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Fairy-Tale Exchanges

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Fairy-Tales: Unity and Plurality

/177/ Fairy tales are very old—their themes are found in legends and myths from Antiquity, and even those early texts likely borrowed from oral traditions humming in the background.¹ Given the respectable age of this genre and its formal complexity, one can assume that all fairy tales are genetically related. At least, as an eminent specialist pointed out, the entire store of fairy tales can be examined as a chain of variants on a basic theme.² This amounts to saying that fairy tales partake of a shared conceptual universe—a notion that raises interesting questions, such as: what are fairy tales about? What sorts of intertextual conversations do they accommodate? And how can we apprehend fairy-tale exchanges?

We know hundreds of fairy tales, each one expressed in thousands of variants, which span a spectrum of regional ecotypes across Europe.³ At first sight, you get an impression of bewildering variety. But two points are worth bearing in mind.

First, as the Brothers Grimm realised at the inception of Märchen studies, fairy-tale themes are quite stable albeit they come in many variants, none of which is in fact more authentic than the next.⁴ And second, Vladimir Propp pointed out that the basic form shared by all fairy tales (and their myriad variants) is that of

1. William F. Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8–11.

2. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 114.

3. Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, FF Communications 284–286, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004).

4. Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1992), 6–9, 272.

initiation rites.⁵ In essence, fairy-tale characters must go through a time of enchantment—a qualifying withdrawal, or symbolic death—before they can rise to a higher stage of life. As historian of religions Mircea Eliade put it, fairy tales seemingly repeat, “on another plane and by other means, the exemplary initiation scenario”.⁶

So it is safe to say that European fairy tales address problems hinging on growth and maturation into adulthood; and they do so from multiple points of view, which find expression in myriad variations. But maybe this statement is a bit too abstract. Hopefully, examining a specific thread will help convey a sense of how different stories, from various parts of Europe, address the same issues and actually illuminate one another.

Dragon Slayers and Snake Maidens

/178/ When Propp submitted that all fairy tales share one basic form true to the death-and-rebirth logic of initiation rites, he had in mind the dragon-slayer theme. In this theme, a boy steps into the otherworld, slays a dragon, and returns to the realm of the living. Then the hero can get married because, *inter alia*, slaying a dragon entails winning a bride.

Propp noted a curious feature in the dragon-fight scenario. Winning the girl, he remarked, “has a dual character. She is either freed (and then happy to be rescued when the hero appears) or, on the contrary, she is taken by force”.⁷ The underlying ambiguity is interesting. Although it is understood that the hero liberates princesses abducted by dragons, sometimes it is clear that *the hero* abducts maidens *from* the dragon. On occasion, dragons ask him questions like: “Why have you come? To woo my sisters or daughters?”⁸ This pattern raises a set of basic questions. Why is there a link between fighting a dragon and winning a bride? In what sense are the rescued maidens the dragons’ kin? What is, in short, the link between dragons and maidens?

5. Vladimir Propp, *Les racines historiques du conte merveilleux*, trans. Lise Gruel-Apert (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 470.

6. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, ed. Willard R. Trask (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998), 201–2.

7. Vladimir Propp, *The Russian Folktale*, ed. Sibelan Forrester, trans. Sibelan Forrester (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 168.

8. Aleksandr Afanas’ev, *Russian Fairy Tales*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 239.

These questions set the course of the following discussion. I invite you to consider how different tales, collected across Europe, help explain the link between killing dragons and gaining brides. For a smooth transition, we start with a dragon-slayer story. The “Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok”, a thirteenth-century Icelandic saga brimming with folktale motifs, recounts how a father who loves his daughter encloses her in a bower and then sends her a little snake. The girl feeds the snake and puts gold under it. Both the serpent and the gold increase rapidly. Eventually the snake encircles the bower, so that no man dares visit the maiden. At this point the father announces that he will grant his daughter, along with the gold, to the man who can kill the dragon.⁹

