THREE “FEMINIST” TALES OF A WOMAN’S QUEST:
A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF FOLK AND FAIRY TALES

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Abstract

This essay is concerned with one of the Grimms' fairy tales, a story from the Arabian Nights, and a South African folk tale. A feminist literary perspective is adopted to examine the tales, and the essay moves from explication of symbols, irony, reversal, and the typical folk tale “trebling” to a discussion of ideological content. Each story tells of the exploits of a heroine who goes in search of some vital object or person. The search is motivated by the woman herself, who at first may appear guilty for disrupting a previously stable situation, but eventually proves to have bettered her previous condition, achieving an enhanced life for a number of others in the process. One of the tales is principally psychological in its orientation, dealing with individual female heroism in the face of an evil male. The other two also have a social dimension, being concerned with injustice as well as evil; one affirms the patriarchal order, while the other shows its overthrow. A comparison of the tales notes statements made by all three concerning stereotypical "feminine" vices. Each declares that such value judgements are labels applied by males to vital human qualities shared by both sexes, but which men have traditionally been unwilling to recognize in women.

The canon of western literature contains many reworkings of the complex of motifs associated with the heroic quest, and it seems a fact that the heroes are almost all men. Though the narratives concern the actions of females as well as males, it is only the males who actually undertake the journey. Yet many patriarchal cultures such as our own have preserved the woman's heroic journey unofficially, as it were, in the oral folk tale and its written derivative, the fairy tale, and it is with such tales that I am concerned here.

Once considered "sub-literary," these tales are certainly marginal still to most of the literary world, and have been studied most closely not by literary scholars but by folklorists and psychoanalysts. Thus in my study I shall be using the insights of scholars from disciplines other than my own. Nevertheless, folk and fairy tales have been established as a legitimate field of interest for the literary critic by such authorities as Mia Gerhardt in her literary study of the Arabian Nights, quoting the renowned orientalist Hans Wehr in her support (43), and by Max Luthi and Jack Zipes in their work on European tales. Despite the European relegation of fairy tales to the children's bedroom and the fact that the Arabian Nights were for centuries regarded as beneath the serious concern of literary scholars, It seems to me now unquestionable that the folk tale and the fairy tale yield work of considerable artistic merit, warranting close attention as texts in their own right.

The focus of this paper, then, is on the tales as works of art, rather than on the culture or the minds which produced them. Luthi, Professor Emeritus of European Literature at the University of Zurich, states a rather extreme form of this approach:
he is interested not in social or historical context, or in narrative as a reflexion of "intrapsychological happenings," or "whether the narrative encourages revolutionary or conservative thinking" or the role of narrative in society, or circumstances of its "performance" – but "why these narratives... are a source of pleasure" (*The Fairytale as Art Form* ix). However, literary critics rarely adopt such a purely aesthetic approach to any genre. Jack Zipes, Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, insists that socio-historical aspects of folk tales should be taken into account in any appreciation of them, for they are the wish-fulfilments of the people, "emancipatory, utopian," and "often considered subversive" by the ruling classes (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 3). Generally, as Abrahams notes in *African Folktales* (4), folk tales most often affirm, rather than subvert, dominant values, but in either case they are "reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch" (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 5).

The fairy tale, which has evolved from the folk tale since the renaissance, is equally a product of a historical epoch, but Zipes argues that because it is no longer the property of the folk, but of the bourgeoisie, it is even less likely to be subversive of the social order. It is in fact generally agreed that during the evolution of the fairy tale, "educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folk tale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 3). This process included "patriarchalization" (7), that is to say, re-structuring a tale in order to affirm the subordination of women to men. Thus, while detailed analyses of the social backgrounds of the following tales is beyond my scope, in considering tales with active, journeying heroines it is essential to discuss the part played by the woman in relation to the patriarchal societies from which all the tales emerge.

On one further important point I find myself in disagreement with Professor Luthli. At several points he states that it is impossible to penetrate the individual psychology of fairy tale characters: "the fairytale does not psychologize; its figures have, strictly speaking, nothing within" (163). Yet, from a feature which Luthli himself observes, I would argue that folk tale characters do possess penetrable depth. "Whatever would happen within them – if they were individual humans – is projected outward and thus made visible" (37). I would contend that the visible outward projections show not only what would happen but what does happen, and that as with other genres it is the reader's task to draw conclusions from the dramatic action concerning the psychology of the protagonists. In fact, Luthli admits as much when discussing the "fairytale of development" of which I deal with two examples here: "One can speak of change, or fairytales of maturation or development, only with respect to their symbolic significance. But since the fairytale has the tendency to project everything that is within outward, one is correspondingly justified in looking at what has been projected outward as symbolic of what is within, at transformations as representations of inner change ... In this sense the fairy tales show their heroes ... as ones who develop, who change" (141). Precisely so: from the outer we deduce the inner.

