supposed to send off the soul (Catedra, 247–54). Catedra fails to explain why the feast amounts to a second funeral and how partaking of the slaughtered animal helps release the soul of the deceased. But once we accept the possibility that eating the cow cleans the bones of the deceased (represented by the cow), everything falls into place. This is actually what the Peloponnesian variant of Cinderella teaches us. The sisters eat the cow's flesh, and thus make the beneficent bones available to Cinderella, who proceeds to lick the bones clean and /34/ incense them until, at last, the mother appears to her as a fairy. According to the same symbolic framework, at the public banquet of Asturian second funerals, all the assembled villagers are asked to feed on the cow—to help clean its bones—and thus contribute to the release of the dead person's soul. Arguably, this is what makes attending the banquet mandatory even if the attendee is not on speaking terms with the family. Appeasing the dead is a communal affair that transcends petty disagreements among the living, and this is where all the living must come together.

Catedra's discussion consistently highlights the functional dimension of the second-funeral banquet—its role in feeding the poor, in healing social rifts, in promoting social harmony and the continuity of families. All this is very real, of course. But in order to understand why such banquets work as second funerals we must heed the symbolic dimension, which entails a comparative outlook.

## Concluding Thoughts

And so we reach the end of our journey. This comparative exercise suggests that Cinderella's mother turns into a cow in accordance with the ancient belief that wandering souls take animal shapes. As Carlo Ginzburg has shown on a Eurasian scale and across many centuries, "The animal metamorphoses and the cavalcades astride animals symbolically express ... the temporary death indicated by the egress of the soul from the body in animal form" (172).

In the particular case I have examined, the use of cows as soul shapes may hark back to the Indo-European assimilation "of the empire of the dead to grazing grounds," as Viatcheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov (1191–92) put it. And there is the well-established symbolic link between the crescent moon, deemed horned, and horned animals playing lunar roles (see Elworthy, 181–96; Vaz da Silva, *Archeology*, 30n27, 68–70). In the particular case of Cinderella's mother, it may be relevant that cows and women are linked in connection with the moon, as pregnancy in both cases lasts ten moons (280 days); and, of course, milk cows aptly symbolize the nurturing aspect of motherhood. Arguably, the lunar motherly cow is a fit image for a nurturing mother who slips into a dark phase before she eventually gains heavenly attributes.

However this may be, the main point of this exercise is to suggest that a comparative outlook is a precondition for grasping thematic patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed and unexplained. Folklore is largely symbolic; and symbolism thrives in variation, which means that a comparative approach is required if we wish to grasp how empirically different motifs may reflect stable traditional notions. In homage to Donald Haase, this discussion is an exercise in symbolic folklore—hypertextual pre-Gutenberg, you might say.

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