
⊗ C ⊗

Tabu
Tabu: Eating and Drinking

Motifs C200–C299

There are numerous tabus concerning eating and drinking; these include tabus against eating in a certain place (C210), eating certain things (C220), and eating at certain times (C230) (there are separate motifs for drinking in all these instances). Many of these tabus are found in cultural practice and are not merely literary devices, especially the tabus against specific foods, such as pork (C221.1.1.5, “Tabu: eating pork”) and beef (C221.1.1.1.3, “Tabu: killing and cooking sacred cow”).

One of the most famous eating tabus occurs in the Old Testament, in which Adam and Eve are expressly told not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Tempted by a serpent, Eve eats and entices Adam to do so, and God expels them from the Garden (A1331.1, “Paradise lost because of forbidden fruit (drink)”).

In AT 310, *The Maiden in the Tower*, a witch confronts a man in her garden and demands as recompense his child when it is born. In the most well-known version, “Rapunzel” (KHM 12), the man’s wife repeatedly asked for and ate greens from the witch’s garden (C242, “Tabu: eating food of witch (demon)”).

This chapter focuses on the tabus against eating food (C211) and drinking (C262) in the otherworld, which are seemingly universal.

**EATING AND DRINKING IN THE OTHERWORLD**

Dating from earliest times, the tabu against eating in the otherworld is present in the myth and folklore of many groups and is still accepted in several cultures.
In the earliest stories, the locale is the lower world, or land of the dead (C211.2, “Tabu: eating in lower world”); later stories tend to be set in a more vague otherworld, such as fairyland.

The etiological myth of Persephone, told in numerous versions from the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” down through the Latin poets, describes Persephone or Kore as a virgin goddess protected by her mother, Demeter, the goddess of grain. Desired by Hades, the god of the underworld, Persephone is kidnapped as she gathers flowers. In her grief over her lost daughter, Demeter curses fertility and prevents all earthly creatures from propagating and all foods from growing or maturing. Finally, Zeus sends Hermes to ask Hades to allow Persephone to return to her mother. Hades assents, but secretly gives Persephone a seed of pomegranate which he urges her to eat, resulting in her having to return to the underworld for part of every year (C225.1, “Tabu: eating pomegranate seed”). “But,” her mother tells her, “when the earth blooms with all kinds of sweet-smelling flowers in springtime, you will come up again from the kingdom of shadows.”

Adapa, son of Ea, the god of wisdom in Babylonian mythology, proves wiser than Persephone. He refuses to partake even of bread and water during his visit to a subaquatic otherworld (“the house of the fish”) and thus, while sacrificing immortality, can and does return to earth (Leach and Fried 1949, 9–10). So too Vainamoinen, the wise old hero of the Finnish Kalevala, who refuses the foaming beer offered to him by Tuonela, the land of the dead, and hence may return to the land of the living (Leach and Fried 1949, 1:410). The Japanese goddess Izanami is less fortunate. She dies giving birth to a fire god and descends to the underworld. When her husband tries to reclaim her, she warns him that she has eaten food in this realm and thus may not return to earth. Instead, she becomes a goddess of the underworld. A New Zealand Maori tale tells of a maiden who dies for love and whose lover begs the gods to let him visit her in Reinga, the Maori underworld. The lover is granted permission to visit, but is warned to eat nothing offered to him.

This prohibition against eating or drinking the food of the dead or that of the otherworld is found in North America among the Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl peoples as well as the Pawnee and Cherokee tribes (Leach and Fried 1949, 1:410). One Apache tale tells of two boys who eat the food of ga’ns (underground fairytale spirits) and can return to earth, but are never again able to eat the food of mortals. In some groups—the Tingit, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl—it is believed that people who have drowned have in actuality eaten the food of the fairytale land otters and can thus never return to normal life.

The people of New Caledonia believe that a newly dead person, arriving in the spirit world, is offered a feast of bananas. If the person partakes of it, he or she cannot return; if the person refuses, there is a chance of being restored to earth. The Melanesians warn living people who would visit Panoi (their underworld) not to touch any food in that place or they must stay there.

