70 ff.). John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress leads every Christian through “the Valley of Humiliation” where he learns that, “He that is down needeth fear no fall, / He that is low no pride” (Bunyan 1986, 212). But the most widely known literary portrait of pride is undoubtedly Milton’s Satan, “who was by the command of God driven out of Heaven with all his Crew into the great Deep” (Paradise Lost 1, “The Argument”). Milton’s Satan has a venerable lineage (Bloomsfield 1967, 109), for believers have always asserted that his pride was the original sin, since his fall from heaven preceded Adam’s fall from grace and was thus the first Judeo-Christian example of pride brought low.

A Hasidic commentator summarizes the significance of the motif and illustrates some of the ways in which it forms a continuum between folk culture and religion. “Said the Kotsker: ‘The Lord brings the proud low, but the man of pride remains haughty even in his lower state; once more the Lord lowers him, and this continues until he is humbled to the very earth’” (Newman 1975, 355).

Judith Neaman

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The theme of a bargain or binding contract with the devil can be traced back to the European Middle Ages. But the somewhat broader theme of the devil tempting human beings to imperil their souls in exchange for worldly riches or power is, according to several scholars, much older. Such a conception of the devil as exercising dominion over the worldly sphere is arguably rooted in a Judeo-Christian dualistic worldview. Thus, if the devil was in charge of the earthly realm, he could tempt humans to give up their souls (read: their allegiance to God in the heavenly realm) in order to enjoy more worldly pleasures (Conway 1881; Kelly 1985). Horst and Ingrid Daemmrich trace this theme back to “Enoch, the Talmud, and the Cabbala” (Daemmrich and Daemmrich 1987, 225), while Spivack (1988) sees its precursor in the Bible, first in the book of Job and later in the Gospels with Satan’s temptation of Jesus Christ.

In archetypal terms, a bargain with the devil may be related to the figure of the shadow. Burrows, Lapides, and Shawcross define the shadow as the “negative double of the body, the image of evil, the alter ego of the soul” (1973, 461). Dimic characterizes the psychological significance of the shadow:

It is taken to be instrumental in a child’s development of a personal body image, and it is defined as one of the major human archetypes. . . . In contrast to the light of consciousness, the shadow is the darkness of the personal unconscious, the other, unfathomed side of the personality, its secret sharer. The shadow includes those sombre traits belonging to the same sex and is representative of the least-developed, inferior function of Jung’s four types of consciousness (thinking, feeling, perceiving, and intuiting); the shadow is everything that the individual refuses to accept or understand in himself . . .
If not assumed and integrated, the shadow may become evil and destructive. In the collective unconscious, the shadow represents archetypal evil; referring to Gnostic and alchemical lore, Jung extends this analysis to God or Christ and Satan. (1988, 1206)

In folklore and literature, there exist two main variations on this theme: one focuses on the person’s actual contract with the devil, while the other revolves around a person’s attempt to (usually successfully) outwit the devil. The first is exemplified by the figure of Faust; the second, by the folk tale cycle of the sharp-witted peasant and the rather stupid devil. These narratives often involve motif M211, “Man sells soul to devil.”

FAUST

The Faust-cycle really encompasses a number of similar stories, beginning around the fourth and sixth centuries, with the diabolic contracts attributed to Saint Cyprian and Theophilus, respectively (Conway 1881; Elkhadem 1981; Spivack 1988). Spivack describes the standard form of this cycle:

Represented as a formal and binding written document between the devil and a human, usually a professor who signs it with his blood, the pact offers renunciation of Christianity in exchange for demonic services to be rendered at the price of the signer’s soul. This theme recurs in modern literature either as a conventional literal pact with a diabolic tempter or as an equivalent psychological experience. Both the motive for signing the pact and the outcome of the agreement vary. (1988, 941)

