

The gendered interpretation of blood

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Isabel Cardigos, *In and Out of Enchantment: Blood Symbolism and Gender in Portuguese Fairytales*. Folklore Fellows' Communications No. 260. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 1996. 273 pp.

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In and Out of Enchantment by Isabel Cardigos is, as its subtitle indicates, a study of fairytales where the starting point for the analysis lies in Portuguese tale variants. The study interprets two masculine and two feminine fairytale types. The theoretical frame of reference is both traditional and highly innovative. The traditional side of the study is the use of psychoanalytic theories, both Freudian and Jungian, and structuralist models as tools of interpretation. The innovative aspects stem from the feminist approach which in this case means problematising some of the traditionally male-biased psychoanalytic views and making them work in a female-focused and female-oriented way.

The tale types analysed are The Twins or Blood Brothers (AT303), Faithful John (AT 516), The Snake Helper (AT533*) and The Girl as Helper in the Hero's Flight (AT 313), the first and second of which are clearly masculine plots and the other two feminine. Cardigos explains her aims at the beginning of the book as follows: "The intention of the analysis is to differentiate the masculine and feminine voices that have generated the structure and symbolism of fairytales. In particular there is a focus on the symbolism of bloodshed as it occurs in hero and heroine tales." The symbolism of bloodshed, argues Cardigos, is important because it "is central to a syntax of enchantment and disenchantment that is common to all the tales." (p. 13). In the analysis this syntax is interpreted in terms of the disjunction and conjunction of man and woman - or the heterosexual union or lack of it which turns out to be very much at the core of all these tales.

One of the sources of inspiration for this argumentation has been the theory of the anthropologist Chris Knight on the origins of culture. Knight's theory is based on the idea of the ancient symbolic correspondence between the phases of the lunar month and women's menstrual cycle. Women's bleeding and their inaccessibility to men during that period were synchronised symbolically with the moon's darkness; this was the time of disjunction of the male (who went hunting during that period) and the female side of society; the lifting of the sexual taboo (by purifying rituals) during the lighter phase of the lunar month ended up with the conjunction of males and females and sexual relations. Cardigos sees here an analogy to the "in and out of enchantment" cycle so typical of fairytales.

In Knight's theory, the binary systems (and thinking) founded on gender difference, which have been among the most discussed themes in feminist studies, are thought to be originally based on the difference between this conjunction and disjunction, coupling and uncoupling, or as Cardigos says: "The divisions cease to be between man and woman, but between togetherness and separateness. The outcome of this shift in primal logical pairs has the advantage of positing a conceptual world free from the marginalization of woman." (40) Free, because the pairs of opposites posited by Knight (Dark Moon - Full Moon, Blood - Semen, Raw - Cooked, Wet - Dry, Water - Fire, Blood-Kinship - Exogamous Groups, Abstinence - Feasting, Ritual - Celebration, Menstruation - Ovulation) include both women and men, only in different relational situations. According to this theory, then, woman only became branded with the negative pole of the binary opposition later on, when there was a shift from the prehistoric (more equal) "cultural structures of continual alternation between sexual modes into a focus on one mode alone, that of the exogamous couple in which it was the male who was empowered. This would explain the symbolic dominance of one sphere of thought over the other. Fairytales show this shift in symbolic power as they consistently end with a happily married couple", writes Cardigos and continues: "This can certainly be seen as a 'male' view, insofar as it only values one side of the female cycle alone - the 'ovular', fertile, and male-responsive aspect of woman." (41)

The valuation of only one side of the female cycle has, as Cardigos argues in her analysis of the fairytales, introduced the abjection and fear that men feel for the other, menstrual or virginal side of the female cycle or the bleeding in childbirth. The snakes, monsters and dragons that the heroes of the fairytales must fight and overcome before they can unite with their brides on the wedding night represent this fear symbolically, says Cardigos. This interpretation does not, she also says, necessarily contradict the other meanings given to these symbols (as for instance, by Bengt Holbek, for whom the dragon that lives on women's blood is an affective impression of the kinship bond with the father). Cardigos refers in connection with her interpretation to information existing in ethnographic descriptions around the world about customs of defloration of the bride by older, more powerful or experienced men, or by older women, who may use different sorts of instruments to break the hymen in order to safeguard the young bridegroom against the evils of the virginal blood, and also to taboos connected to menstruation and childbirth in different cultures. For Cardigos, the monsters of the fairytales could be symbolic remnants of these customs.

Cardigos' analysis does also speak of the fairytales in other, but connected terms: the enchanted, "bad" space for the hero and its opposite, the disenchanted, "good" space. But the space that displays to a hero itself as bad or enchanted may for the heroine represent the time of the other side of her cycle of bodily or social life, the precondition of the "good" as interpreted from the male point of view, the conjunction in marriage. The fairytales are thus about solving the problems arising in the shift in status from unmarried to married, described as a journey or adventure for the hero and

speaking symbolically in terms of the fear of the "other", the feminine "unknown", not-yet-experienced which concentrates, according to Cardigos, on the blood symbolism.

As Cardigos says, the discourse in most of the fairytales is masculine; women are most often silent objects of dispute or mediation in male adventures, but even then it is possible to discern them as "muffled organizers", "the presence that determined the path of the male adventure" (209). In the feminine tales like "The Little Snake" this syntax is given conscious wording: "These tales brought forth the female perception of the necessity to be governed by a skin-shedding friend in order to emerge in full womanhood. This friend can appear as a rival or mortal enemy, a 'black bride' - until the heroine is ready to appear as the 'white bride'. 'The Little Snake' demonstrated that the ugliness of the 'black bride' is a male perception of the 'wrong' times of woman: in the story the snake is golden and beautiful except for those times when the heroine can be decoded as shedding blood, at those times the snake turns into a horrible serpent. If kept a secret - out of man's sight - this never happens." (ibid.)

Cardigos refers somewhere in her discussion to the double (standard) meaning of the bloodshed: woman's blood shed in menstruation, defloration or childbirth is mostly regarded as defiling, pollutive, dangerous, but men's blood shed in battle is considered sacred, purifying. And blood sacrifice has been and is the most powerful means of affirming male genealogy and solidarity. How come the blood shed at birth is pollutive, but that shed in killing is purifying? Isabel Cardigos gives us one answer in her fairytale interpretation: if we invert the discourse and listen to the feminine voice, it is easy to see that the quality of the blood depends on the frame of the gendered interpretation which has for so long been masculine.

"In and Out of Enchantment" is a richer analysis of fairytales than I have been able to describe here, and I have mostly paid attention to the analysis of the blood symbolism. The book also includes an admirably condensed and clear introduction to the basic knowledge on fairytales and their study and can be recommended to any beginning folklore student. For those of us who have never read any Portuguese fairytales it does, of course, offer an expert introduction to that tradition. And the book is really exciting to read in all its details without killing the enchantment which the fairytales themselves spark off in the mind: "There was once a king who was very unhappy at not having a son or a daughter. At a certain time the queen gave birth to a child of the feminine sex, a child whom a very evil fairy enchanted as a little snake, a spell which would last until the snake was soaked in the waters from a child-birth." And what happened then?

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