In British folklore, fairyland is often the otherworld in which no food may be eaten and the tempters are often fairies (C211.1, “Tabu: eating in fairyland”). Lewis Spence argues that there is no essential difference between the taboo that “forbids a mortal to partake of the food of the elves and that which prohibits him from eating food proffered him in the land of the dead” (Spence 1946, 79), and numerous folklorists see the fairies and their world as realms of the dead. In much lore from the British Isles, it is a dead friend or neighbor who warns the protagonist against eating fairy food. Many versions of a single tale are told all over the British Isles; the best-known version, called “The Fairy Dwelling on Selena Moor” (retold by K.M. Briggs), illustrates both belief in the fairies as the pagan dead and the dangers of tasting food in fairyland:

When Mr. Noy, a local farmer, loses his way and wanders into a fairy realm, he finds that he is very thirsty and asks for a drink. But he is signalled by a young maiden dressed in white whom he recognizes as a former sweet-heart, thought to have died some three or four years earlier. Though she carries ale, she denies him a drink and warns him against eating a fruit or plucking a flower if he wishes ever to return to his home again. “Eating a tempting plum in this enchanted orchard was my undoing,” she warns him. The fruit that enlaved her dissolved into “bitter water” in her mouth. But all else in fairyland, fairy food is a snare and delusion: “What appear like ruddy apples and other delicious fruit are only sloes, hollins [haws] and blackberries.” Mr. Noy did escape, but, we are told, like other visitors to Fairyland, he pined and lost his thirst for normal life after his adventure. (Briggs 1977, 142–143)

In the medieval romance Thomas of Erceldoun, the Queen of Elfin warns the poet against eating fairy fruit; in the romance of Ogier the Dane, the hero is nearly destroyed by eating an apple from the fairy garden of the enchantress, Morgan La Fay. Conal, of the Third Fenian cycle of Irish legend, eats the apple given him by the beautiful Sidhe (fairy woman) and is thus compelled to follow her to Tir-na-nog, the Celtic otherworld, never to return to ordinary earth.

Lady Wilde tells two Irish tales parallel to “Selena Moor,” though not as fully developed. In one, a young woman enticed into a fairy dance and then led to a banquet is warned by an unidentified man to “eat no food, and drink no wine, or you will never reach your home” (Briggs 1977, 65). Almost forced to drink, she is rescued by a redheaded man who gives her a magic plant to help her escape. In the other tale, “Thel Legend of Innis Sark” (Briggs 1977, 14–15), a young man transported asleep to fairyland first witnesses a horrible
scene in a fairy kitchen—as an old woman is chopped up and boiled for food—and is soon after offered a share of a delicious-looking royal fairy banquet. He wisely refuses, arguing that he cannot eat since no priest is present to bless the food. He does drink some fairy wine and, as a result, the palace vanishes and he wakes. He, too, soon pines and dies, the fate common to those who break the prohibition.

Interestingly, in the Celtic enclaves from which many of these tales derive, food was left out for people thought to be kidnapped or “away” (i.e., comatose, paralyzed, or simply absent), so they would not be forced to eat fairy food, which would bind them to fairyland forever (Silver 1999).

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

The concepts behind these varied tales are strikingly similar. All suggest that “we are what we eat.” To eat the food of a spirit is to partake of the spirit’s nature. Thus one gains kinship with those in the spirit world but at a price—that is, the renunciation of human nature. To eat fairy food endows one with a fairy nature and sometimes with power, but may prevent one from ever eating mortal food again. The knight in John Keats’s famous “La Belle Dame sans Merci” has tasted fairy food in an “elfin grot” but is returned to earth dying amid visions of “starved lips.” Partaking of food or drink in the land of the dead makes the visitor kin to or one with the dwellers in that land and thus unable to leave or to return to the land of the living. In this case, the fear of “pollution” by the dead or contact with them may play a significant role (Simons 1994). For behind the concept that we are or become what we eat is a law of contact and contagion. When one has contact with something or someone more powerful than humans or of another order of being, one takes on its essence.

