B

Mythical Animals
Mythical Animals

Motifs B0—B99

Sith Thompson's nearly exhaustive taxonomy of mythical animals in his Motif-Index lists nine sometimes overlapping categories. The largest of these, "Mythical beasts and hybrids" (Motif B10-B19.11), embraces the dragon, the basilisk, the unicorn, the chimera, animals with unusual limbs like the hydra, devastating animals such as the Erymanthian boar, hostile animals, the behemoth, and other mythical beasts. The class of "Beast-mon" includes centaurs, satyrs, man-dogs, the lamia, and other combinations. Among "Mythical birds" (B30-B39.1), the roc and the phoenix are the most familiar. Counted among "Bird-beasts" (B40-B49.3) are the winged horse, the flying horse, the griffin, and the air-going elephant. Leviathan (B61) is the most famous of the "Mythical fish" (B60-B68). (Not detailed below is a small class of "Fish-beasts" (B70-B73).) "Other mythical animals" (B90-B99.2, also not discussed here) include the plumed serpent, the horned snake, the sea-serpent, and other reptiles and exotic forms. Celebrated examples in the "Bird-men" category (B50-B57) are in fact part women: the sphinx, the harpy, and the siren, as the most popular form of "Fish-men" (B80-B83) is the mermaid.

The dragon (B11-B11.12.7) is a nearly universal motif, a reptilian or snake-like hybrid or compound animal, covered with the scales of a fish and sometimes endowed with claws and wings and the head of an eagle, falcon, or hawk. Of tremendous size, the dragon often devastates the land or guards a treasure such as the Golden Fleece, which was stolen by Jason and the Argonauts. Famous dragon-slayers in the West include Perseus, Saint George, and the Arthurian knights. Unlike its Western cousin, the Eastern dragon, particularly in China and Japan, benefits, rather than terrorizes, people (Lam n.d., 111).
Another hybrid, the basilisk (B12–B12.3) is a mythical lizard or serpent whose hissing drives other serpents away. In ancient and medieval times, the basilisk was considered to have a lethal glance and fiery breath that consumed animals and foliage alike. Because the animal was decimating his troops, Alexander the Great believed to have disposed of the basilisk by inducing it to look into a mirror (Rowland 1973, 28). The Parson in The Canterbury Tales relies upon a long medieval tradition when he compares a lustful glance to the deadly attention of the basilisk (Rowland 1973, 30).

The fabulous unicorn (B15) is an animal in the form of a horse or a goat whose one horn has magical and curative powers. Although by legend only virgins may capture unicorns, the hero in the Grimm’s tale “The Brave Little Tailor” rises to the king’s challenge of capturing a mischievous unicorn that is damaging the forest; only then can the tailor marry the king’s daughter (Grimm and Grimm 1992, 85). In the West, the unicorn can symbolize courage, nobility, and purity as well as pride, wrath, and destructive forces (Leeming 1997, 474). The resemblance between the unicorn of Europe and the proud but gentle Ki-lin of China—like a large deer with the tail of an ox, horse’s hooves, and a single short horn—suggests a possible common origin in some real or legendary creature (Lum n.d., 60–61).

Another hybrid, the chimera (B14.1), is described by Homer as “a foaming monster . . . of ghostly and inhuman origin, / her forepart lionish, her tail a snake’s, / a she-goat in between. . . . [which] exhaled / in jets a rolling fire” (Il. 6, 154–158). Although Aeneas encounters fire-breathing chimeras, along with hissing hydras, and other monsters in the infernal regions (Bullen 1979, 267), the chimera plays a key role in only one myth—that of Bellerophon, who kills the creature in a dangerous challenge established to avenge the alleged seduction of King Iobates’ daughter Antea (Leeming 1997, 112). Because of the grotesqueness of its composition, the chimera has become over time synonymous with anything so improbable that it must be imaginary (McLeish 1996, 117).

The hydra (B15.1.2.8.1), a nine-headed water-serpent or serpentlike monster living in the swamps of Lerna, may be counted among those animals with unusual limbs or members (Grant and Hazel 1993, 163). One of the twelve labors of Heracles is to destroy the beast, but he has great trouble killing it because whenever he cuts off one of its heads, two grow in its place. Also in the class of animals with unusual limbs or members is Cerberus (B15.7.1), the monstrous hound with three heads, a serpent’s tail, and a tangle of snakes writhing from his body. Cerberus is the watchdog that lives on the infernal side of the river Styx. He guards the entrance to the lower world and prevents the shades from leaving Hades. While he greets in a friendly manner the souls of the dead that are ferried across by the aged boatman Charon, Cerberus disapproves of living mortals attempting to enter the underworld. To get past him, Orpheus has to charm him with sweet music, and the Sibyl of Cumae, guiding Aeneas, throws him some cake soaked in drugged wine (hence, the expression “a sop to Cerberus”) (Grant and Hazel 1993, 81).

Devastating animals (B16–B16.6.3) include many drawn from domestic species: monster cats, hounds, man-eating mares, snow, monster bulls, and destructive sheep. Among the wild animals are foxes, tigers, lions, wolves, bears, elephants, boars, deer, mice, porcupines, reptiles, insects, and fish. The great Leviathan and the Erymanthian boar, which is slain by Heracles in his fourth of twelve labors (Fox 1964, 82), are examples of the latter class.

Hostile animals (B17–B17.2.4.1) include the griffin and the behemoth. The largest of all creatures except perhaps the Leviathan, the behemoth is described in the Talmud as “an oxlike animal some seven miles in length who daily grazes over a thousand miles of grass in paradise and will eventually be slain by the Jewish Messiah” (Lum n.d., 199).

Thompson’s second major category of mythical animals is “Beast-men” (B20–B29.9), combining bestial and human form. The two major types of human-animal creatures are those with a human head and an animal body and those with an animal head and a human body. The centaurs (B21), for example, are a race of creatures with the trunk and head of a man and the body of a horse; they live on Mount Pelion in Thessaly. Most centaurs are lustful, savage, and licentious, and several myths associated with them concern their war with a neighboring nation (Grant and Hazel 1993, 78). Chiron, however, was one centaur reputed to be wise and good. His most famous pupil is Asclepius, the Greek god of healing (Leeming 1997, 103).

Unlike the centaur, the Minotaur (B23.1)—offspring of King Minos’s wife Pasiphae and an unusually beautiful bull (Hamilton 1998, 212)—has the body of a man and the head of a bull. The siring bull was given to Minos to be sacrificed to Poseidon, but Minos keeps it for himself. As a punishment, Poseidon makes Pasiphae fall passionately in love with the bull, and she conceives the Minotaur. Minos has the architect and inventor Daedalus build a great labyrinth to confine the fierce monster, but Theseus, one of the fourteen Athenian youths to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, wrestles it to the ground and kills it (Hamilton 1998, 215).

Part goat and part man, the satyrs (B24–B24.1), of whom Pan is the chief deity, are generative demons of the flocks and herds. Pictorial representations of the satyrs reveal two general periods of development: in the first, the human element is prominent, and they are regularly seen as “possessing the heads and bodies of men and the members of animals, such as horns, tail, pointed ears, shaggy hair, and the legs of goats or of horses”; or as “beautiful youths bearing here and there upon their persons mere hints of
the semi-bestial nature” (Fox 1964, 268–269). In the second period, the animal elements predominate, and Pan, the god of the pastures, is usually seen with “goat’s legs and a leering, sensual countenance, while the flute of reed, the goatherd’s staff, and the goatskin are his common attributes” (Fox 1964, 269).

