


Ogres
Cannibalism

Motif G10

The eating of human flesh (anthropophagy) is to civilized people one of the most repellent events imaginable (C227, "Tabu: eating human flesh"). In their efforts to understand this practice, ethnologists have recognized many different forms of cannibalism: cultural vs. individual, ritual vs. gustatory vs. survival (G70.1, "Hungry seamen eat human flesh"); G78.1, "Cannibalism in time of famine"), endo- vs. exo- and even auto- (G51, "Person eats own flesh"), mortuary, and medical. In one or another of its forms, cannibalism is associated with the horrors of murder, human sacrifice, fear of the dead, human dismemberment, and starvation (Thomesen 1983). Sigmund Freud connected the fear of being eaten with castration anxiety, and psychologists and artists continue to link cannibalism with sexuality (Thomesen 1983, 110–144; Ranke 1973, 1977–, s.v. Freud). Recently, because of its connections with colonialism, cultural relativism, and human bodies, cannibalism has been popular in literary studies both as a subject and as a metaphor. In modern popular culture, it is most commonly encountered in horror films and in descriptions of Satanism.

Groups of disliked persons have long been accused of abhorrent acts, including cannibalism. In Europe, such groups have traditionally been characterized as anti-Christian: witches (G11.3, "Cannibal witch"), Satanists, and Jews (V361, "Christian child killed to furnish blood for Jewish rite"; Dundes 1991). The Western cliché of Africans as cannibal savages is complemented by corresponding African and African-American ideas of whites as cannibals (Turner 1993, 9–32). The prevalence of such usually unfounded accusations has made the extent of the actual practice of cannibalism very difficult to determine. In this connection, it is often noted that the Christian practice of
Holy Communion, eating bread and drinking wine as the symbolic or actual body and blood of Christ, strikes nonbelievers as cannibalistic.

Cannibals in folklore span a continuum from animals who devour people (e.g., the wolf in AT 333, Little Red Riding Hood; the cat in AT 2027, The Fat Cat) (Ranke 1977—, s.v. Fressermärchen) through more or less humanoid werewolves and monsters (the troll in AT 2028; the Chinese Grand-uncle Tiger in AT 123335) (Dundes 1989, 21–63), through human strangers who eat people, to cannibals as relatives. Folktales and legends from all parts of the world feature ogres who seem to belong to a subhuman race of creatures and who eat, or at least threaten to eat, people (Macculloch 1905, 279–305, chapter 10; Warner 1999, 1–183). Modern usage of the word ogre began in 1697 in French literary folktales; ogres was used in an early (1713) English translation of The Thousand and One Nights. Etymologically, these words come from Orcas, a name of Hades, the Roman god of the underworld. Like the closely-related orca, “whale,” an ogre is something that swallows (Ranke 1977—, s.v. Ogre).

In a popular folktales pattern, one or more humans enter an ogre’s dwelling and at least some of them escape by outwitting their adversary. The encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus in Homer’s Odyssey (book 9, lines 105–566; AT 1137) is an early example. In a stereotyped but nevertheless terrifying folktales scene, the hero (or heroine) arrives at an ogre’s house and hides; the ogre returns home and exclaims “I smell human meat” (G84, “Fee-fi-fou-fum. Cannibal returning home smells human flesh and makes exclamation,”) and G532, “Hero hidden and ogre deceived by his wife (daughter) when he says that he smells human blood”), implying that he intends to eat the visitor. The ogre often sharpens his knife or his teeth (G93). In fairy tales, including several subtypes of AT 327, The Children and the Ogre, and AT 328, The Boy [Girl] Steals the Giant’s Treasures, the hero escapes. In legends, however, he may not. In either genre, the ogre may eat other human characters (Ranke 1977—, s.v. Menschenfleisch riechen).

Eaters of corpses inhabit tales from many parts of the world. In the Middle East, ghouls, like ogres elsewhere, are often stupid and may rely on their sense of smell rather than on their sight. If the hero or heroine greets a ghoul or ghoulie (female) politely, the monster will help the supplicant. In particular, the interloper may suck the dangling breast of a ghoulie and thus become her foster child (Muhawi and Kanaana 1989, 415–416; Goldberg 1997, 126–130).