Among other related manifestations of this taboo is the belief that some food is not to be eaten—in the underworld, otherworld, or anywhere else—because it is itself transmigrated souls (Latham 1987, 4:393). Vegetarianism is sometimes based upon this premise; according to Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Pythagorus used this argument. Another similar belief is that since the food of the otherworld may make mortals immortal (as with Greek Psyche, below), otherworldly creatures must avoid human food lest it make them mortal (Latham 1987, 393). A Scandinavian tale tells of an elf-maiden who eats mortal food in order to stay with her lover; there are Celtic tales of Sidhe (fairy maidens) who renounce their fairy lives and become mortal by eating human food (Leach and Fried 1949, 1:410). There are also numerous tales of food that, if eaten, confers immortality upon those who eat it. Psyche, given the ambrosia of the gods, becomes a goddess; Gilgamesh, in the great Mesopota-

mean epic, fails at a chance to renew his youth because the magic plant he was to eat is stolen by a serpent. In Taoist belief, a peach from a paradisiacal fairyland ruled by His Wang Mu, the Chinese Queen Mother of the West, can make one immortal (Latham 1987, 4:392). Nevertheless, myths, tales, and popular wisdom remind us that even when there is a reward, the price is high. For as Tithonus, made immortal by ambrosia yet deprived of youth and vigor, learns, the gods themselves cannot take back their gifts; to eat the food of the divine is to lose one’s human nature.

Carole G. Silver

REFERENCES


Tabu: Looking

Motifs C300–C399

The tabu against looking at a certain person or thing (C310) is widespread in folklore, and the list of persons or things that must not be viewed includes a deity, a heavenly body, a rainbow, copulating snakes, and various supernatural creatures, including ghosts, fairies, a supernatural husband or wife, and supernatural helpers. This is only a partial list.

The looking tabu has three main scenarios: (1) A person voluntarily avoids the sight of the tabu object because it is too fearful to behold; (2) a person is warned not to look at a specific person or thing and ignores the warning at great cost to himself or herself, often breaking a magic spell; (3) the viewer receives no warning beforehand not to look at the tabu object, sees it, and suffers a bad fate.

In a prime example of the first instance, when God appears before Moses in the form of a burning bush, “Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6) (C311.1.8, “Tabu: looking at deity”). In an example from Greek myth illustrating the second scenario, Zeus warns his mortal lover Semele that she must not see him in his godly manifestation, but she insists, and the sight destroys her.

There are a number of tales in Africa that tell of the origin of death as a consequence of looking at a forbidden thing, especially a specific act. A tale from the Chaga tells how people used to have the ability to live forever by shedding their skins like snakes. A god had warned that no one should observe anyone in this act, which must be performed alone, but a girl sees her grandfather shedding his skin and then death comes to the people (Feldmann 1963, 120).

LOOKING INTO RECEPTACLES

The Greeks had a story to explain the existence of suffering in the world, which Hesiod tells in Works and Days (seventh century BCE). In retribution for Prometheus having stolen fire and given it to mortals, Zeus has Hephaestus fashion a beautiful woman, Pandora, whom Zeus sends to earth, and she opens the lid of a jar from which escaped all the evils that are now in the world (C321, “Tabu: looking into box (Pandora)”). Thompson notes that this motif is found in tales of several North American Indian groups.

A story from Java involves a man and his supernatural wife, a winged maiden whom he had tricked into marrying him by stealing her wings while she was bathing (D361.1, “Swan Maiden”; F302.4.2, “Fairy comes into man’s power when he steals her wings (clothes). She leaves when she finds them”). One day the wife goes to the river to wash clothes and warns her husband not to look into the pot in which their dinner was cooking (C320, “Tabu: looking into certain receptacle”). He is curious about her cooking since she has always provided abundant meals even though he gives her only one measure of rice. No sooner has she left than he goes straight to the fire and lifts off the cover of the pot and peers in, to find only one grain of rice in boiling water. When his wife returns and sees the single grain of rice in the pot, she knows that her husband has looked in, destroying the magic power by which she had been able to produce food. She then finds her wings and flies off (Dixon 1916, 208).