Lamias (B29.1) are “sharp-clawed sphinx-like creatures with a woman’s upper body who attacked men and boys and sucked their blood” (Gilmore 2003, 41). In some versions of Isaiah 13:22, a lamia, along with other evil creatures, is said to haunt the city of Babylon, laid waste by Jehovah (Rowland 1973, 115). Keats immortalizes the lamia in his poem, “Lamia,” about a Corinthian youth who is seduced by a serpent woman described as “a gorgian shape of dazzling hue, Vermillion-spotted, golden, green and blue” (lines 47–48).

**MYTHICAL BIRDS AND FISH**

Among the most fabulous of “Mythical birds” (B31.1–B31.1.2) is the roc, a giant bird that can carry off people and elephants in its claws. Probably originating in Arabia and China, it is best known in the West from its appearance in the Arabian Nights and The Travels of Marco Polo (McMillan 1987, 75). The roc of myth may be based on a real bird such as the eagle, which in several European folktales exhibits similar prowess. In the Grimm’s “Foundling,” for example, a young boy is carried off by a giant bird, and in “Snow White and Rose Red,” a little man is held in the talons of an eagle (1992, 189, 520–521). In “The Attack on the Giant Elk,” an American Indian tale of the Southwest, the hero is carried by an eagle to the giant bird’s nest (Thompson 1977, 339). In Hawaiian mythology, too, a great seabird carries the first man of creation, Kumu-honua, and his wife, Lalo-honua, off into the jungle (Beckwith 1970, 44–45).

Larger than an eagle and more graceful, the phoenix (B32–B32.1.1) is a bird that is consumed in fire, with a new phoenix arising from its ashes. It appears in the iconography and texts of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Arab, Russian, and Judaic traditions (Leeming 1997, 363). Although the myth of the phoenix came to be understood in Christian literature as an allegory of Christ’s resurrection, the phoenix has been used in more secular contexts as an emblem of creative living (McMillan 1987, 75).

“Bird-beasts” (B40–B49.3) include the winged horse, the flying horse, and the griffin. According to Hesiod and Pindar, the winged horse Pegasus springs from the gorgon Medusa’s blood when Perseus severs the monster’s neck (Hamilton 1998, 184–185). The young Corinthian Bellerophon tries one day to ride Pegasus to Olympus, but Zeus sends a fly to sting the horse, and Bellerophon falls crashing back to earth. Later Zeus harnesses Pegasus in his chariot team, to pull him across the sky as he hurl thunderbolts (McLeish 1996, 472). In Norse mythology, the flying, eight-legged steed Sleipnir carries Odin through the sea and air. When Odin’s son Balder is killed, Hermod rides Sleipnir to Hel to offer a ransom (MacCulloch 1964, 43). Half lion and half eagle, the fierce and cunning griffin is the legendary guardian of vast gold mines in India and Syria (Lumm n.d., 47). Often associated with rulers of earth and sky, the griffin appears in heraldry, in manuscripts, and on cathedral walls (Bartsch 1987, 85–87).

The sphinx, the harpy, and the siren are the most familiar of the “Bird-men” (B50–B57). The sphinx (B51) has the face of a woman, the body and tail of a lion, and the wings of a bird. A frightful monster who lies in wait for travelers along the roads to Thebes, she propounds to those whom she seizes a riddle to be answered on pain of death: “What animal walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?” (Hamilton 1998, 376). Only the courageous and intelligent Oedipus is able to respond that she describes the three stages of human life. The harpies (B52) are loathsome birds with the arms and breasts of women. A vivid account of their repulsive behavior occurs in the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, who drive them away from tormenting the blind old seer Phineus (Fox 1964, 111). Aeneas, too, gives a horrifying description of his men’s encounter with the harpies: “They tear the banquet to pieces, filching all with their bestial touch. Hideous the sounds, nauseous the stench about us” (Aeneid 3, 227–228). The siren (B53–B53.4) is a bird with a woman’s head (sometimes in mermaid form [B53.0.1]). By their sweet song the sirens in Greek mythology entice seamen to forgetfulness and death by hunger. Odysseus escapes their terror by filling his companions’ ears with wax and lashing himself to the mast of his ship (Odyssey 2).

“Mythical fish” (B60–B68), as might be expected, abound in Hawaiian, Tahitian, and Tongan mythology. Ancestral sharks, for example, were celebrated among the fishing people as family guardians who were fed daily and were believed to drive fish into the nets, to save fishermen from death if their canoe capsized, and to ward off danger in other ways (Beckwith 1970, 128–132). The fish Uhu-makai-kai was considered to be the parent of all the fishes (Beckwith 1970, 24). In the Biblical tradition, the giant fish Leviathan, great adversary of God, may or may not have been a whale, and different descriptions of the huge sea animal may be found in Psalms 74:14 and 104:26, Job 41, and Isaiah 27:1 (South 1987, 360–361).

The “Mermaid” (B81–B81.13.12), a woman with the tail of a fish who lives in the sea, is the most common of the “Fish-men” category (B80–B83). Like the sirens, mermaids are fair to look upon (Thompson 1977, 244). Although specific tales about mermaids are not numerous, they have nevertheless furnished
subjects for art, perhaps the most famous of which is the bronze statue in the harbor of Copenhagen. The statue commemorates the best-known of mermaid stories, Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” in which the creature is willing to trade her voice for legs in order to marry a prince (Andersen 1983, 57–76). The merman (B82–82.7), male of the species, never mates with a mermaid, but rather, like the creature in Matthew Arnold’s “The Forsaken Merman,” lures a human spouse into his cold sea-cave home only to be abandoned by her at the sound of church bells on shore (Thompson 1977, 244).

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See also: Dragon; Leviathan; Mythical Birds.

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Mythical Animals: Dragon

Motif B11

Dragons are imaginary and composite creatures (B11.2.1, “Dragon as compound animal”). Although they vary in detail, they are reptilian monsters, often represented with wings, huge claws, and fiery breath (Eberhart 1983, 9) (B11.2.11, “Fire-breathing dragon”). Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary of Mythology and Folklore describes the dragon, usually a male figure, as a composite of a snake and crocodile, its body covered with scales (Leach and Fried 1972, 325). While female dragons appear to be a rarity, the Motif-Index refers to a “she-dragon” motif in Irish myth and legend (B11.2.0.1).

The dragon’s forchands and head might be those of a lion, eagle, or hawk. Smith describes the dragon as a modified serpent, lizard, fish, shellfish, toad, elephant, horse, ram, deer, or another animal (1919, 77–78). Therefore, unless there are contemporaneous illustrations, it is difficult to know if some of the earliest literature is truly describing creatures we think of as dragons, or some other kind of monster.