Tales of cannibals and cannibalism appear particularly frequently in Australia, New Zealand, Melanesia, Indonesia, and Africa. Géza Róheim says that cannibalism is the most outstanding feature of the narratives he collected in central Australia (1966, 27). Whaitiri is a female cannibal deity in New Zealand myth who comes down from the sky to capture men in a net. A tale from Mangaia in the South Pacific tells of a sky cannibal who lets down a basket in which he catches and hauls up his human prey; similar stories are told in Rotuma, a small island west of Samoa (Dixon 1916, 62–63) Schmidt says that in Africa ogre stories are extremely popular and lists three main groups of friends that try to kill and eat humans: “supernatural animals, particularly lions and hyenas, all-swallowing monsters of sometimes apocalyptic dimensions, and the ogre in human shape” (2001, 277–278). The creatures in the latter group, however, usually have some physical characteristic that sets them apart from true humans. Among the Nama-speaking peoples, the ogre is called Kho-oreb, meaning literally “man-eater”; “Their standard attributes are the axe and the big pot in which they cook their victims. . . . Man-eaters are incredibly strong and fast, and like in nightmares persons cannot escape from them” (Schmidt 2001, 278–279). Eventually, however, they usually do escape, employing such motifs as the obstacle flight (D672, “Flight into the tree”); R251, “Flight on a tree, which ogre tries to cut down”), or rescue by faithful dogs (B524.1.1, “Eats dog attacking cannibal (dragon)”) (279).

In “The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad” in The Arabian Nights, Sinbad and his shipmates are shipwrecked and make their way to an island where they encounter cannibals. “All who came to their country or whom they caught in their valleys on their roads . . . they slaughtered them by cutting their throats and roasted them for the King’s eating; but, as for the savages themselves, they ate human flesh raw” (Bartun 2001, 357).

The forbidden chamber—a room which the hero or heroine is forbidden to open (C611)—often turns out to contain bloody corpses and evidence of cannibalism. Similarly, in AT 955, The Robber Bridegroom, a young woman discovers that her husband-to-be is a murderer who butchers his victims. The witch’s house in the horror tale AT 334, The Witch’s Household, often contains evidence of man-eating in the form of human bones or cooking meat. Such gruesome details appear in Russian tales that feature the witch Baba Jaga.

The idea that a relative or trusted friend should have an appetite for human flesh has been developed in several popular tales. In AT 315A, The Cannibal Sister, a young girl lays waste to an entire village, eating livestock as well as humans. Like another African cannibal wife (G11.6, “Man-eating woman”), she is often vanquished by the hero’s dogs (Goldberg 1998). Early versions of Sleeping Beauty (AT 410) include a sequel in which the mother of the prince schemes to eat her daughter-in-law and grandchildren. They are saved by a compassionate executioner who substitutes animal parts (R512.2.1, “Animal substituted for child served at meal”).
Motif G72, “Unnatural parents eat children,” is the most pitiful example of atrocities concerning parents and children. In AT 720, My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me, a child is killed and cooked by his mother and served to his father for dinner. A tree grows from the child’s bones, and a bird sings about the murder and cannibalism (Belgrad 1980). Often this account begins with a mother who eats the meat that should have been her family’s dinner. She replaces it with part of her body, flesh from her leg or breast. From eating this meal, she and her husband develop a taste for human meat, and they decide to cook one of their children (G36, “taste of human flesh leads to habitual cannibalism”). This introduction can lead instead into other tales in which the children, having overheard their parents’ murderous plan, run away.

In several tales of persecuted women, AT 451, 652, 706, 707, 710, and 712, a new mother is falsely accused of having eaten her newborn child. The accusation is supported by “evidence” in the form of animal blood (K2116.1.1, “Innocent woman accused of eating her new-born children”). In a tale from India and Arab lands, children are actually eaten by their starving mothers. A queen who is really an ogress causes her co-wives to be imprisoned in a pit. There, they give birth, and all except one eat their children (AT 462, The Outcast Queens and the Ogress Queen). Only rarely do stories tell of children eating their parents. In Cinderella tales (AT 511 and 510A) in the Balkans, the mother is eaten by her children, either in her human form or after she has been turned into a cow (Xanthakou 1988; Roth 1951, 213–215).