The legend of Saint Cyprian tells how he wagers his soul if the devil can make the beautiful Justina his. He is saved, however, because he becomes a Christian and dies alongside Saint Justina as a martyr (Conway 1881; Spivack 1988). Pedro de Calderón based his 1633 work El mágico prodigioso on this story. Theophilus, on the other hand, refuses election as bishop out of modesty but later regrets the decision. He strikes a bargain with Satan in exchange for restoration of his position in the church. He eventually repents, however, and is saved through the intercession of the Virgin Mary; this relates to motif M218.1, “Pacts with the devil sealed in blood made ineffective by a saint” (Elkhadem 1981). An early treatment of this story comes from Gauthier de Coiney, who wrote Le miracle de Théophile around the year 1200. In addition, several other historical figures have had the bargain with the devil motif added to their legends: “Pope Joan,” who is said to have sold her soul to Satan to secure election as supreme pontiff (Giovanni Boccaccio produced a literary work based on this legend); François Henry de Luxembourg, a ruthless French military leader during the time of Louis XIV (anonymous versions from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century have been found); Paracelsus, the Swiss alchemist; Pope Sylvester II, who supposedly opened a school for sorcerers and attempted to cheat death by consulting either a magic oracular head or a familiar in the form of a black dog (he died anyway) (Elkhadem 1981). Paul Carus adds that the figure of Faust became a magnet for a number of other closely related oker tales, such as those of Adelbertus Magnus, Johannes Teutonicus (Deutsch), Trihemius (Abbot of Sponheim), Agrippa of Netteheim, Theophrastus, and Paracelsus (Carus 1969; see also Conway 1881). It seems likely that people have attached the motif of a contract with Satan to historical and legendary figures when a viable explanation for their extraordinary power, wealth, or cruelty was needed.

The essential structure of the Faust-cycle story involves a magician-doctor who makes a bargain to give his soul to the devil in exchange for a certain period of unlimited wish-fulfillment. In the German medieval legend the period of time is twenty-four years (Elkhadem 1981). In some versions, the individual is saved, usually through divine intervention or the undertaking of extreme penitential practices (Saint Cyprian, Theophilus, Johann Goethe’s Faust); in others, the devil enforces the terms of the contract and drags him off to Hell (the 1587 Faust chapbook, Christopher Marlowe’s Faust). The historical Faust is believed to have been a phony magician-philosopher who died in the early to mid-sixteenth century (Conway 1881; Spivack 1988). Trihemius, a medieval abbot, first mentions him in a 1507 letter (Conway 1881; Weber 1999). The first publication of the Faust-story appeared in 1587 in Germany as a chapbook titled Das Volksbuch von Doktor Faust. This Faust wants to be godlike in knowledge and power and is thus drawn to magic. The devil materializes as Mephistopheles and Faust signs, in blood, a twenty-four-year contract. Seeking fame and respect, he visits both Heaven and Hell and tours the world. He encounters Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy before the court of the Holy Roman Emperor and subsequently fathers a prophetic child with Helen. The tale ends in Faust’s apparent damnation, suggested by the discovery of his mangled corpse (Carus 1969). In 1604, Christopher Marlowe published an English rendering of the tale, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, which likewise includes what had come to be the essential elements of the Faust-cycle: the thirst for knowledge, the twenty-four-year contract, the signing of the contract in blood, and the protagonist’s final damnation (Elkhadem 1981; Spivack 1988). Goethe’s famous poem Faust (1808–1832), however, exhibits all these elements except for the ending—his Faust is saved because the devil is unable to fulfill his end of the bargain and satisfy Faust completely. As we will see shortly, Goethe’s version almost seems a melding of the medieval form of the Faust story (as a morality tale) with the folk tale representation of the devil as dupe outwitted by an impossible task.
FOLKTALES

More generally, in folklore the bargain with the devil motif (M210 and related motifs) is found in the traditions of many groups; it is related to a number of other motifs and figures in the plot of a host of folktales. In folktales, the devil figure may overlap with that of the ogre, giant, or even Death personified. The theme appears in medieval exempla and literature such as the Legenda Aurea (1270) and includes motifs such as M212, “Devil at gallows repudiates his bargain with robber;” and M217, “Devil bargains to help man win woman” (Spivack 1988).