Further complicating the definition of dragons is the fact that in some cultures they are benevolent—for example, in China, they have traditionally been regarded as symbols of good fortune—while in others they are malevolent. In the European tradition, where they are commonly viewed as inhabitants of remote or underground realms, they are an “amalgamation of indigenous Germanic and Celtic motifs with Christian biblical theological symbolism laid on a foundation of Middle Eastern, Anatolian, and Illyrian cosmogenic and mythographic concepts” (Evans 2000, 235)

Evans, in his discussion of the dragon in medieval folklore and literature, explains that the dragon’s ubiquity in European legend was a result of biblical
associations of it with the arch-figure of diabolical evil (B11.9, “Dragon as power of evil. So considered everywhere except in the East, where are also found beneficent dragons”). But this association of the dragon with evil came about through mistranslations of various Hebrew words as “dragon.” “By the end of the Middle Ages well over 100 saints had been credited with critical encounters with diabolical foes manifest in the form of a dragon or monstrous serpent” (Evans 2000, 235).

MYTHOLOGY

The dragon figures prominently in the mythology of various Asian countries. Early dragon stories center around creation and an attempt to preserve creation from chaos. Leeming characterizes the dragon as the most important of Chinese mythological beasts, “a positive expression of yang, the male principle, balanced by the female yin, represented by the phoenix” (2001, 52). In Chinese mythology, Gun created new land after the god Tiandi covered the earth with floods in retaliation for human wickedness. Gun’s action angered Tiandi, who struck him with a sword. Out of the wound sprung Gun’s son, Yu, who stemmed the flood and became a yellow dragon who lived in the waters thereafter (Leeming 2001, 39, 206).

The earliest dragon story in Sumerian myth, from about 5000 BCE, tells of a dragon named Zu, the Sumerian storm god, also known as Anzu. This myth tells how Zu steals the Tablets of Law, which set out the laws of the Universe, from the god Enil. Enil sends the sun god Ninurta to retrieve the tablets and kill Zu. Ninurta and Marduk are sometimes interchanged in this myth (Röhrich 1981, 788; Lieck 1991, 53–54).

Another ancient dragon story is contained in the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish. In this story, Tiamet, the watery chaos, becomes a huge monster, perhaps a dragon, that is defeated by the god Marduk. In Egyptian mythology, a sea dragon named Apopis tries to overcome Ra, the Egyptian sun god. He is slain by Seth (Röhrich 1981, 788).

In Greek mythology, there is a race of gigantic toothed serpents, called drakones, some with multiple heads, wings, and/or poisonous venom that could kill at the touch. The females (drakaina) have the upper bodies of beautiful young women, but the long coiling tails of drakones in place of legs.

The Motif-Index lists “fight with dragon” as a motif (B.11.11). It is also a major tale type (AT 300). Here, the conflict between the hero and the dragon symbolizes the conflict between life and death, good and evil, and right and wrong (El-Shamy 1997, 38). There are many famous dragon slayers in myth and literature, including Perseus, Marduk, Apollo, Siegfried, Saint Michael, Saint George, Beowulf, Arthur, and Tristan (Leach and Fried 1972, 324).

Jason, with the help of the sorceress-princess Medea, sets out on a quest for the Golden Fleece, which is held by King Ares of Colchis and guarded by the Khalikian Drakon. Apollonius (1997) writes in the Argonautika (third century BCE):

[T]hen did the monster undulate its enormous coils with their protective armor of hard dry scales... Jason followed behind [Medea] in terror; but already the dragon, charmed by her spells, was relaxing the long spine of its sinuous earthen form, spreading out its countless coils, as some dark wave, stealthy and noiseless, rolls over a sluggish expanse of ocean. (4:141–153)

This story is Type AT 313, Girl as Helper.

Herakles’s eleventh labor is to fetch the apples of the Hesperides, which are guarded by a hundred-headed dragon or serpent named Ladon (drakon ladon) on Mount Atlas. Herakles slays the dragon, as Apollonius writes in the Argonautika, but “now the snake, struck down by Herakles, lay by the trunk of the apple-tree. Only the tip of his tail was still twitching; from the head down, his dark spine showed not a sign of life” (4:1390f). Herakles also vanquishes the Hydra Lernaia, a gigantic water drakon with nine heads, and Skylla, a drakaina.

Perseus saves Andromeda from another type of serpent-monster, a ketos, which, in a depiction from a contemporary vase, looks like a dragon. Andromeda was being sacrificed to this monster, which had been sent by Poseidon to punish Andromeda’s mother for boasting that she was more beautiful than the Nereides. Perseus falls in love with Andromeda and marries her (R11.1.4, “Rescue of princess (maiden) from dragon”; T68.1, “Princess offered as prize to rescuer”; AT 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 506, 653).

FOLKTALES

The widespread European folktales show how the princess being saved from a dragon by a young hero may not stem directly from the story of Perseus and Andromeda, but it certainly is analogous (Thompson 1977, 279).

The Dragon Slayer (AT 300) is a central folktale type in Europe. The Two Brothers (AT 303) is a related type that contains the dragon-slaying story of AT 300. Thompson says that in Die zwei Brüder (1934), Kurt Ranke cites about 1,100 examples of both tales, taken together. They are among the oldest stories in the European tradition and probably arose in France (1977, 24–31).

The folklore of the pagan tribes of northern Europe contained dragons, and various references are made to the dragon’s serpentine nature (Lindahl, McNamara, and Lindau 2000, 236–237). In the Nibelungenlied, Siegfried kills a dragon, and the last creature faced by Beowulf is referred to as a dragon and described in
a fair amount of detail (Heaney 1999). Other north European dragon stories are found in Germany’s Thidrek’s Saga, Old Norse narrative Poetic Edda, and Norwegian Heimskringla (Lindahl, McNamara, and Lindau 2000, 236–237).

The best-known dragon slayer of Christianity is Saint George, the patron saint of England, and an important saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church. While George was apparently a real person in the third century who was an early convert to Christianity, the dragon slayer element again harkens back to the Greek myth of Perseus and Andromeda. An early version of the story appears in The Golden Legend; or, Lives of the Saints, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, in 1275. The legend relates how a Libyan king’s daughter was saved from a dragon by Saint George, and in gratitude the king’s subjects were baptized. Tales and ballads about Saint George are found throughout European folklore, including in Poland, Germany, Russia, and England. There is an English ballad about Saint George in Richard Johnson’s Seven Champions of Christendome (1597).

Dragon stories are also widespread in Eastern traditions and lore. "Dragon-King" stories (B11.12.5; D812.7, “Magic object received from the king”) are noted by Eberhard (no. 65, "Wishing Stone") (Eberhard 1965). A dragon slayer, Hsu Sun, in Chinese mythology, is instrumental in killing two dragons in a boat (Werner 1922, 222–223). The dragon appears in Turkish folk tale tradition under Type TTV 107, Der Drache. For example, in the collection of Billur Koşk, the tale “Zümrüd-ü Anka” (TTV Type 72) brings in the motif of dragon slayer: the young prince kills the dragon in order to rescue the princess held hostage in the well and marries the princess at the end of the tale (Alangu 1961, 109–111).

ELITE LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

Zohak, also known as Zahak or Zohbak, is the serpent king in the Persian epic Shahnname, the Book of Kings, written and compiled by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in the late tenth to early eleventh centuries. King Zohak is kissed by Satan, who takes him into his web of evil. Two serpent heads grow out of the king’s shoulders and this creature has to be fed human brains. Kawanah the blacksmith kills Zohak, after feeding him all Zohak’s sons except for the last one (B11.8, “Sacrifice of human being to a dragon”; B11.2.7, “Snakes issue from dragon’s shoulder”).