Now let us turn to another time and place. “Biancabella and the Snake”, a sixteenth-century Italian story, recounts how a girl at age ten becomes aware for the first time of a garden full of roses—“a place her mother called her own garden”—and strolls into it. There she meets a snake (her “sister,” found coiled around her neck at birth), which bestows upon the girl the gift of being unrivalled in beauty and grace. Henceforth, Biancabella’s hair drops pearls and precious stones whenever it is combed, and her hands yield roses, violets, and all kinds of flowers when they are washed. Biancabella’s fame spreads; soon enough the father celebrates her betrothal, and the snake vanishes.¹⁰

/179/ These two stories come from distinct times and places, and yet they share the idea that killing the snake frees the girl for marriage, and (reciprocally) marriage dispels the snake. Actually, the two texts convey complementary aspects of this shared idea. The saga makes it clear that getting the maiden married entails getting rid of the encircling serpent; therefore, it also implies that the snake protects the girl’s chastity.¹¹ Whereas the Italian tale clarifies that the bond with the snake starts when the girl first steps into a space of red blossoms; indeed, the snake bestows on the girl the gift of producing flowers. Taken together, the two texts imply

9. *Ragnars Saga Loðbrókar*, trans. Chris Van Dyke (Denver: Cascadian Publishing), 10-1.

10. Giovan Francesco Straparola, *The Pleasant Nights*, ed. Don Beecher, trans. W. G. Waters and Don Beecher, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 424-7.

11. Carolyne Larrington, “Þóra and Áslaug in *Ragnars Saga Loðbrókar*: Women, Dragons and Destiny,” in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. M. Arnold and A. Finlay (London: Viking Society, 2011), 54, 58.

that the snake protects the chastity of maidens at the age when they are metaphorically in bloom—when they are *jeunes filles en fleurs*, or, to talk like Shakespeare, “fresh uncropped flower[s]” (*All’s Well that Ends Well* 5.3.319). For a girl, being enclosed in a bower and entering a rose garden are interchangeable images for a pubertal idyll with the snake. This phase starts at menarche (when a girl first sees red flowers) and lasts until a wooer interlopes, which is why dragon-slayer tales assume an a-priori link between maidens and dragons.

Blood Bonds

Now let us pull into one orbit the fact that a Russian dragon asks the hero if he has come for its sisters or daughters and the fact that Biancabella’s snake is her sister. In the two instances, snakes and maidens are blood relations. There is, in other words, a blood connection between maidens and dragons. To elucidate this blood connection, consider a Portuguese text that uses yet another set of images to convey the same ideas. “The Snake”, published in 1903, recounts how a man finds a bunch of grapes out of season and offers it to his daughter. In the grapes hides a little snake, which grows fast, so that eventually the girl keeps it hidden in the wine vat. One day the father declares that it is time to wash the wine vat in preparation for the grape-picking season. Then the snake bestows her blessing upon the girl and goes away, whereupon a royal wooer steps into the story.¹²

Note that in this southern tale, as in the northern saga, the father offers his daughter a little snake and then, in the ripeness of time, triggers their separation and so brings about the girl’s marriage. In the Portuguese tale there is, of course, no bower and no dragon slaying. Instead, we find that the snake stems from grapes and is stored in a wine container. This is significant because the correlation between wine and blood is both widespread and ancient.¹³ Specifically, in wine-producing countries, menstrual women used to avoid wine cellars because (according to the principle that similar acts upon similar) their blood purportedly

12. António Thomaz Pires, *Contos Populares Alentejanos Recolhidos da Tradição Oral*, ed. Mário Ferreira Lages (Lisboa: Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2003), 115.