In this essay I shall be dealing with three tales in ascending order of narrative complexity: "Fitcher's Bird," from the Grimm brothers' early-nineteenth-century collection of German tales; "The Story of Two Sisters Who Were Jealous of their
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Younger Sister,” from Galland’s translation of the Arabian Nights; and a southern
Vladimir Propp argues in Morphology of the Folktale that “All fairytales are of one
type in regard to their structure” (23). This dictum was based on research into
Russian tales only, but these three stories appear to conform to Propp’s pattern,
and they have features in common in addition to the “functions” Propp enumerates.
Above all, in each case the main protagonist is a woman, and, as we shall see, the
theme of each concerns the relationship between the sexes. The three vary vastly,
however, in subject matter on a more literal level, in their cultural and historical
provenance, and in the degree of “purity” they may be said to possess with respect
to any original oral folk tale. The purpose of the comparison is to examine the way
tales carry meaning, and to study the attitude of each tale to the questions of gender
with which it deals.

(1)

“Fitcher’s Bird” is a brief tale of the “Bluebeard” type, whose variants are
known in Europe as far east as the Urals, in Palestine and in India (Thompson, The
Folktale, 35). Despite the fact that it was collected by the brothers Grimm from an
oral informant, it has been shown that the Grimms’ tales cannot be regarded as a
pure folktale (Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell 24). The Grimms took it upon
themselves to translate from dialect to Hochdeutsch, censoring objectionable
material, and altering as their own artistic instinct suggested. The text that concerns
us, therefore, is a brief nineteenth-century fairy tale based (very closely in this in-
stance) on a folktale of a widespread type.

Here, the motifs of the journey that Propp perceives in every fairytale are set out
in a mere three pages, yet the tale is not without subtlety. An ogre, a
“Hexenmeister” (Fitcher, by name), captures three sisters, one by one, and carries
them off into that fairytale Underworld, the dark forest. He installs them each in
turn in his palatial home in the depths, providing for each “whatsoever she could
possibly desire,” and declaring, “My darling, you will certainly be happy with me,
for you have everything your heart can wish for” (216). This is the motif Neumann
names “the marriage of death,” in which a woman is carried off to an Underworld to
be married against her will to a non-human being. But the ogre imposes an in-
terdict as a condition of her remaining in what under other circumstances might
have been an earthly paradise: she is never to open a certain door. She is also to
take great care of an egg, and carry it everywhere with her.

Predictably, the first sister and then the second unlock the forbidden door while
the ogre is away, and panic at the vision of blood that lies within: the room, the
“Blutkammer”, contains the dismembered corpses of their predecessors lying in a
“great bloody basin.” Into the basin falls the egg. Unable to clean the egg or to
conceal their terror when the ogre returns, they are decapitated, quartered, and
flung in with the rest.

The ogre knows that they will break the interdiction, as all his previous women
have, for, says the tale, it is in the nature of women to be insatiably curious, and
they can never resist finding out something they are told they must not know. But
when he captures the third daughter he meets his match. She must, of course, break
the taboo — it is in her nature — but first of all she puts the egg carefully away; then,
unlike her sisters, she keeps her head (the pun works in German, too: sie verliert

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nicht den Kopf) when she learns the hideous secret. She enters the room, and instead of panicking coolly removes the pieces of her sisters from the basin, restores them to life by arranging their limbs in order, hides them, and makes ready to greet the ogre on his return. As the ogre is unable to detect her disobedience he is obliged to offer himself in marriage.

We now discover why the ogre chops up these unfortunate women: as soon as he promises to marry the successful sister he loses all power over her; he becomes a hen-pecked wretch, "forced to do whatsoever she desired". A comic scene ensues when the bride-to-be obliges the emasculated ogre to transport her sisters, hidden under gold coin in a great basket, to her parents' house. While he is away, the heroine invites the ogre's friends to the wedding and at the same time summons her kinsfolk; she will not only kill the ogre but rid the whole country of his like. Having set her scheme in motion, she escapes disguised as a bird ("Fitcher's bird"), leaving in the upper window a skull decked out as a bride, which the bridegroom greets on his way home. The tables are thus neatly and ironically turned, for it is now not she but the ogre who will marry Death. When the kinsfolk arrive they lock the doors and set fire to the house, and he and all the wedding guests are burnt. This is a particularly satisfying example of what Luthl terms Kontrarironie — the irony of reversal, typical of folk tales (124).

(II)

"The Story of Two Sisters Who Were Jealous of Their Younger Sister," is from Galland's Les mille et une nuits, the first translation of Alf Layla wa Layla into a European language, completed in 1712. This tale, apparently of Persian origin, conforms to "one of the eight or ten best known plots in the world," recorded in Europe, the Near East, India, Africa, and America. Galland's version has a short but interesting history, for it was collected not from one of the well-known manuscripts, which date from as early as the ninth century A.D., but from a Syrian Maronite named Hanna who related this and other tales to Galland in Paris in 1709. No Arabic or Persian original exists. Galland is well known to have censored and refined the sometimes bawdy Arabic tales, but Galland's journals show he followed Hanna's version very closely, without altering anything essential (Gerhardt 71). Nevertheless, in treating Galland's edition, we must be aware that we are dealing with a literary piece, part of a series within the fictional frame of Scheherazade's marriage to the Sultan.