The contract with the devil (M211, “Man sells soul to devil”) serves as the initial situation in several folktales, such as Types 330, 360, 361, 756B, 810, and 812. For example, in Type 330, The Smith Outwits the Devil, a man agrees to surrender his soul to the devil after a certain period of time in return for being made a master smith. He is usually granted three wishes by a supernatural helper who provides him with objects he can use to entrap the devil (examples include a tree, chair, or bench to which the devil sticks and a bag or container in which the devil can be trapped). The smith uses these objects to overcome the snares of the devil—he gains more time or may be released from the contract. When the smith dies, however, neither Heaven nor Hell will accept him and he must instead wander the earth, emitting a spooky glow. This tale, according to Thompson (1977), is widespread in the world’s traditions, including the Kinder- und Hausmärchen by the Brothers Grimm (tales 81 and 82) and in different areas of Europe as well as America. Fred Morgan (1968), for example, collected a version of this tale in the Uwharrie Mountains of North Carolina. The entrapped devil figure is more generally related to the theme of Death sticking to a bench or tree in Greek and Hebrew myth (Aarne and Thompson 1987; Thompson 1977).

In Type 360, Bargain of the Three Brothers with the Devil, brothers receive money in return for the devil’s power over them (M211, “Man sells soul to devil”). An innkeeper commits a murder and the brothers are accused. They are rescued by the devil in the nick of time and the innkeeper is hanged instead. The devil is satisfied with the innkeeper’s soul. This tale has been collected extensively, according to Aarne and Thompson, from Denmark and Germany in particular. Type 361, Bear-Skin, likewise involves a bargain with the devil in exchange for money. This time it is a soldier who agrees not to wash or comb himself for seven years; he ends up marrying the youngest sister in family and the two elder sisters hang themselves (Aarne and Thompson 1987). The devil tells him, “I got you; you one.” This story has been collected somewhat recently by Taggart (1990) in the Cáceres region of Spain.

Type 765B, The Devil’s Contract, is about a boy who goes to Hell to try to retrieve a contract, signed before his birth, that promised him to the devil. He successfully retrieves his contract and thus evades the devil’s power. This tale features motif M211, “Man sells soul to devil,” along with related motifs about children being given to the devil (S211, “Child sold (promised) to devil (ogre)”). The most versions of this tale have been collected in Ireland, with a sizable number also coming from Germany and Lithuania (Aarne and Thompson 1987).

A number of folktales begin with the promise of children to the devil either by the parents or by the youths themselves. For example, Type 313A, a version of The Girl as Helper in the Hero’s Flight, begins with motif S223, “Youth sells himself to an ogre in settlement of a gambling debt.” Structurally, this strategy of opening a tale serves the function of setting the hero on his journey (away from his childhood home and out into the world). It thus sets the story in motion. Several other examples of stories set into motion by this cluster of related motifs are Type 310, The Maiden in the Tower, better known as Rapunzel, in which a man promises an offended witch his unborn
child; Type 400, *The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife*, in which a father unwittingly pledges his son to a monster; and Type 425C, *Beauty and the Beast*, in which a father may promise his daughter to the beast. The theme of a son promised to Satan appears in medieval romances like *Robert the Devil* and *Sir Gawith*, both of which end with the child’s redemption. This theme is related to motif M219.1, “Bargain with the devil for an heir;” and S223, “Childless couple promise child to devil if they may only have one” (Aarne and Thompson 1987; Thompson 1977).