In the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, the dragons of Middle Earth are evil creatures, enormous in size and awesome in strength. There are three species: the first are the great serpents that crawl over the ground, second are the reptiles with limbs, and the third sort have wings like a bat that enable them to fly and to create storms on the land over which they fly. Because they are made with magic, they keep themselves far from water and prefer the darkness above light, even starlight (Rahn 2000, 525–526). Bilbo Baggins of The Hobbit is a middle-aged hobbit of Middle Earth who finds himself on a journey with a group of young dwarfs to recover the ancestral treasure from the dragon of the Lonely Mountain. The expected outcome of folklore with the hero slaying the dragon is subverted, and instead a minor character kills the beast. He takes a small portion of the treasure (Rahn 2000, 525).

There are other legends about sea serpents that are variously described as
looking like dragons (eyewitnesses describe them as having horselike heads atop serpentine necks), such as Chessie in Maryland and Virginia, the Loch Ness sea monster in Scotland, and Storsjöodjuret in the great lake at Ostersund in central Sweden (B11.3.1.1. “Dragon lives in lake”) (Meurer and Gagnon 1988, 42–43).

A 2001 film, Shrek, puts a twist on the dragon-slayer type, with the ogre (Shrek) taking up the role of the prince who is supposed to slay the dragon and rescuing the young princess from the castle.

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Mythical Birds

Motif B30

Many cultures deemed birds important in their mythology, legend, and folktales tradition, believing that they possess powers of prophecy and associating them with gods. The roc, phoenix, and griffin are examples of such birds (Bies 2002, 1022). They are seen to possess the ability to talk, offering guidance to humans, guarding treasures, and sending messages to gods (Jones 1995, 67; Ingersoll 1923, 20–28). Stories of these fabulous birds have parallels with stories of the garuda of India, the simorg of Persia, the anka of Arabia and Turkey, the feng-huang of China, and the bennu of Egypt.

The garuda, probably the oldest of the great birds, is capable of blocking out the sun with its body and picking up elephants in its talons. It is depicted with a white face, an eagle’s beak, and scarlet wings attached to a golden human’s body. It was also called the bird of life, as it was thought to be the incarnation of fire (Ingersoll 1923, 206–207; Bies 2002, 1028).

The simorg, the wise old bird of Persian folklore, is said to have lived on the Mountain Kaf for thousands of years. By some accounts it is immortal and is said to have a nest in the Tree of Knowledge (B31.5) (Lindahl, McNamara, and Lindau 2000, 449). The name means “thirty birds,” and it is said that the simorg is so old that it has seen the destruction of the world three times over (Ingersoll 1923, 205). It is known to take children into its nest two nurse them or foster them. A bird with the same name, which had orange metallic feathers, a silver head, a human face, four wings, a vulture’s talons and a long peacock’s tail, was an attendant to the Queen of Sheba (Bies 2002, 1027–1028). Carnoy notes that in Mazdaean mythology the most celebrated bird is Saena, a bird similar to the Persian Simorg. Its open wings are like a wide cloud and fall of water crowning the mountains (Carnoy 1917, 289–290).

In Middle Eastern traditions, the anka is depicted as a bird of huge size, large enough to carry an elephant. It has a long life span, approximately 1,700 years. At the end of its life, it burns itself and rises again. The Arabs believed that it was a creation of God, originally a perfect bird, but that, over time, these birds devoured all the animals on earth and started carrying off children. People appealed to God, who prevented the anka from multiplying; thus it eventually became extinct.

THE ROC

There are four stories about the roc in the *The Thousand and One Nights*, two involving Abd al-Rahman and two involving Sinbad (Dawood 1973) (B31.1, “Roc. A giant bird which carries off men in its claws”). Sinbad sails on a commercial venture from his home in Basra, and the ship stops at a very pleasant island. Sinbad goes ashore, wanders in the lovely woods, falls asleep, and awakes to find that the ship is gone and that he is the only person on the island. He is carried to a better place by the rukh (B.552, “Man carried by bird”) (Ingersoll 1923, 200–201). In the other Sinbad story and in one of the Abd al-Rahman stories, rocs destroy ships by dropping rocks on them (Marzolph 1997, 639).

In Turkish folklore, the marvelous bird *üzümürdü anka*, of Indian or Persian origin, is found in different collections of tales. *Billur Kösk* is a collection of pruned folktales widespread in the tradition in Turkey (Alangu 1961, 5–7). In the tale “Üzümürdü Anka,” the young prince walks toward the mountains and sleeps in a huge tree, which happens to be the nest of the anka. The nest is full of little ankas, whose mother is away. The little birds are approached by a snake that intends to kill them, but the young prince kills the snake. Upon her return, the anka finds out about the events and treats the hero well. She opens one of her wings to shade the prince. She also brings him to a faraway land. On the way, after they consume their food and drink stocks, the prince feeds the bird with pieces of his own flesh. But the bird does not eat them and she thinks of the prince as a hero. Since the anka is a holy bird, he is among the holy saints. With her great blessings, the bird cures the leg of the prince (B322.1, “Hero feeds his own flesh to the animal”) (Alangu 1961, 114–115). Other tales with the anka motif have been collected by Pertev Nabi Boratav and appear in *Typen der türkischen Voksmärchen* (Eberhard and Boratav 1953).

Marco Polo describes seeing rocs in Madagascar, and envoys from Madagascar present the great Khan of Cathay with a roc feather. In fact, Madagascar was the home of a gigantic bird, the *Aepyornis maximus* or elephant bird, undoubtedly what Polo saw. This bird may not have become extinct until the sixteenth century. While huge like the roc, it could not fly (Ingersoll 1923, 201; Bies 2002, 1030).
The roc was thought of as a gigantic bird, here depicted carrying elephants. From "The Second Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor" in Thousand and One Nights: or, The Arabian Nights' Entertainments, translated by E.W. Lane; illustrated by William Harvey (1850).

The Arabic authors of the Middle Ages had much to say of the ankā, also known as al-rukh, which supposedly lived in the Mountain Kaf, believed to be the mother of all the mountains. No one knows where the mountain is and what lies behind it. Ibn Battuta, an Arab traveler, encountered the stories of the roc (Nigg 1995, 53). Marzolph argues that a huge ostrich-like bird might have existed in historical times. The New Zealand moa bird, which became extinct in the fourteenth century, might have contributed to the genesis of the rukh (Marzolph 1995, 595).

THE Griffin

Griffins (B42, "Griffin. Half lion, half eagle") are portrayed with a lion's body and an eagle's head, wings, and claws. The griffin is symbolically significant for its domination of both the earth and the sky because of its lion's body and eagle's head and wings (Franklyn 1967, 43–44).

In Greece, the griffin was a symbol of vigilant strength and an embodiment of Nemesis, the goddess of retribution (Bies 2002, 1027). In medieval times, the griffin was an agent of destruction, as in the German epic Gudrun, but later the bird had a more positive character. Griffins are frequently found in Eastern European tales symbolizing the unknown. They are found in the The

A griffin is created by rearranging the top flap in a "turn-up" book. From Metamorphosis; or, a Transformation of Pictures, with Poetical Explanations, for the Amusement of Young Persons (1814).