The first part of the tale tells of the birth of three children to the Sultan of Persia. The mother's two sisters, however, jealous of her marriage, steal them as they are born, year by year, and cast them adrift on a river. The sisters substitute an animal for each of the first two babies and accuse the mother of giving birth to monsters, and though the grand vizir begs the mother off on these occasions, when the outcome of the third confinement appears to be a log of wood the outraged sultan imprisons the mother in a little wooden hut by the mosque, where everyone who enters for worship is to spit upon her. Meanwhile, the children — two boys and the youngest a girl — having been rescued from the river by one of the Sultan's high officials, are brought up in complete equality of education and recreation, and with every advantage but the knowledge of their real parents. The foster father then dies, leaving the incomparable Parizade and her two splendid brothers apparently orphans, but comfortable in their palace, and its park stocked with every variety of
game. We are told that the brothers could easily have found places at court among the highest in the land, but they have no ambition to leave their home and their hunting (440).

Though Parizade is expert in the skills required, including throwing the javelin, it appears that she does not share her brothers’ love of the chase, for one day, while the brothers are out killing beasts, an old woman calls at the palace and finds her alone. She tells Parizade that her Eden is not perfect after all, but would be if only it included certain wonderful treasures, the chief of which is a talking bird. There is also a singing tree and the magical “golden water,” one drop of which will transform a basin into a perpetual fountain which never overflows; and all are to be found in one place only twenty days’ journey to the East. Curiously, these treasures are precisely the items most characteristic of the earthly paradise that figures in medieval European legend. Like Fitcher’s brides, Parizade now manifests a stereotypically feminine trait — she craves “things.” She must have the talking bird of which the old woman has told her or life will simply not be worth living. The brothers apprehend at once that her need is real and they depart, each in turn, to fetch the treasure.

Their quest leads them to an Otherworld which is apparently far from paradisal; it is a Land of the Dead, a mountain covered with black rocks — the petrified remains of those who have tried and failed to win the treasure on the summit. They have failed because they broke the interdiction against looking back as they ascended. A friendly dervish warns the brothers that they too will be assailed by “a confusion of voices on all sides which will threaten and insult you to undermine your courage and prevent you from reaching the summit” (450); but the brothers are splendidly confident. Nevertheless, though the first grits his teeth against the crescendo of insinuations and threats he eventually loses his nerve; the second is tricked into turning round by an insulting challenge scarcely five yards from where he begins the climb.

When her brothers fail to return, Parizade takes up the quest. She follows their path exactly until she meets the dervish, but then, like Fitcher’s bride, she takes precautions. She stuffs her ears with cotton, which partially blocks the noise, and succeeds where her siblings fail, obtaining the treasures and restoring all the rocks to life by pouring “living water” over them. She and her brothers descend followed by a gathering procession of reanimated noblemen who declare themselves her slaves and, though she graciously absolves them from all obligation, insist on escorting her home. Parizade thus proves herself as brave as her brothers, as courteous, more resolute, and canny.

Once back in their palace, the three return to their former way of life, but not for long, for the talking bird soon brings about the reunion of the children with the parents and the parents with each other. Finally, the whole family, including the mother, who has been brought to see the wonders, returns in triumphal procession to the sultan’s capital. Order and justice are now restored.

We should note here an interesting relationship between the country palace and the mountain. Both partake of the nature of the earthly paradise, in that one offers a completely carefree existence while the other possesses the emblematic treasures. Yet, each is a Land of the Dead; the state of the brothers as black rocks on the mountain is a metaphor of their failure to live in the fullest sense at home. Instead
of going out into the world to take up the responsibilities of their birth and education they are content to pursue a frivolous self-gratification in isolation from society. We might compare them unfavourably with the stolen sons of Shakespeare’s King Cymbeline, whose royal natures cannot be content with the life of bucolic freedom and hunting to which their foster-father has reared them (Cy m III. iii). Parizade cannot be so easily contented, however, and, willy-nilly, she stirs them into action too, rescuing them from an existence like that of the Lotos Eaters. Once is not enough, apparently. Their commitment to life is not sufficient to carry them through, and she has to rescue them again, yet still they fall back into their old ways as soon as they find themselves at home. To complete the most subtle of the several treblings (three sisters, three children, three attempts at the quest, etc.), a third and definitive rescue must be performed by the bird which only Parizade has been able to obtain. At last the perfection of the paradise is the cause of its final disruption. The triumphal procession through the capital is a public acknowledgement of status and hence of responsibility, signifying that the princes’ lives have now begun in earnest.