13. Franco Cardini, “*Hoc est sanguis meus: Le vin dans l’Occident médiéval*,” in *Le ferment divin*, ed. Dominique Fournier and Salvatore D’Onofrio (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1991).

interfered with the wine.¹⁴

Notice that the tale variants use convergent imagery. The roses, grapes, and wine jointly convey the pubertal status of the girl. And the reason why the snake becomes her companion—and why it encircles the girl's bower in the saga—is that, as comparatist Robert Briffault pointed out, serpents supposedly share with the moon the power of immortality through perpetual renewal; hence, they “play the same part in regard to the functions of women as the moon”.¹⁵

Indeed, the menarcheal girl who meets the snake starts cycling along with the moon. Moreover, she enters the moon sphere under the protection of her kin (or she is kin to the snake). Recall that in “The Snake” a blood bond connects the girl with both the snake and the father, which is why the father's injunction to wash the wine vat amounts to separating the snake and himself from the girl, who moves on to courtship. This pattern is also clear in the Icelandic saga, which presents a girl secluded by her father in a snake-encircled bower. And, again, it clarifies why some Russian dragons profess they are blood kin to the maidens in their power.

In short, where Propp saw only a heroic act and a feminine prize, a preexisting theme of feminine maturation comes to light. The dragon/snake idyll appears to be a phase of own blood, in the complex sense of a menarcheal phase that is also a time of seclusion with (or, under the power of) kinsfolk. As a comparative mythologist puts it, “a woman's prior union with her Snake is a way of depicting the fact that she reaches puberty enveloped in the protective potency of her own blood—her own kin. ... Protected by her kinsfolk, she starts out in possession of herself”.¹⁶ It follows that dragon slaying is the forceful termination of this idyll—hence, the ambiguity noted by Propp.

The foregoing discussion suggests that snake-helper tales

14. Isabel Cardigos, *In and Out of Enchantment: Blood Symbolism and Gender in Portuguese Fairytales*, FF communications 260, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1996), 132; Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire: La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière*, Bibliothèque des Sciences humaines, (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 41.

15. Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*, ed. Gordon Rattray Taylor (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 312–5.

16. Chris Knight, “On the Dragon Wings of Time,” in *Maidens, Snakes and Dragons*, ed. Chris Knight, Isabel Cardigos and José Gabriel Pereira Bastos (London: Centre for the Study of Imagination in Literature, 1991), 10.

illuminate dragon-slayer stories insofar as both hinge on the notion that a woman's bond with the snake/dragon terminates upon marriage. Given this common background, one would expect to see snake-helper tales seamlessly shade into dragon-slayer stories. Take one example. According to "The Little Snake" (another Portuguese variant), when the girl and the prince ride to their marriage ceremony the snake briefly turns into a hideous monster that puts the prince to flight, then it slithers away.¹⁷ This echo of a dragon fight, just as marriage looms, takes us back to the Russian and Icelandic tales. It also suggests that the break between the woman and her snake can be framed as a feminine act of volition, rather than as a male act of compulsion. The point here is that there are no authoritative fairy-tale texts and no final interpretations—there are only myriad variants that reflect, and contest, and transform, and renew, other variants and interpretations. The fairy-tale landscape fosters plurality, and it accommodates dissension.

Full Circle

/180/ But the very possibility of dissension supposes a unified conceptual universe. From Russia to Portugal, we have come full circle. By means of a bunch of different tales collected across Europe, we have realised that fairy tales illuminate one another as they express shared themes.

Ultimately, the point is that fairy-tale exchanges are good to think with. In the old days, people would directly respond to each other's oral tales, swap stories, and build new variants out of previous threads—that is how tales used to talk to each other in people's minds. Today, the erstwhile vibrant points and counterpoints of oral storytelling linger in dusty archives and yellowing books. Yet, these old themes are persistently dialogic. As we load them back onto living memory—as we wake them up from their enchanted sleep—fairy tales still work their magic on a pan-European scale. As long as we follow their intertextual exchanges, fairy tales grant us the regional flavours of Europe as well as the metaphorical underpinnings of a shared popular culture.

17. Francisco Xavier d'Athaide Oliveira, *Contos Tradicionaes de Algarve*, vol. 2 (Porto: Typographia Universal, 1905), 103. Translated in Cardigos, *In and Out*, 122

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