Two Brothers (AT 303); in the variants of Amor and Psyche (AT 425); and also in motifs H1233.4.3, "Griffin as helper on quest"; A232.4, "Griffin disdains to go on ark; drowned: hence extinct"; N575, "Griffin as guardian of treasure"; and B17.2.2, "Hostile Griffin" (Bies 2002, 1026, 1029).

The Grimms' tale of the griffin tells of the son of a farmer who goes to the griffin, because "it knows everything." He wants to get a feather from the griffin's tail. But no Christian can talk to the griffin, because it would eat him. Only when the bird is asleep can he pluck out the feather from the griffin's tail says the wife of the griffin (Zipes 2002, 488–493). The same motif, about a feather from the griffin's tail being used to cure the rich man's daughter who is sick, appears in Celtic folklore as well (Danaer 1970, 81–91).

THE Phoenix

A mythical bird of gorgeous plumage about the size of an eagle, the phoenix was fabled to live in the desert of Arabia with a lifespan of 500 years. At the
close of this period, known as the phoenix “period” or “cycle,” it “makes a nest of spices, sings a melodious dirge, flaps its wings to set fire to the pile, burns itself to ashes and comes forth with new life” (Brewer’s Dictionary 1999, 906). Restored to youth, it lives for another 500 years, when the cycle is repeated. Thus, the phoenix is linked generally to concepts of resurrection, immortality, and cyclic resurgence (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1969, 597–598).

Van den Broek’s monumental treatise, The Myth of the Phoenix According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions (1972), lists hundreds of occurrences in Biblical, Greek and Latin, and Egyptian, Coptic, Syriac, and other Oriental texts. The phoenix has many analogues in different cultures, including the anka of Arabic lore and the garuda of Hindu mythology (Leach 1972, 869), the Taoist’s oiseau de cinabre (san-nian), the Chinese feng-huang (or -hwang), and the Siva of Hindu mythology. Cirlot traces connections to the Persian sinomorth and the Turkish kerkes (1962, 253). Other counterparts are the Japanese ho-ho and the Russian firebird (Nigg 1995, 17–18). Many scholars connect the phoenix to the sacred Egyptian bird, the bennu, a bird similar to the stork or heron, which was believed to have been “the first creature to alight on the hill that came into being out of the primordial ooze” (Biederman 1994, 264). The bennu symbolized the Egyptian gods Ra and Osiris and was a hieroglyph for the sun. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead is recorded: “I am bennu, which is as in the Heliopolis. I am keeper of the book that which is and of that which shall be.”

In tracing the history of the phoenix, Van den Broek begins by noting “the widespread oriental conception of the bird of the sun” (1972, 397) and outlines a genealogy of the sun bird, from the Semitic world via Phoenicia to the Mycenaean culture and then on throughout the Greek world, where its Greek name became established. His extensive research leads him to proclaim that it is “probable that the Classical phoenix myth is a purely Greek product, i.e., the Greek variant of the mythical conception of the bird of the sun found in various cultures of the Near, Middle, and Far East” (398 and 398n). Classical writers who wrote about the phoenix include the Greeks Hesiod (eighth century BCE), and Herodotus (in his account of Egypt, ca. 430 BCE) and the Romans Ovid (in Metamorphoses, first century CE), Pliny the Elder (Natural History, 77 CE), and Tacitus (Annals, 109 CE). A key change in the phoenix legend came with the writings of Lactantius (Lucius Caecilius Firmatus), who wrote of the bird’s fiery death. Although it was Clement of Rome (late first, early second century) who first reworked the phoenix myth as a Christian symbol of the Resurrection of Christ, Lactantius’s Christian reinterpretation is the foremost example of the “apologetic method—the re-expression of fundamental Christian truths in a form that would be palatable to educated Roman pagans who might otherwise be appalled by a religion that venerated a crucified malefactor” (McGucken in Lactantius 1995).

The phoenix and related birds of youth figure in folk and fairy tales. The Irish story of Maol Dúin (tenth century), the immediate source of the famous Navigatio Brendaní, was very influential in the Middle Ages and served as an impetus for voyages of discovery that led eastward to India and west to the New World (Dillon 1948, 124). In one episode, a huge phoenix-like bird eats of a fruit that, when cast into a lake, gives the water the power to renew the youth of those who bathe in it (129). A French-Canadian fairy tale features the golden phoenix, whose voice has youth-granting power: “Whoever lives within the sound of its voice will never grow old” (Barbeau 1958, 20). The Chinese phoenix, feng-huang or feng-hwang, differs from the phoenix of Western mythology in being a pair of birds, the male (feng) and the female (huang). The male symbolizes fire; the female is the sign of the empress. A bird of good omen, it is not seen in times of war. Music-loving, it may appear when it hears the flute. “The bird’s song is said to be the source of the Chinese musical scale” (Nigg 1995, 16). With its unity that transcends duality, the feng-huang is “a powerful symbol of conjugal unity” (Biederman 1994, 264). It does not die and undergo rebirth, although it is immortal.

Poets and writers of fantasy have for centuries seized on the metaphorical potential of the magical bird, and psychologists find it an apt symbol “d’une irréfragable volonté de survivre” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1969, 598). It can be viewed psychologically as the “phoenix” within ourselves, “enabling us to live out every moment and to overcome each and every partial death which we call a ‘dream’ or ‘change’” (O. Wirth in Cirlot 1962, 253–254). Such symbolic significance transcends time. As just one example, Milton’s poem Samson Agonistes (1671) speaks of the “self-begot’n bird” from the Arabian woods as the emblem of Samson’s reconstitution of heroic fortitude and animal vitality (Wilkenfeld 1965, 166).

Van den Broek remarks that “it can only be concluded that the phoenix fulfilled an important function with respect to the meaning of human existence… The phoenix could symbolize renewal in general as well as the sun, time, the empire, metamorphosis, consecration, resurrection, life in the heavenly paradise. Christ, Mary, virginity, the exceptional man, and certain aspects of the Christian life” (1972, 9).

In modern times there have been imaginative portrayals of the phoenix in literature for young readers. Carolyn Wells, in Folly and the Forest (1902), tells of a little girl who is flown by Pegasus to the nest of Phoenix, who relates his history to her. Described as the “biggest and most beautiful bird that ever lived,” he dwells in paradisiacal surroundings, inhabits an aromatic nest, has a musical voice, and is kind and intelligent. His motive for self-immolation is nothing more than boredom and loneliness, and burning “does me more good
than a Turkish bath.” He is ecstatic to feel “so young and gay and frisky” on arising from the ashes. The only unpleasant aspect of the wonderful transformation is the smell of burning feathers (61–64). In the story “The Phoenix,” by Sylvia Townsend Warner, “the phoenix is caged in a zoo and subjected to all sorts of abuse by schemes profiteers until it finally bursts into flames, destroying the zoo and killing everyone in the area” (Storytelling Encyclopedia 1997, 364). J.K. Rowling, in her Harry Potter fantasy series, portrays a magic phoenix, Fawkes, who belongs to the sage Dumbledore. Phoenix tail feathers are at the core of the wands of both Harry Potter and his nemesis, Lord Voldemort, suggesting the moral ambiguity of magic and the tenuous line between good and evil. The fifth book in the series is titled Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2003).