We perceive, I think, that this story as well as being more complex — it consists of three “moves” rather than the single one of “Fitcher’s Bird,” 10 — seems more advanced, more fully verbalized, concerned more with consciousness than with conflict. Fitcher’s Bird was, in Propp’s terms, a “victimized hero”; Parizade, though she begins as a victim of her aunts’ jealousy, becomes a “seeker” (Propp 36) in her own right. She is inspired to become a seeker by the old woman, whom one intuitively feels to exist on a different plane from the characters previously encountered. In Propp’s scheme the old woman is a “donor,” often an otherworldly being, who sends the heroine on her quest (Propp 39 ff.); psychoanalytically, the old woman is a still small voice within the young one, the embodiment of her discontent. 11

Moreover, on her quest she must resist distraction by disembodied voices — metaphors of inner doubts and uncertainties — and the chief treasure is an oracle. It is clear even to Parizade that her journey to the mountain is not merely a rescue attempt. Despite herself she feels a profound joy in attaining the summit, and before considering her brothers she demands of the bird that it tell her where the other treasures are. The ultimate object of the quest is not treasure but a truth, and in the language of myth and tales the discovery of one’s parents is perhaps the most profound truth: it is the discovery of oneself, of who and what one is. The story of Oedipus provides a striking parallel. While she climbs the bird adds its own “thunderous voice” to those assailing her, but at the summit it greets her with the words “I know who you are, and I will teach you that you do not know yourself” (459). In her successful quest Parizade attains knowledge of her fundamental self, a psychological goal which, like the salvation of one’s own soul, has absolute priority.

(III)

“The Child in the Reeds” is a Basuto tale published in French in 1895, and later in both English and Basuto, by its collector, the French protestant missionary, E. Jacotte. 12 Thus it is as pure a collected folktale as possible before the days of the cassette recorder. However, though it conforms to none of the Aarne-Thompson tale types it seems to conform to Propp’s structural scheme, and at first glance seems much like the other two.

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Like the story of Adam and Eve, it begins in a garden with a forbidden tree. When cut with an axe the tree gives milk, but the parents keep the milk exclusively to themselves. The first move begins when their daughter, Thakane, is persuaded to break the interdiction by her brother, who won’t graze the cattle until she gives him some of the tree’s magic milk. The father, having decided to cast her out for her disobedience, makes her some clothes; then he leads her away, attired for her “marriage of death”, to be devoured by a “cannibal”, an ogre, despite the protests of animals they encounter on the road. The tale is particularly emphatic that this is a journey to the Land of the Dead, for we are told that “that the cannibal was as a grave”, and when a person is taken to the cannibal it is said that the cannibal is to “take care of” him or her, a common Basuto euphemism for burial of the dead (Jacottet, Treasury 118). A typically humorous twist of Kontarironie ensues, however, when, in accordance with the indignant desire of the animals, it is the father who is “taken care of” by the ogre, for Masilo, the cannibal’s son, falls in love with Thakane.

The second move begins when, in due course, Thakane bears a girl child and is told that in that village all baby girls are eaten by the ogre that consumed her father. Determined to avoid such a fate for her child, she goes to the river to drown it, but as she hesitates on the bank an old woman rises from an underworld beneath the water and offers to take care of the baby. In the waters of this second womb the baby gestates quickly, and in a year becomes a young woman herself, duly “initiated” by her protector. Masilo now learns that his daughter has survived, and is much moved by the news. Amid his tears he appears deeply glad to hear that she looks like himself – an unusually delicate psychological touch, alluding perhaps to patriarchal anxiety about legitimacy. There is now no question of the girl’s becoming ogre’s meat.

For the quest to be formally complete, however – and Luthi rightly observes that such “formal completion … is among the vital properties of the genre” (58) – the expelled daughter must abandon the land of the cannibal and return to her point of departure, her father’s village. She sets off in triumph, and just as Parizade is followed down the mountain by men she has restored to life, Thakane is followed, we may say, by her husband, her children, her people, and her cattle. But now a third move is initiated, for her father, returned from the dead as a monstrous cannibal “rock”, meets them at a narrow pass, blocking their progress and demanding their blood:

Rue le, le rue, I shall eat you, Thakane, my child,  
You who lead the way; I shall eat the people afterwards. (122).

In the encounter, Thakane is indisputably in charge. Masilo has nothing to say as, group by group, she marches the whole parade into the belly of the monster, and finally, when the father is still not satisfied, calmly walks in herself with the rest of her family.