Origin myths include both infanticide and patricide, followed by eating the victim (MacCulloch 1980, 208–209; Thomsen 1983, 24–28). According to Hesiod’s Theogony (lines 453ff.), the Greek god Kronos, afraid that one of his children will supplant him, swallows them in succession, until, finally, his wife Rhea substitutes a stone for the infant Zeus. Zeus, when grown, forces Kronos to vomit up all the other children, who become the Olympian gods. In Totem and Taboo (1900), Sigmund Freud developed a modern myth in which an archetypal “primal horde” (a term borrowed from Charles Darwin) of brothers killed and ate their father. According to Freud, this event led to two pillars of culture, reverence for a totem animal and the prohibition of incest.

Unwitting cannibalism (G60, “Human flesh eaten unwittingly”) emphasizes the horror of eating taboo (or contaminated) food more than the horror of being eaten. Rumors and legends often explain how the human flesh was accidentally or deliberately put into food, or how people happened to eat something not intended for consumption (X21, “Accidental cannibalism”) (Runke 1973; San Fernando Valley Folklore Society 2001). In Greek mythology, Tantalus cooks his son Pelops and serves him to the gods, in order to see whether they notice the difference between human and animal flesh. Pelops is resuscitated but, because Demeter ate part of his shoulder, that part of his body is replaced with ivory (Frazer 1921, 2,156–157; Motif E33, “Resurrection with missing member”). The eighteenth-century London barber-murderer Sweeney Todd, popularized in a 1979 musical production by Stephen Sondheim, is said to have disposed of the corpses of his victims by preparing and selling the meat as food (Thomsen 1983, 163–165).

Motif G61, “Relative’s Flesh Eaten Unwittingly,” a personalized form of G60, is amply documented in North America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Since World War II, Motif G61 has circulated as an urban legend motivated only by ignorance or misunderstanding. Cremated remains of relatives are included in a package sent to family members overseas, and the recipients eat the ashes, believing them to be food (San Fernando Valley Folklore Society 2001).

The most extreme examples of G61 involve a person being tricked into eating his own relatives (cf. AT 1115–1162). Thus, in AT 327, The Children and the Ogre, where a clever person outwits an ogre, the ogre may be tricked into eating his own wife or daughter, thinking it is the human intruder who has been cooked (cf. Motif G512.3.2.1, “Ogre’s wife (daughter) burned in his own oven”; Cosquin 1922, 366–372). At the end of tales with a substituted bride, the flesh of the imposter wife is preserved like meat and sent to the false bride’s mother, who eats it (Goldberg 1997, 150–161 passim). The wolf may feed Little Red Riding Hood parts of her grandmother’s body (Dundes 1989, 13–20). In an African development, a child recognizes the source of the food and exposes the murder and dismemberment (G 61.1, “Child recognizes relative’s flesh when it is served to be eaten”).

A horrific example of G61 occurs in the story of Pelops’s son Areus, who revenges himself on his brother Thyestes by serving him a meal consisting of Thyestes’s own children. After Thyestes finishes eating, Areus shows him the hands and feet of his children. In Shakespeare’s gory play Titus Andronicus (1593/4), two villainous brothers are “baked in that pie; whereof their mother daintily hath fed” (5.3.60f.). In AT 992, The Eaten Heart, the same trick is played on a woman whose husband or father disapproves of her lover enough to have him killed and butchered. When she is told she has eaten her lover’s heart, she tells herself. This story, which has been popular in European literary tradition since the Middle Ages, also appears in folktales from many parts of the world, including native North America (Ranké 1977–8, s.v. Herznäte).

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See also: Forbidden Chambers.

REFERENCES
———. 1977. – Encyklopädie des Märchens. 11 vols. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, s.v. Erzähltypen (for tale type references); Fressenmärchen (Marianne Rumpf); Freund, Sigmund (Elliot Oring); Herzmärze (Albert Gier); Kannibalismus (Birgitta Hauser-Schauß); Menschenfleisch reichen (Christine Shojai Kowar); Ogre (Thomas Geider).