LOOKING BACK

The unfortunate consequences of looking back (C331, “Tabu: looking back”) are chronicled in many sources around the world. The Motif-Index lists occurrences in Greek, Jewish, Indian, French Canadian, Lithuanian, Chinese, Eskimo, Polynesian (Tonga Islanders), Hawaiian, South American, and African (Fang, Luba) folklore.

In the Old Testament, the Lord decides to destroy the city of Sodom because it has been overrun by wickedness, and he sends two angels to Lot and his wife to tell them to flee the city, warning them not to look back. “But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt” (Genesis 19:26) (C361.1, “Transformation to pillar of salt because of breaking tabu”).

The Greek myth of Orpheus is one of the most famous variants of the tabu against looking back, involving a journey to the underworld in order to fetch a dead loved one (F81.1, “Orpheus. Journey to land of dead to bring back person from the dead”). Thompson (1977) lists four components of the story: (1) journey to the land of the dead to bring back a wife (sweetheart, etc.); (2) permission obtained; (3) prohibition against looking at wife on way out (or other tabu); (4) tabu broken and wife lost.
Orpheus, a great musician, charms the guardians of the underworld with his music in order to plead with Hades to allow his dead wife, Eurydice, to return to the world of the living with him. Hades grants his request, with the stipulation that Orpheus not look back at Eurydice until they reach the upper realms. Orpheus is unable to resist one look back at her as they approach the light, and Eurydice vanishes back to the lower world and is lost to him. Thompson lists variants from Ireland, England, Norway, Babylonia, Siberia, India, China, Japan, Indonesia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Samoa, New Hebrides, Banks Islands (South Pacific), New Guinea, Africa, and Latin America. He states that parallels to the classical story occur in North America, especially on both coasts. “Out of some forty versions, only three tell of the successful return of the wife” (Thompson 1977, 351).

SUPERNATURAL HUSBAND OR WIFE

In the story of Cupid and Psyche, a Greek myth written down by Apuleius in the second century, Psyche is married to the god Cupid, who she believes is a monster. He has told her she may not look at him, and he only stays with her during the night, fleeing before dawn. Finally resolving, at the urging of her sisters, to look at her husband, Psyche lights a lamp in the middle of the night. As she leans over Cupid, he wakes up and immediately takes flight (C32.1, “Tabu: looking at supernatural husband”). Psyche then begins an arduous search for him. This story is the prototype of a number of tales under the heading The Search for the Lost Husband (AT 425). “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” and “Beauty and the Beast” are two well-known examples in the European tradition.

The tale of Melusine, or Melusina, a water fairy who has a serpent’s tail that is manifest only one day of the week, was written in numerous sources between 1475 and 1577 in France, Germany, and Spain (Baring-Gould 1978). When she marries, she makes her husband promise that he will never look upon her on a specific day of the week. For years he obeys this injunction, but finally his curiosity gets the better of him and he spies on her while she is in her bath on the forbidden day. When she realizes that he has seen her, she flies off (C31.1.2, “Tabu: looking at supernatural wife on certain occasion (Melusine). The husband must not see the wife when she is transformed to an animal”).

NAKED WOMEN

The tabu against looking at a naked woman is embodied in a well-known legend attached to the city of Coventry in England, first written down in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century by Roger of Wendover. The townsmen of Coventry are suffering under a heavy tax, and Lady Godiva asks her husband to lessen their burden. He agrees on the condition that she ride the full length of the town nude, clothed only in her long hair. She does so, and the citizens are all commanded to shut their windows and stay indoors. All obey except one (C312.1.2, “Tabu: Looking at nude woman riding through town”). Peeping Tom is stricken with blindness because of his disobedience (C94.2, “Loss of sight for breaking tabu”) (Thompson 1977, 265). The motif of Peeping Tom was not added to this legend until the seventeenth century.