If we read this as exemplifying Thakane’s personal attitude, we are first horrified at her callous sacrifice of the people, and then astonished at the calm surrender of herself and her family to death; but I believe we should read the episode in another manner, for this phase of the story yields best to a social, rather than a psychological interpretation. Thakane’s daughter is safe after her initiation not because cannibalism has been abolished in Masilo’s village, but “because she is now grown up” (120). Masilo’s father still lives, and though Thakane’s father is supposed to
be dead, his spirit – the spirit of patriarchy – is still a force to reckon with; in this sense the two fathers are merely alter egos and are now merged completely. The sense of triumph with which the journey began is therefore a delusion: the return home is merely another journey to the Land of the Dead; before the new world can come into being the old must be finally destroyed. But this is not very difficult, for by the time Thakane gets into the monster’s belly a young man is chopping a hole for them to get out: a member of the new generation is finishing off the old cannibal patriarch. Once the hole is cut the monster quickly dies and Thakane’s people are reborn from its corpse, together with the cattle; “there only remained the rotten ones, whom it had eaten long ago” (124).

The story resembles that of Abraham and Isaac, not only in its theme of murder, but in its attitude to the murder, and, using the term in the Mallnovskian rather than the Proppian sense, in the tale’s apparent “function.” In the Bible story scholars understand a prohibition of human sacrifice, once widespread in the Middle East as elsewhere (Skinner 331-32). Similarly, cannibalism had been practised sporadically among the Basuto until its well-documented suppression by the native King Mosesh in 1874, some sixty years before the story was collected (Dutton 36-37). Jacottet’s source for this tale was an old woman who may have lived through this period (Contes 187). Casalis too, writing in 1860, records this suppression, quoting a named “most veracious” Basuto source (19-20), and noting that Mosesh himself is said to have described the cannibals as “living sepulchres.” Abrahams stresses the very close “relationship between art and life in sub-Saharan Africa” (African Folktales 9), and confirms that African storytellers do in fact compose stories which have just this relation to the lives of their audience: “Circumstances demand that actions be fictionalized so that they may be talked about as if human behaviour in general were the subject of the tales rather than what A did to B yesterday... Stories operate, like proverbs, as a means of depersonalizing, of universalizing, by couching the description of how specific people are acting in terms of how people have always acted” (2-3). By means of the tale, then, the prohibition is transmitted down the generations without the embarrassment of having to admit that such an obnoxious custom as human sacrifice or cannibalism was ever practised by one’s own people.

(14)

We are now in a position to compare the three tales, and in doing so to elucidate their commentary on the relation between the sexes. What, first of all, are we to make of the journey to the Land of the Dead, which occurs in all three tales? Psychoanalytically we might merely say that it is a journey into the unconscious self, but dramatically, it seems to be a supreme test of character: all life’s difficulties rolled into one, surmountable only by a hero unperturbed by death itself, the most terrible of life’s mysteries. The test of fitness for life is living – in the richly interdependent senses of surviving an ordeal and of enjoying a full and humane life; the qualities required, the tales proclaim, are intelligence, commitment, love, and above all courage. The woman with those qualities is the heroine whose living redeems humanity and restores the land.

Such qualities are, of course, necessary to any hero, female or male, and indeed these tales evoke interesting intertextual comparisons with imaginative exploits beyond, as well as among, the tales themselves. For example, we can say that the
mountain, in the tale of Parizade, is analogous to the inner room in Fitcher’s house. Here, among the remains of previous travellers, just at the farthest point of the journey, the ordeal is undergone and the proof of character exacted. The protagonists need their courage most at this moment: not the hot-blooded courage of the dragon-slaying, battle-winning prince, but the cool, intelligent, moral courage needed to overcome horror of a metaphysical kind. But an even closer parallel to this scene in “Fitcher’s Bird” is found in Dante’s Inferno.

The moment when the hero of “Fitcher’s Bird” beholds the basin is the tale’s crisis, psychologically and structurally equivalent to Dante’s first glimpse of Satan in the Pit; Virgil prepares him with the words “lo, the place where you must arm yourself with fortitude” (Inf. 34.20-21.). For the woman as for Dante this confrontation with the ultimate horror, with death itself, is the extreme moment. Dante falls into a state of trance, “frozen and faint,” neither dead nor alive (21,25), and has to be roused by Virgil. Fitcher’s Bird has no guide or helper, but has sufficient fortitude in herself to resist the panic that ruined her sisters, and now, whereas Dante has to be carried bodily forward, towards and beyond the horror, she reaches calmly into the bloody basin for her sisters’ remains. Her rescue of her sisters, Parizade’s restoration of the black rocks, and Thakane’s leading her people out of cannibalism and infanticide, have also an archetype among the world’s best known myths, the rescue of the dead from the Land of the Dead being analogous to Christ’s harrowing of Hell.