Hande A. Birkalan (roc and griffin) and Milicent Lenc (phoenix)

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Leviathan

Motif B61

Leviathan is a primeval sea monster—a giant fish, crocodile, or whale—of Hebrew folklore mentioned in five Old Testament poetic passages (Job 3:8; Job 41:1; Psalms 74:13–14; Psalms 104:26; Isaiah 27:1) and described and alluded to in others and also in the Apocrypha. Leviathan is said to cause a cataclysm by striking the earth with its tale (B16.4.1.1) and to cast up gorge that spreads disease (B16.4.1.1). The Motif-Index cross-references under Leviathan “Giant Fish” (B874), “Giant Whale” (874.3), and “Jonah. Fish (or water monster) swallows a man” (F911.4), the latter motif appearing in Irish, Italian, Babylonian, Indian, Melanesian, Indonesian, Hawaiian, and South American Indian folklore.

Yassif states that when myth is used in the Bible, it functions in “two common, classical forms: a narrative of the world of the gods, detailing their struggles with primal forces and their relationship with the human world; and the myth as an account of the origin of things and the various phenomena of the world (the ‘etiological myth’)” (Yassif 1999, 10). While most of the fragments of the Leviathan myth within the Bible function in the former sense, there is also evidence of Leviathan as an etiological myth, for it explains the border between land and sea (Yassif 1999, 19). There is reason to believe that the biblical writers and redactors, in their use of mythic fragments, were afraid of giving godlike status to Leviathan. It has been suggested that “the special reference to God’s creation of Leviathan in Psalms 104, 25–26 was probably intended to eliminate any doubt that this dragon-like creature was in any way an independent deity in biblical theology” (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997, 415).

Scholars have attempted to reconstruct the Leviathan myth by drawing upon parallels within similar myths of the ancient Near East (Yassif 1999, 10). From such reconstructions, it is apparent that Leviathan stems from an ancient tradition of the dragon and the sea (Day 1985, 1). Many scholars have noted that the linguistic roots of the creature’s Hebrew name leviyatan or lēviyatan (meaning “great serpent”) suggest its mythical origin (e.g., Hartman 1963, 1350); the Hebrew consonants lwy are related to the Hebrew word for “coiled, twisted, writhed.” Day, in fact, argues on linguistic grounds that the Hebrew name derives from the name of the dragon in the Ugaritic “Baal cycle” (Day 1985, 4–5).

Biblical scholars began to note similarities between the biblical myth and a creature similar to Leviathan in ancient Near Eastern mythologies at the end of the nineteenth century. The “the divine conflict” of dragon and the sea in the Old Testament was the subject of a book published by H. Gunkel in 1895, and the American scholar G.A. Barton had given some attention to the topic two years earlier (Day 1985, 1–2). Day writes that Gunkel noted “the mythical character of various passages in the Old Testament which speak of a conflict between Yahweh and the sea or a dragon or dragons . . . and saw these as being an Israelite appropriation of the Babylonian myth of Marduk’s victory over Tiamat at the time of creation recounted in the Enuma elish” (Day 1985, 1–2). In 1911, Frazer, in a section of The Golden Bough called “the slaughter of the dragon,” also linked Leviathan with the “Babylonian” myth and with creation: the myth relates “how in the beginning the mighty god Marduk fought and killed the great dragon Tiamat, an embodiment of the primaeval watery chaos, and how after his victory he created the present heaven and earth by splitting the huge carcass of the monster into halves and setting one of them up to form the sky, while the other half apparently he used to fashion the earth” (Frazer 1966, 105–106).

In his extensive study of the biblical myth of Leviathan, Day believes that a causal relationship between Leviathan and the Creation myth exists. Where Day differs with the early scholars is in his contention that the imagery of the conflict is Canaanite and not Babylonian in origin (Day 1985, 1); thus the motif of Leviathan may be considerably older than the earlier scholars thought. Unlike Gunkel and Frazer, Day has the advantage of the Ugaritic texts, one of the great archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century.

In 1929, clay tablets dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries BCE and written in cuneiform script in the Ugaritic language were discovered at the mound of Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast; they contain, among many other writings, a literary text known as “the Baal Cycle,” a group of myths about the deity Baal, “the central god in the Ugaritic pantheon” (Rainey
1965, 102; Coogan 1987, 3:46–47). Translations of these tablets reveal several literary parallels with the Leviathan myth (Hartman, 1963, 1330). They tell how Baal, the “champion of the gods,” vanquishes “Leviathan, the fleeing serpent... the crooked serpent, the tyrant of the seven heads (UT 67:I.1–3)” (quoted by Rainey 1965, 120). Although Leviathan is never described as having seven heads in the Old Testament, a multihued creature is spoken of in Psalms 74:12–14—“[Y]ou broke the heads of the dragons in the water.” You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness”—and the “great red dragon” of Revelation 12:3 is said to have seven heads.

As the sea monster of chaos, Leviathan sparked the imagination of apocalyptic writers as well as later rabbinic writers. Biblical writers in later periods, both Jewish and Christian, used the processes of historicization and eschatologization to transform the creature into the Apocalyptic dragon (Day 1985, Chs. 3 and 4). Evidence of such transformation is evident in the Old Testament in Isaiah 27:1: “On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.” According to Day, Leviathan in that passage probably denotes Egypt “though it might refer to Babylon or Persia” (Day 1985, 177). Through an intertextual argument based on various Hebrew usage of the words for “serpent,” Phillips links Leviathan with the “crafty” serpent in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1) and also with the dragon of Revelation (Revelations 12:3); she notes that “in the Hebrew bible it [Leviathan] lacks the definitive identification as the adversary and the devil that appears in the extra canonical literature” (Phillips 2000, 233, 236–245). These examples illustrate two additional motifs listed in the Motif-Index: “God battles Leviathan at the end of the world” (A1082.4) and “God conquers Satan at the end of the world” (A1082).

In the postbiblical Jewish literature written before the conquest of Palestine by the Arabs (632 CE—the date seen as the end of the “rabbinic period”) (Yassif 1999, 70), Leviathan takes on some additional meanings in Jewish literature, often with eschatological nuances. Wigoder notes that aggadic sources indicate that both Leviathan and Behemoth are being kept alive to “provide a banquet for the righteous in the afterlife”: at a preordained time, the Lord will slaughter both beasts, “serve their meat at the ‘eschatological feast,’ make a tent from Leviathan’s skin and supply the righteous banqueters with ‘wine stored since Creation.’” (Leviticus R. 13.3; Baba Bathra 746b; 4 Esdras 7,51; Apocalypse Bar 29,4)” (Wigoder 1989, 433; see also Hartman 1963, 1331). In the Talmud (B. B. 74b), Leviathan is killed by the Lord because he was “plotting to destroy the world”; in that text, Leviathan symbolizes “the forces of chaos and evil defeated by the power of good” (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997, 415). In medieval Jewish culture, “the kabbalists found esoteric significance in the story of Leviathan, identifying the male and female of the species with Samael and Lilith,” and the great medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (1135–1204), suggested that the Leviathan legends were “veiled prophecies referring to future events” (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997, 415). Yassif indicates that “Jewish myths join the typical features of the international tall tale as an integral part of rabbinic tall tales,” adding that “these myths deal primarily with the world to come” (Yassif 1999, 188). Among such “tall tales” are “travelers’ and seafarers’ face-to-face encounters with the basic themes of Jewish mythology,” providing “proof of their existence”: Leviathan is one such “mythic” creature encountered (Yassif 1999, 189). Leviathan appears in a tale first in the Midrash of the Ten Commandments but “is copied and retold in other medieval sources,” including the story cycle in the midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah (Yassif 1999, 260), where Leviathan is shown in a positive light. Some of the mythic aura of Leviathan as mighty serpent of the sea survives, however, the links with the chaos monster, God’s enemy, have been lost.