In Greek myth, Actaeon, too, looks upon a naked woman, although he comes upon her by accident one day while he is hunting. She is not a mere
woman but the goddess Artemis, and although Actaeon has not been forewarned not to look at her, he too suffers a terrible fate for seeing her; she immediately turns him into a stag, and he is torn apart by his dogs (C312.1.1, “Tabu: man looking at nude goddess”).

MISCELLANEOUS

From the Amazon comes a story about a young man who follows a beautiful star up a magic palm tree to the sky world. When he hears sounds of festivity and music, she warns him not to go see the dancing (C311.1.1, “Tabu: looking at ghosts”). But as soon as she leaves, he cannot repress his curiosity and goes toward the sound.

What he saw was fearful! It was a sort of dance of the dead! A crowd of skeletons whirled around, weird and shapeless, their putrid flesh hanging from their bones and their eyes dried up in their sunken orbits. The air was heavy with their foul odor. The young man ran away in horror. On his way he met the star who blamed him for his disobedience and made him take a bath to cleanse him of the pollution. But he could no longer endure the sky world, but ran to the spot where the leaves were tied to the sky and jumped on to the palm tree, which immediately began to shrink back toward the earth: “You run away in vain, you shall soon return,” the star called after him; and so indeed it was, for he had barely time to tell his kindred of his adventure before he died. (Alexander 1920, 307–308)

Another dance that is tabu to see is performed by Yu, the Chinese culture hero. In the shape of a bear, Yu performs a dance upon the stones of Hounyuan pass in order to allow floods to flow through, and his wife is forbidden to see it. Yu tells his wife that when he wants food brought to him he will beat on his drum. One day he accidentally strikes the drum and his wife, bringing food, sees Yu perform the magical dance. She is turned to stone (C961.2, “Transformation to stone for breaking tabu”) (Holden 2000, 155).

In a story collected by the Grimms, a poor shoemaker and his wife awaken one morning to find some beautifully made shoes. This happens for several days, and finally they decide to hide and watch during the night. They discover that the shoes are being made by two naked little men, and they resolve to make some clothes for them. When the elves return one night and find the clothing laid out for them, they put it on and run off, never to reappear (C514.3, “Tabu: spying on secret help of fairies”). While the shoemaker and his wife do not suffer a terrible fate from seeing the elves, the elves do leave as soon as they know they have been observed (F361.3.1, “Fairies leave work unfinished when overseen”). A similar motif, albeit in a much more powerful form, is found in the ancient Greek Hymn to Demeter, when the goddess Demeter, posing as a nursemaid, is seen by her charge’s mother in her nightly ritual of immortilizing the baby by anointing him with ambrosia and putting him in the fire. Demeter then angrily throws the baby down and abandons him. Another tale from the Grimms’ collection illustrating the dangers of seeing what should not be seen is the story of Frau Trude. A headstrong little girl goes into the forest to see an old woman named Frau Trude, although her parents expressly forbid her to go. When she looks through Frau Trude’s window, the girl sees the crone in her true witch form, with a head of fire. Frau Trude then turns the girl into a block of wood and throws her into the fire (C311.1.6, “Tabu: seeing witch in her true form”).

According to Greek myth, Tiresias while walking in the woods sees two snakes copulating and is transformed into a woman (D513.1, “Man looks at copulating snakes: transformed to woman”). He does not regain his male identity until seven years later when he again beholds a pair of mating snakes.

There are taboos against looking in certain directions (C330); in North America the looking down taboo occurs sporadically in folktales from the Southwest to the Aleutian Islands (Demetracopoulou 1933, 116).

There is a tabu against looking up a chimney (C337, “Tabu: looking up chimney”) and in some versions of AT 480 (Kind and Unkind) a girl is threatened with death for looking into a fireplace.

See also: Quest for the Vanished Husband.

Jane Garry

REFERENCES


The entire Chapter C of the Motif-Index is devoted to tabus, obedience to which results in actions of avoidance as well as compulsion. The Motif-Index lists various examples of speaking tabus, including speaking during a certain time (C401), before a certain time (C402), asking questions (C410), speaking to strangers (C492), cursing (C494), using obscene language (C496), and uttering the name of a person or thing (C430) or god or gods (C431).