Just as the tales contain a Land of the Dead they also contain an Earthly Paradise; but in contrast to Dante’s Hell and Paradise, they are actually identical. In the tale of Parizade they are identified metaphorically, as I have shown, but in “Fitcher’s Bird” the pleasure palace has the bloody chamber at its heart, and for Thakane, the garden with its magic tree from which she is cast out is the Land of the Dead she must redeem on her return. In no case will the heroine remain content in the paradise for long, even when it appears most pleasant. The heroines of these stories are thus related to Odysseus: the Lotos eaters offered him mindless contentment, the nymph Kalypso offered immortality together with the perpetual physical gratification of her love if only he would live with her on her island; his inability to accept demonstrates the psychological truth declared by the tales that by their very natures the hero and the heroine must at all costs strive to be master of their own fates, and never submit to an existence arbitrarily limited, however comfortable or safe it may seem.

The qualities of the heroine are those of the hero also, yet the context in which heroism is affirmed within the tales is especially supportive of women. The very fact that the heroic actions are performed by women is significant; in other examples of the same tale-types as “Fitcher’s Bird” and the story of Parizade the heroes are male. Gender is important in forming the reader’s response to the tales because in all three we seem to see a woman disturbing some kind of comfortable status quo from motives one must recognize as traditionally “feminine.” Fitcher’s Bird is explicitly motivated by curiosity, then Parizade develops her “craving”, and Thakane brings about her expulsion from the parental garden by yielding to her brother’s insistent demand to be fed – nurtured with milk.

For a reader – or a listener – who has already made up his or her mind about the natural depravity of women the stories set nothing less than a clever ironic trap. How stupid; or wicked, that person will say, to open the door, or to disturb such an
idyll, or to be so disobedient; how typical of a woman! Yet the stories go on to justify the very qualities they seemed to depreciate. We see that it is not curiosity that brings the two young women to their death, but fear; the same curiosity in the third sister restores them to life and destroys the evil ogre. And the final scene of the tale of Parizade is a spectacular demonstration that a desire which appeared to be an absurd and dangerous feminine caprice was in fact a life-giving intuition. Thakane’s disobedience is also good in its final result. In folk tales, as in psychoanalysis, actions are to be judged not by their ostensible motives but by their consequences.

To the male chauvinist, among whom we must count the ogress Sultan Schahriar, fictional narratee of the Arabian Nights, the distinction between femaleness and femininity is merely that between inner nature and outer manifestation. To such a reader or listener the tales say, yes, there are certain traits in a woman, whether culturally or biologically determined, that cause her to act in a feminine way, but what you in your bigotry have perceived as feeble-minded attempts to gratify vulgar desires you must now see as the result of a powerful urge to transcendence, the very highest of the qualities that distinguish us from the animals. Moreover, your stereotype of the feminine is far too narrow to encompass all the potentialities of a woman.

Courage and a cool head, the tales declare, are not the exclusive possession of males, nor are the qualities of leadership nor even skill with weapons. Parizade, for example, in her education and in learning to ride and throw the javelin is clearly “unfeminine”, as she is also in adopting masculine clothing for her quest, but the wise dervish who tells all three siblings the way to the talking bird says to her “Madam... for your voice betrays your sex despite our manly disguise... I shall be proud to serve you in any way I can” (456). In the dervish’s simultaneous perception of her femaleness and her worth the tale therefore makes a strong statement about the intrinsic nature and potential of women as opposed to the limited role to which society typically conditions them to conform. In the case of her resistance to insults, however, it would seem that it is mere lack of (conditioned) masculinity rather than positive (biological) femaleness which is her salvation; thus the tale indicates that typical feminine behavior, be it nothing more, may be far superior to the typical masculine response to the same circumstances.

The Sultan Schahriar, incidentally, appears to some extent persuaded by the tale of Parizade, which Galland with superb editorial judgement places last in his twelve-volume edition of Arab tales. After the brave and brilliant Scheherezade has finished the sultan says to her, “I wish you to be considered the liberator of all the girls who would otherwise have been sacrificed to my just resentment” (482) - which is perhaps as much as one can expect. But by this manipulation of the narrative frame the import of the story is made to leap out toward the reader’s own life and we realize that it is not only in fairy tales that women can be heroic; Scheherezade, by voluntarily becoming the bride of a real, live ogre, has saved the lives of at least one thousand of her sisters.

To men in general, therefore, the tales declare, women are worthy of respect as well as love, nor need a man be ashamed to find himself the follower and his wife the leader. To women they say simply, trust yourself and lead humanity towards your vision of a higher form of life.
In considering gender issues, however, we must also examine the tales' treatment of male characters. And we must note that they are dealt with severely. In two of the cases the paradise is the property of an ogre who singles out women for evil treatment; in all three there is a strongly patriarchal society either ruling in the paradise or associated with it, which has brought suffering and death to women especially. In each tale the heroine disrupts and leaves a deadly patriarchal paradise not only to her own and her siblings' benefit, but to that of a sufficiently large number of people to mean, in the language of tales, humanity. Moved by love as well as a desire for knowledge, and negatively by her abhorrence of imposed restraint, the woman completes her task with courage and returns in triumph to a land she has restored.