A giant fish or whale appears in the “First Voyage of Sinbad,” one of the tales of the Arabian Nights (of Persian, Indian, and Arabic origin), when the ship in which Sinbad is sailing stops at what the sailors thought was an island, but which is really “a great fish stationary a middlemost of the sea, whereon the sand hath settled and trees have sprung up of old time, so that it is become like unto an island” (Burton 2001, 334). The men unfortunately start a fire (J1761.1, “Whale thought to be island. Sailors light a fire on his back”), and, Sinbad says, “suddenly the island shook and sank into the abysses of the deep, with all that were thereon, and the dashing sea surged over it with clashing waves. I sank with the others down, down into the deep, but Almighty Allah preserved me from drowning and threw in my way a great wooden tub... I gripped it for the sweetness of life and, bristling it like one riding, paddled with my feet like oars, whilst the waves tossed me as in sport right and left” (Burton 2001, 335). This encounter with a “great fish” is echoed in the nineteenth-century American novel, Moby Dick, in which the narrator, cast into the sea after the whale destroys his ship, survives by clinging to a coffin that bobs to the surface of the sea.

REFERENCES

Animal Brides and Grooms: Marriage of Person to Animal

Motif B600, and Animal Paramour, Motif B610

The marriage and/or love between a human and one whose form is that of a magical or enchanted animal is a motif used from earliest times in the mythology and folklore of peoples from every part of the world. Thompson notes that Motif B600 is “extremely common.” Among the many animal paramours and spouses are birds of all sorts (usually these are female), dogs, goats, bears, horses, bulls, fish, crocodiles, and snakes (Leach and Fried 1949, 1:61).

Some commentators argue that there is a difference between the tales of marriage between humans and animals and tales of humans having animal lovers (Leach and Fried 1949, 1:61). Tales of marriage between humans and animals are often Mitrchen, focus on transformation, and have happy endings, in which the animal metamorphoses into a princess or prince. The Grimms’ tale of “The Frog Prince” and Madame de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast” (1757) are classic examples of this pattern. Animal paramour tales, on the other hand, are sometimes etiological or moralistic and often end with the slaying of the animal lover or the desertion of the human partner. The lines between the two categories are often blurred, however, and there are numerous tales of mermaid, seal, or swan brides, who, when they recover their caps (in the case of mermaids) or their skins, quickly desert their human husbands.

THE MARRIAGE PATTERN

The Search for the Lost Husband is Type 425 in Aarne-Thompson’s classification, and Apuleius’ telling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, dating from
the second century CE, is an example of 425A, *The Monster (Animal) as Bridegroom*, as is “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” from Norway. The familiar fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” is Type 425C, *The Girl as the Beast’s Wife*. In these stories, a girl marries or goes to live with what she thinks is a beast or animal who is really a god or an enchanted prince. These stories include some sort of prohibition made by the husband often against looking at him at a specific time, which the girl disobeys, resulting in the husband’s leaving her and her setting out to search for him (C32.1, “Tabu: looking at a supernatural husband”).

Often the animal groom is depicted as an especially noxious or unpleasant beast. He is a swine in Straparola’s “Pig King,” a snake in Basile’s “Serpent,” a “snotty goat” in a Russian folk tale, and a crocodile in a Bantu legend. The grooms in many arranged marriages must have been perceived this way by their brides, who, full of anxieties about wedding, are taught the lessons of their culture about the self-sacrifice of female desires and the transformative power of love (Bettelheim 1977). Clearly, in many of these stories of animal husbands, the emphasis is on a young woman’s acceptance of male sexuality, which she may find initially frightening, and on her growing to love a husband she finds initially unattractive. Older versions of the “beauty and beast” motif stress the civilizing value of women’s virtue, the triumph of female gentleness over brute desire (Tatar 1999, 29). More recent versions, like the tales in Angela Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* (1979), stress the values and virtues of the beast. As Marina Warner suggests, the passion, wildness, and defiance of the beast, his rebellion against the evils of civilization, are now perceived as good (Warner 1994, 307).

Tales of animal brides are strikingly similar, despite local coloration and variation. When not a bird or fish, the bride is often a small animal; she is a frog in Burma, Russia, Austria and Italy; a dog in India, Germany, and among American Indians; a mouse in Sri Lanka; and a tortoise in an account from *The Thousand and One Nights*. An ancient Japanese tale dating from 713 CE called “Utsashima the Fisherman” depicts the bride as a turtle who vanishes forever when her husband calls her name. In general, even the gentlest animal brides bring with them an element of fear or distrust. That women could be half human and half animal, that they had ties to nature and could call up forces with which civilized beings had lost touch, made them threatening. Their animal nature reinforced the suggestion that women needed control. Significantly, while animal grooms are often revealed as handsome princes in disguise, female animals, though masked in human beauty, are frequently exposed as monsters (Leavitt 1994, 121). In all, tales of animal brides may serve many functions. They may embody women’s desires for autonomy and equality in marriage; they may reflect men’s fantasies of captured and domesticated power; and they may also reflect male anxiety about desertion or abandonment by women. Interestingly, relatively few tales in the modern world utilize the idea that a husband must love and accept a “beastly” or animal wife.

In *The Folk Tale*, Thompson devotes a chapter to “Animal Wives and Husbands” (1977, 353–358) focusing on their occurrence in American Indian and Eskimo tales. He says they are most popular among the Plains Indians and the Eskimos of the North Pacific coast. In this latter area, as well as in Siberia and Japan, the tale of the fox woman is prevalent. Here, a mysterious housekeeper, who is sometimes a woman and sometimes a fox, is finally wed by the man with whom she lives. They are happy until he mentions her origins, at which point she leaves him in anger. Similar is the Plains Indians’ tale of the “Piqued Buffalo Wife.” A man weds a buffalo cow who becomes human and bears him a child. Harassed by the man’s mortal wife, the buffalo woman and her child retransform themselves and return to the herd. The husband searches for them and is told by the buffalo leader that he may have them back if he can identify them. Helped by his child, he recovers them.

There are numerous tales among Eskimos from Greenland to Siberia of young girls wedding eagle or whale husbands. In these cases, the maidens wish for animal mates but are unhappy when their wishes are granted; they are rescued by mortal men—often their brothers. The tales of dog husbands are also somewhat frequent. In these, a woman is visited by a lover who is a man by night and a dog by day. The birth of dog children leads to her disgrace and banishment from the tribe. In most cases, she disenchanters the children by throwing away their dog skins and all ends happily. In these tales, the dog is the legitimate husband, but in other tales of women’s interactions with animal lovers, the relations are clandestine and lead to the punishment of those perceived as an adulterous pair. Among the most popular of these stories are tales of women’s clandestine relations with snakes. In most cases, the angry husband kills the snake, and in many, he punishes or kills the wife as well (Thompson 1977, 356–357).