**SPEAKING DURING A CERTAIN TIME**

The Grimm’s *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* collection includes three tales exemplifying C401. In “The Twelve Brothers” (KHM 9), a sister who has unwittingly plucked twelve flowers that caused her brothers to be transformed into ravens is told by an old woman that the only way to disenchant them is to remain dumb for a period of seven years “and if thou speakest one single word, and only an hour of the seven years is wanting, all is in vain, and thy brothers will be killed by the one word.” The girl is later married to a king, but does not speak or laugh. The king’s mother convinces him that his wife is evil and he finally condemns her to be burnt at the stake just as the seven years are up. As the fire is burning, twelve ravens come flying to the spot, transform back into her brothers, and she is able to tell her story. “The Six Swans” (KHM 49) has a similar story line. “The Three Black Princeses” (KHM 137) is a very different story, but incorporates the same motif in that the hero is told by three enchanted princesses whose castle he has entered that he might disenchant them if he stays a year and does not speak to them or look at them

Guessing the name of a supernatural creature gives power over it (Motif C432.1). From “Tom Tit Tot,” an example of the folktale type AT 500, in Joseph Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales*; illustrated by John Batten (1890).

in that period (thus this story also includes the taboo against looking at a certain person or thing, Motif C310).

**NAMING**

Anthropologists have noted that the belief that one’s existence is bound up in one’s name is widespread, and this is reflected in folklore. Ernst Cassirer says, “He who gains possession of the name and knows how to make use of it has gained power over the object itself; he has made it his own with all its energies” (1957, 117). In the Danish ballad “The Sword of Vengeance,” the owner of a magical sword is able to make it stop slaugthering only by calling it by name (Wimberly 1965, 89–90).

Child lists numerous examples from Scandinavian ballads in which warriors either lose their strength or receive their death blow if anyone calls out their name during a battle contrary to their injunction not to name them in front of their adversary (1965, 1:489)
In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus craftily tells the Cyclops Polyphemus, who has asked his name, that it is “Noman.” Not revealing his name saves Odysseus from certain death later when he mortally wounds Polyphemus and other ogres, coming to the entrance of the cave in response to Polyphemus’ screams, ask if anyone is trying to kill him. When he responds that Noman is trying to kill him, they retreat.

An old proverb, “Talk of the devil and he will appear,” explains motif C433, “Tabu: uttering name of malevolent creature (Eumenides). To avoid the evil results of naming these creatures other names are substituted.” In Greek mythology, there are two, and later three, avenging deities, the horrific-looking daughters of night, who punish wrongdoers both in this world and after death. The Romans called them the Furies. The Greeks originally called them the Erinyes; “the form Eumenides, which signifies ‘the well-meaning’, or ‘soothing goddesses,’ is a euphemism, because people dreaded to call these goddesses by their real name” (Smith 1958, 120). It has been remarked upon that the word *bear* among Slav nations has been displaced for fear that uttering the name will bring the creature. In Bulgarian, the bear is literally “honey-eater.” “We find [this circumlocution] in Czech, Slovak, Russian, Serbo-Croat; only the Poles among the Slavonic peoples have created their own circumlocution niedzwiedź; in German the bear is often called der Braune” (Adler 1978, 59).

In *AT 444B*, *Guessing the Girls’ Names*, a sorcerer kidnaps two beautiful princesses, takes them to a distant country, and offers them in marriage to anyone, including animals, who can guess their names. Many men try without success. A toad and a turtle overhear the princesses talking, learn their names, and win them in marriage (N475, “Secret name overheard by eavesdropper”). When the girls, angry at the animals, throw them against the wall, they are disenchanted and become princesses.