So much the tales declare in common, but their differences are equally interesting. In "Fitcher's Bird" we see a conflict between male and female from an essentially feminine point of view. If instead of an ogre we had a king's son, and instead of three innocent young women, three witches, the prince might go from one to the next outwitting and killing them and we would applaud him at every step. The witch is a well-known psychoanalytical symbol for the devouring mother, that archetypal fantasy figure who emerges in nightmares and in tales throughout the world, always standing between the man and freedom or love, blocking his way to life. Similarly, Fitcher stands for the terrible father: the ogre who can lock up his daughter and never let her out, the old ghoul who steals a young woman from life, imprisoning her in a marriage of living death. But the woman makes a fool of her oppressor. She outwits him and exposes the root of his tyranny, which is nothing but fear — fear of losing control, fear that if he does not oppress and murder he will be oppressed, exploited, controlled, emasculated, annihilated.

The conflict between Fitcher and the women he kidnaps takes place in comparative isolation from society, but in the second and third tales social factors play an important part, as we have seen, and both the latter make statements about woman's role in society. We learn over the course of the tale that Parlizade is superior to her brothers in many respects. It is to their credit that the brothers recognise this as fully as does the wise dervish, and by the third move of the tale they are accustomed to take no important step without asking her advice. We should also consider the sultan, who is presented as a dignified and magnanimous ruler, but who, in a manner it would take too long to explain, is finally made to look very silly for having believed that his wife could have given birth to a dog, a cat, and a log of wood.

Yet despite the fact that men have to acknowledge the worth of women and repent of injustice done to them we must perceive that the initial villainy was the work of women, and that the end of the tale is the restoration of patriarchal order. The tale is quite explicit: in the triumphal procession one of the princes rides on the sultan's right and one on his left; "the sultan's wife, with the princess on her left, walked behind the sultan." Now order is restored the princess is unhorsed; she takes a subordinate role even in the triumph she alone has brought about. While her sporting brothers become her gullible father's deputies she, we must assume, will now retire to respectable obscurity. Thus the tale, while emphatically affirming woman's worth, does not challenge her subordinate political status. If men prove less sensible or less active than they should be, women may have to adopt a masculine role to set things right, but governance and the dispensing of justice remain the prerogative of males.

Examined from this point of view, "The Child in the Reeds" is seen to combine
certain features of the German and Persian tales, in that it deals with a male-dominated society but involves the overthrow and death of the dominant male. At the beginning of the tale we see that the patriarch had appropriated the female function of controlling the flow of milk, but his first aim is not to give but to refuse the milk even to his own children. This is the first of the reversals which are as outstanding a feature of this tale as trebling was of the last. Finally, on Thakane’s return journey, a culminating reversal completes the circle, cancelling out the unnatural situation with which the story began: a male midwife, laboring inside the womb, facilitates the birth of the people from the body of a male. Now all things are made new: men and women can live without fear of cannibals, and their daughters can grow up in peace. The main thrust of the tale, however, is not against these obvious evils of a bygone era but against patriarchy itself, on to which the emotions of repulsion connected with the more obviously loathsome practices are cleverly displaced. On the one hand the tale says that only monsters ever practised cannibalism, and only foreigners infanticide; on the other we are shown a patriarch from Thakane’s own tribe who becomes a monster and swallows his own daughter.

Although nothing can now be certainly known about the tale’s impact on the Basuto of the nineteenth century, it is worth reporting such information as is available, as conclusions of this kind have limited validity with respect to a culture one knows nothing about. It is worth noting, for example, that the Basuto are strongly patriarchal, as are most Bantu. Their marriages are patrilineal and patriarchal, children being the exclusive property of the husband or, on his death, of his family. This story seems subversive, therefore, not only in that the heroic leader is a woman, and that the story ends with the couple at her mother’s village, but even in the simple detail that Thakane regards the child as her own to dispose of. The role reversal is still more far-reaching on the symbolic level: if Thakane’s father is the unwilling “mother” of his people, then Thakane, who puts the people into the womb, is the “father.” It might be conjectured also that the Basuto would be alert to the repeated reversals in the tale because of the existence of a certain “legal fiction” in their customs, by which a woman of a family which has no male heir may become legally a male and marry a man legally a female, thus producing offspring for her own house (Dutton 77-78).

The story is not anti-male – Thakane’s husband is a sympathetic figure who loves his wife and daughter, and another young man plays an essential role in the final defeat of the monster father – but it is anti-patriarchal. In the Persian tale the restoration of order is the restoration of the original status quo – all is now as it would have been had the original villainy never been committed – but at the end of this third tale a new order is established. Luthi asserts that in the European fairytale “revolutions... simply do not appear” (157). This is arguable; “Fitcher’s Bird,” for example, might be said cryptically to portray a revolt against patriarchy; but in this African tale a social revolution quite clearly occurs.