**The Swan Maiden**

One of the most popular and widespread versions of the animal bride is *The swan maid* (AT#400*) (D*361.1, “Swan Maiden”; F302.4.2, “Fairy comes into man’s power when he steals her wings (clothes”), an ancient motif that occurs throughout the world. “Elements of it are to be found in a story from the Indian Rig Veda, recorded 3000 years ago” (Poignant 1967, 82). In this abduction tale, a youth steals the feather dress of a swan maiden as she bathes and thus makes it impossible for her to fly away to her fairy or heavenly
world. He wedds her in a “marriage by capture” (perhaps based on actual practice or ritual in early societies) and domesticates her until either she finds her feather dress or he beats her, strikes her with iron, or breaks a tabu—questioning her or speaking her name or looking at her at a specific time or place or something else he was told not to. Then she vanishes, sometimes forever. Poignant gives several examples from Oceania, including “The Porpoise Girl,” popular in Micronesia. In these stories, a man steals the tail of a porpoise girl who comes ashore to watch men dance.

The man married her and hid the package which contained her tail in the rafters. After a while she had two children and seemed content. Then one day, bugs falling from the rafters directed her attention to the parcel. She opened it, and finding her tail put it on. Before returning to the sea she warned her children that they must never eat porpoise meat. (Poignant 1967, 82)

Poignant notes that the swan bride motif has a widespread distribution in Oceania (82).

In Victorian Europe, the swan bride was a source of fascination. In *The Earthly Paradise* of 1868-1870, William Morris tells the tale in verse of the swan maiden captured by a young man who steals her plumage. Morris drew much of his material from the Scandinavian folktale that had been translated and presented to an eager public by Benjamin Thorpe and George Dasent. Nineteenth-century British folklorists became fascinated with this version of the animal bride motif; Sabine Baring-Gould devoted a chapter to swan maidens in *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (1866-1868), providing examples ranging from the Sanskrit to the Irish and reading the tales as solar myths, while Edwin Sidney Hartland devoted two lengthy chapters to them in *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891). John Stuart Stuart-Glennie gained attention with his theory that swan maidens were feather-clothed but superior women of an archaic white race, wedded to men of color beneath them in level of civilization (Silver 1999, 97-98). By the end of the century, Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* ballet immortalized the motif of the swan maiden in dance.

**Brides from the Deep**

The most famous serpent bride is Melusine from medieval French legend, who, as a lamia, reverts to her serpent form one day a week while she bathes. The tale describes her metamorphosis into a snake when her husband, breaking the prohibition, enters her bathing room; it also renders it genealogically important as the mother of the Counts of Lusignan. Vernon Lee’s late Victorian tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” depicts a lamia or serpent woman as an innocent victim of human cruelty. The title character of John Keats’s “Lamia,” a poem based on a tale in Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, is less innocent but becomes a figure for imagination or perhaps delusion.

Among the most popular tales of animal/human pairing are those of selkies (softies) from Celtic and Scandinavian folklore. These tales reveal much about the attitude toward and treatment of women in the places and eras in which they were told. Selkies (there are selkie grooms as well) are popular figures in the folklore of Scotland and Ireland, depicted, for example, in tales such as “The Daughter of the King of the Land of the Waves” (Campbell 1889-1895, 15-17). Huhemerists (those who believe that myth and folklore accounts are based on actual historical persons and occurrences) argue that selkies are derived from folk memories of actual women. David MacRitchie believes that early settlers in Scotland and the Shetland Islands probably encountered and even married Finnish and Lapp women who, because of their sealskin clothing and use of skin kayaks, had been misidentified as selkies (MacRitchie 1890, 4). Selkies have made occasional appearances in literature as well, especially in collections of tales partially based on folklore such as those of Fiona Macleod/William Sharp.
In “The Sin Eater” (1895), MacLeod deals with the bestiality inherent in the source material by suggesting that seal brides could actually be female seals. Indeed, several of the tales are of the MacCodrum clan of the Outer Hebrides, known as “the MacCodrons of the Seals” because they claimed to be the offspring of a union between a selkie and a fisherman. A hereditary horny growth between their fingers made their hands resemble flippers. One Baubi Irqurt of the Shetland Islands claimed in 1895 to have a selkie as her great-great-grandmother (Silver 1999, 111–112).

Mermaid brides, more glamorous than seal women, had a special vogue in the Victorian era. They were made famous in such songs as “Married to a Mermaid” (1860s) and in romance novels such as H.G. Wells’s The Sea Lady. Seafaring families all over the British Isles claimed descent from them. The most famous mermaid is, of course, the heroine of Hans Christian Andersen’s “Little Mermaid,” a softened, Christianized, and domesticated figure. The Irish and Scottish folklore accounts of mermaid wives are considerably less sentimental; several, like Thomas Crofton Croker’s account of a “merrow” captured by an Irish fisherman, stress the hard life and domestic bondage of the captured animal bride. Croker’s Merrow is an ideal wife, mother, and housekeeper until she finds her mermaid’s cap and deserts both her husband and her children by him (Croker 1825, 1:247). The Lady of the Van Pool or Lady of the Van, in the Welsh version of the tale, leaves her spouse when he strikes her three times without cause. Having warned him against so doing, she immediately abandons him and their offspring.

NONMARITAL RELATIONS WITH ANIMALS

Among the best-known animal lovers is the Greek god Zeus, who often takes various animal forms when he wishes to make love to human females (A120.1, “God as shape-shifter”). He approaches Leda in the form of a swan, and Hera in the form of a cuckoo. He takes the form of a bull with Europa and Io. He visits Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great, in the form of a serpent.

Thompson remarks that in European tales “the animal actor is not really an animal” but a transformed or enchanted human (or god). “In tales of American Indians, however, and, indeed of primitive peoples everywhere, the marriage of human beings to actual animals is of very frequent occurrence” (1977, 353).

Thompson describes the story of the dog husband that has parallels to the story of Cupid and Psyche. He says this story is remarkably popular both on the North Pacific coast and among the Eskimo. “In all the stories, a girl is visited by an unknown lover who has the form of a dog by day and a man by night (D621.1, “Animal by day; man by night”). When, in due time, she gives birth to dog children, the tribe feels itself disgraced and deserts her. She is befriended by Crow, who hides some fire for her in a clam shell” (Thompson 1977, 355). She later spies on her pups, whom she sees in human form, with their dog skins hanging up, and these she destroys in order to keep them in human form (D721.3, “Disenchantment by destroying skin”). The story ends happily when she and her children prosper and the tribe, which has fallen on hard times, welcomes them back.

Thompson remarks that the sexual relationship between the girl and the dog is only incidental to this story, while “a considerable group of stories, known over the entire American Indian area, but especially popular among Plains tribes, finds its chief interest in the clandestine sexual relations of a woman with some animal” (1977, 356). In the story of “The Rolling Head,”

A husband discovers that his wife has been leaving the camp to commit adultery with a snake. He kills the snake and punishes the wife. In some versions he serves the snake or the snake’s privates to the wife, so that she eats it unaware. In other versions, particularly those of the Plains, he also kills the wife and cuts off her head. The head rolls after the man and his family, and they escape only with the greatest difficulty (Thompson 1977, 356).

A similar story among the Plains tribes is “The Bear-Woman,” in which a woman has a bear lover, whom her husband kills, and the woman turns into a bear and attacks her family.

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See also: Seduction; Quest for Vanished Husband/Lover; Tabu: Looking; Tabu: Speaking.

REFERENCES


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