The tabu against uttering the name of a malevolent creature also has its reverse in folklore, in that naming the devil will cause him to go away (C432.1, “Guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over him”). Exorcising a demon by naming him is the climax of one version of the British ballad “Riddles Wisely Expounded,” in which an “unce” (uncouth) knight comes to the home of a widow and her three daughters, says that the youngest must lie with him that night, and if she can answer ten riddles he will marry her. She answers all of them, including the last—What is worse than a woman?—by replying “Clotie” (a name for the devil), and the ballad concludes, “As soon as she the fiend did name, / He flew away in a blazing flame” (Child 1965, 1:5).

*The Name of the Helper* (AT 500) is a widespread folk tale type found in Europe (Thompson 1977, 48). The story appears in the Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* as “Rumpelstiltskin,” in which a little man helps a girl spin straw into gold but makes her promise to give him her firstborn child in re-

turn. When he comes to collect the baby, she balks, and he tells her she may keep the child if she can guess his name within three days. This would be an impossible task since he does not have a conventional name, except that on the last night he is overheard intoning his name while dancing around a fire, and the next day she is able to name him, causing him to disappear in a fury (C432.1, “Guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over him”).

In a story from the Kru of Africa’s Ivory Coast, a young girl goes to the land of the dead and is given refuge by an old woman. Death discovers her and withholds food from her unless she can tell him his name. She is able to do this with the help of a bird (Werner 1925, 177–178).

Puccini’s opera *Turandot*, based on the 1762 play of the same name by Carlo Gozzi and said to derive from a Chinese tale, contains the motif of naming. Princess Turandot has renounced men and says she will only marry the man who can answer three riddles successfully; those who fail will die. Calaf succeeds, and Turandot is so distraught that Calaf offers to forgo the marriage (and forfeit his life) if she can guess his name by morning. She decrees that no one shall sleep until his name is discovered. In the end, however, she overcomes her aversion to the idea of marriage, and the opera has a happy ending.

*REFERENCES*


Tabu: Forbidden Chambers

Motif C611

The widespread tabus against entering one forbidden place (C610, "The one forbidden place"), or more specifically a forbidden chamber (C611, "Forbidden chamber. Person allowed to enter all chambers of house except one"), derive from two distinct kinds of social restrictions. First, cautionary tabus warn against physical and perceived spiritual dangers in such natural sites as woods, mountaintops, or bodies of water, as well as places controlled or frequented by potential adversaries. Second, tabus also impart awe to and protect sacred areas accessible only to consecrated individuals, for example, the Holy of Holies section in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem.

Both types of restrictions are reflected in folktales and myths. The forbidden chamber motif, in particular, is found in many types of tales, and in some types it is the nucleus of the stereotypical formulation. For instance, "Mary's Child" from the Grimms' Children's and Household Tales (KHM 3, At 710, Our Lady's Child) exemplifies folktales using the forbidden chamber motif as a religious interdiction. This story, told throughout the Catholic world and popular even in Protestant Europe, tells how a poverty-stricken man and woman give their daughter to the Virgin Mary for foster care. Mary takes the child to heaven. When the girl is fourteen years old, Mary gives her keys to the thirteen doors of the kingdom, warning her, however, not to open the thirteenth door. The girl cannot resist the temptation and opens the forbidden door, behind which she sees the Holy Trinity seated in fire and splendor. From her contact with this brilliance, one of her fingers turns to gold, so Mary knows that the girl has been in the forbidden room. The girl denies her transgression and is cast from heaven. After much travail and suffering, the heroine confesses her disobedience and is forgiven.

In some Type 710 tales, the prohibition comes not from a saint but from a demon. For example, in the Swedish tale "Gray Cape" (Blecher and Blecher 1993, 231–234), a princess is captured by a female troll. The captive is treated well and has full access to the troll’s castle, except for one forbidden door. Again, the heroine, unable to resist the temptation, opens the door, only to find the troll herself on the other side. Like the heroine in the Grimms' tale, she is given a chance to redeem herself with a simple confession, but she refuses and is cast out. And again, after much suffering, she confesses her transgression and in the end is rewarded with marriage to a handsome prince.