We have examined and compared three tales from widely different cultures and found them to have interesting similarities and differences observable in the course of a literary analysis. We have discovered such aesthetic qualities as subtlety and formal completeness, and such literary devices as irony and metaphor. We have also noted how the tales convey meaning, first of all in terms of the personal drama of the characters’ lives, and secondly in terms of the wider social setting of which the tale is a product and to which the tale refers. Naturally, certain issues have been
Ignored in this discussion, particularly questions of style. Much more could be said concerning the differences between the literary fairytale (Kunstmärchen) and the folktale; more should be said concerning the problems of treating the folktale as a literary text. Yet I believe we have earned the right now to evaluate these tales as art, and to say that they are excellent, and more than worthy of our attention. It is worth remarking once more that of these three fine tales, each different from the others in length, style, and degree of "literary" sophistication, the tribal tale, the pure folk tale, is not a whit inferior to the other two in subtlety, depth, or form.

I began by referring to the canonical quests of western literature — works like the Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost — the great epics of male heroism. Females play a vital part: Penelope, Athena, Circe in the Odyssey; Beatrice in The Divine Comedy; even Sin in Paradise Lost — without them the quests could never have succeeded, and this is so of many, many such adventures, literary and mythic. In these three tales, however, women are portrayed not simply as providers of loyal support or ingenious advice, but as agents in their own right. In these and in similar tales throughout the world such heroines embody women's aspirations as old as the race to be autonomous, to determine their own fates, and to lead humankind toward an ever fuller humanity.
Notes

1 See also Luthi 17, 37, 157.

2 Tale-types are recurring combinations of particular folk tale motifs. This is tale-type 311 as classified by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson in *The Types of the Folktale*. The motifs themselves have been catalogued by Stith Thompson in his six-volume *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.

3 In some variants the ogre’s castle is situated in a literal Underworld (Thompson, *The Folktale* 35-36).

4 I have used the Hunt-Stern translation except where I have found it necessary to refer to the Grimms’ original German.

5 Neumann (*Amor and Psyche* 57 et passim) refers to a very similar occurrence of the motif in the tale of Cupid and Psyche.

6 The heroine of Angela Carter’s story “The Bloody Chamber,” based on Perrault’s “Blue-beard,” realises that in disobeying her husband and entering his torture chamber she has “behaved exactly according to his desires” (34). The interdiction, imposed on men or women and invariably broken by the hero, is a very frequently occurring motif.

7 An abridged translation is found in Andrew Lang’s edition, *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, but translations given here are my own.

8 Tale type 707, known as “The Three Brothers.” Thompson, *The Folktale* 121. A very similar version occurs in a more recently recorded Egyptian tale, “The Nightingale that Shrieked” (Busnag, *Arab Folktales*).

9 The earthly paradise contains a fountain from which flows the water of life, the tree of life, and birds famed for their singing (Patch 619, 624, 626).

10 The term “move” is Propp’s (*Morphology of the Folktale* 91-95). Propp seems to regard the trebling that occurs in the quest for the magic objects as constituting three moves, but in such a tale as this, these are more usefully taken as a single move, reserving the term “move” for the new unstable situations caused by: I) the sisters’ initial villainy, II) Parizade’s realisation of her own lack, and III) the introduction of the bird that can perceive the final, hidden lack in the siblings’ lives.

11 A purely Jungian interpretation of a tale would see all the characters as manifestations of different aspects of a single psyche. Dramatically, however, this would be reductive.

12 Slightly differing versions of this tale are found in Lang’s *The Brown Fairy Book* and Abrahams’ collection of African tales. Both derive from Jacottet. Though African tales do not come within the scope of the Aarne-Thompson classification of tale-types, Jacottet’s collection is among the sources of Thompson’s motif index. Many of the motifs of the Thakane story are frequently encountered in Bantu tales (see Werner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu*, passim).

13 The “milk-tree” (*Diplorrhyncus condylocarpum*), from which a milky fluid oozes when the bark is cut, is a cultic symbol of the matrilineal Ndembu tribe of northwestern Zambia, some 1200 miles north of Basuto territory. In *The Forest of Symbols* Victor Turner gives a detailed account of the meaning of this tree, and sums up by comparing the milk tree to “Goethe’s ‘eternal womanly’, a female or maternal principle pervading society and nature” (54). Naturally, information concerning the meaning of a symbol within a distant and tenuously related tribe must be used with great caution if at all—particularly as, though both are Bantu—speaking, the Basuto are not matrilineal. But as Isidore Okpehowo notes, Turner’s account of the meaning of Ndembu symbols “leans... on a Jungian belief that the logic of symbolism is amenable to transcultural intellectual appreciation” (*Myth in Africa* 30). The present study also makes this assumption.

14 This seems to be an allusion to the normal Basuto initiation rites for women, in which older women have charge of the younger ones for several months: “these women first lead them to a neighbouring stream, send them into the water, and sprinkle them. They then hide them separately in the turns and bends of the river...” (Casalis, 268).
Bibliography