The best-known European folktales featuring forbidden doors are those of Types 311 and 312, Three Sisters Rescued. Type 311 tales seem to be the older and more widespread of these two. Again, the Grimm brothers provide an exemplary rendition. Their "Fischer's Bird" (KHM 46) opens with a sorcerer abducting a young woman and installing her as a de facto bride in his house in the woods, where she is treated well, albeit with specific restrictions. First, she must carry an egg at all times, with its obvious symbolism of femininity, fertility, and fragility. (In other versions she is given an apple or a flower, items with similar symbolic possibilities.) Her second restriction is the prohibition against opening a specific door, although she is given a full set of keys to the house. Predictably, she opens the forbidden door, behind which she discovers an execution chamber filled with body parts and gore. Horrified, she drops the egg into the gore, staining it. When her husband returns, he knows from the stained egg that she has violated his prohibition, and he forthwith drags her back to the forbidden room and cuts off her head, then hacks her body to pieces. Next he abducts the dead woman's sister, and the entire process repeats itself.

The sorcerer then captures the youngest of the three sisters, giving her the same freedoms and restrictions. As soon as he is out of sight she sets the egg aside for safekeeping and enters the forbidden room. She puts her mutilated sisters back together and restores them to life. The man returns home and finds no evidence that the heroine has disobeyed him. Inexplicably, the former power structure of the household now reverses itself. Henceforth she gives the orders, and he must obey. She requires him to carry a basketful of goods to her impoverished parents. Hidden in the basket are the two resurrected sisters. While he is struggling under this burden, she disguises herself as a giant bird (again the symbolism is obvious) and walks away from captivity. Later she sends her relations back to the sorcerer's house, and they set it on fire, burning up the villain in the process.

In some versions of this story, for example, "How the Devil Married Three Sisters," from Italy (Crane 1885, no. 16), the malefactor is no less an evildoer than Satan himself, and the forbidden door is the entrance to hell. Here the item to be carried by the bride is a flower, which is singed when she opens the door
to hell, and her husband then casts her into the fiery abyss. The episode repeats itself with a second sister, then threatens to do so with a third, but this last sister puts her flower in a safe place before opening the fateful door, thus enabling her to rescue her sisters and to effect her own escape.

Type 312 folktale, which also feature an execution chamber behind a forbidden door, differ from their Type 311 counterparts in that here the heroine does not magically restore her sisters to life and then bring about her own escape, but instead she is rescued in a heroic (but thoroughly nonmagical) attack by her brothers on her captor’s castle. The stereotypical formulation of this tale is Perrault’s “Blue Beard” (1697). Perrault’s heroine is not abducted, but willingly marries the sinister-looking Blue Beard. She too is treated well, but prohibited from opening one specific door. Again, she violates the taboo and discovers a chamber filled with corpses and blood, then drops the key into the gore. No amount of scrubbing will remove the stain from the key, and when Blue Beard sees it he prepares to execute his disobedient wife. However, before he can carry out the murder, her brothers storm the castle and kill the wicked husband.

A male counterpart to the forbidden-chamber motifs discussed above can be found in the extremely widespread folktale of Type 303, known generically as The Blood Brothers. The concluding episode of these stories features a forbidden place that lures the hero to his apparent death, but in the end he is miraculously rescued by a younger brother. “The Castle of No Return” from Spain is a typical rendition (Thompson 1974, no. 5). Here the older of twin brothers leaves home, arranging a magic sign that will summon his brother should he need help. The adventurer kills a dragon and marries a princess, but his domestic bliss is short-lived. A castle in the distance rouses his curiosity. His wife warns him that this is the “castle of no return,” but his restlessness drives him forth to investigate. In other versions of this tale, the forbidden place is a forest, a road, or a city. Once in the forbidden place, the young husband encounters a witch (possibly a symbol for the generic “other woman”) who turns him to stone. At this point the prearranged signal alerts the younger twin of his brother’s danger. He seeks out his petrified twin, overcomes the witch, and reverses the enchantment. Thus here, as in virtually all folktale featuring a forbidden-place motif, the transgression serves as a learning experience rather than as an irreversibly fatal act.

D.L. Ashliman

REFERENCES