In Type 810, *The Snare of the Evil One*, a man is protected from the devil by a priest who draws a magic circle around him. This story includes motif M211, “Man sells soul to devil;” and appears in the Grimm (tale 92) and Svend Grundtvig (number 59) collections from Germany and Denmark, respectively. It appears to be especially popular in northern Europe and the Baltics. Type 812, *The Devil’s Riddle*, concerns a man’s success in outwitting the devil by solving riddles. This may involve guessing the true nature of enigmatic objects (examples include a gold cup that is really a cup of pitch and roast meat that is really a dead dog); answering seemingly impossible questions (such as What is sweeter than honey? or, What is whiter than white?); interpreting numbers symbolically; or performing impossible tasks. The man is successful because he saves or seizes the help of the devil’s grandfather or other supernatural helper. Again, this tale seems to be particularly prolific in northern Europe and the Baltics (Aarne and Thompson 1987). In addition, Polly Stewart notes that in some versions of the Child ballad “Riddles Wisely Expounded” (number 1), the heroines solves riddles in order to escape from the snares of the devil (Stewart 1993). Type 820 incorporates motif M213, “Devil as substitute for day laborer at mowing.” The devil uses a magic sickle, but when the evil boss attempts the same feat, he dies of overexhaustion. This type has been collected mostly from northern Europe (Aarne and Thompson 1987).

It is in the more simple folktales, specifically Types 1170-1199, grouped under the heading *A Man Sells His Soul to the Devil*, that we see most clearly the representation of the devil as foolish and easily outmaneuvered. These tales share a common theme: the man saves his soul through trickery, usually by demanding that the devil perform impossible tasks. It is thus motif M211, “Man sells soul to devil;” that sets these stories in motion. The devil is usually a buffoon. Thompson explains:

> Among the impossible tasks assigned the devil in stories of this kind are catching rabbits in nets set out in high trees (Type 1171), collecting all stones from the brook or field, making knots from drops of spilled brandy, making a rope from sand, straightening curly hair, catching a man’s broken wind, pumping out water from the whole sea, or catching water in a sieve (Types 1171–1180). Other kinds of cheats are perpetrated on the devil. Having agreed to give the devil a part of his body, the man gives him a paring from his fingernail (Type 1181). Three other deceptive bargains are *The Level Bushel*, *The Last Leaf*, and *The First Crop* (Types 1182, 1184, and 1185). In the first, the student is to come into the devil’s power if, at the end of a year, he does not at least return for the heaping bushel of gold a level one. The student immediately hands back the level bushel and keeps the surplus. In the second the man is to pay the devil when the last leaf falls from the tree. It is an oak tree, and the leaf never falls. The oak also figures in the third of these stories. The man is to pay the devil as soon as he harvests his first crop, but he plants acorns and the devil must wait long. These three tales are widely distributed and popular over most of Europe.” (Thompson 1977, 44)

As a whole, these stories are especially popular in Scandinavia and the Baltics, although distributed throughout other areas of Europe (Thompson 1977).

Type 1186, *With His Whole Heart*, also known as *The Devil and the Advocate*, involves a declaration by the devil that he will not take anything not offered with one’s whole heart. Someone curses the judge/advocate with such vehemence that the latter is taken off to Hell. This is motif M215, “With his whole heart: devil carries off judge.” The story appears in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Frier’s Tale” (*The Canterbury Tales*, 1478) and in English romances. It is a tale collected most frequently from northern and eastern Europe. Type 1187, *Meleager*, has as its basis the ancient Greek myth of Meleager, in which a person is permitted to live as long as a candle burns. This story has proliferated in Irish, Flemish, and French tradition. The remaining tales in this cycle involve bargains that turn on such stipulations as giving the devil the first thing driven over a bridge (Type 1191), singing a hymn (Type 1193), and saying the Lord’s Prayer (Type 1199) (Aarne and Thompson 1987). In addition, Stewart points out that in “The Elfin Knight” (Child ballad no. 2), the tempter that the heroine attempts to evade by posing impossible tasks may in fact really be the devil (Stewart 1993).

Type 1191, *The Dog on the Bridge*, which seems especially characteristic of German folklore, may be associated with certain actual bridges in that country, the so-called Devil’s Bridges. This type involves motif M211.2, “Man sells soul to devil in return for devil’s building house (barn, etc.).” The builder may outwit the devil by having an animal (or animals) cross the bridge first, thus saving human souls (Aarne and Thompson 1987; Conway 1881).

If the theme of a bargain with the devil can be considered to include related figures such as a giant or Death personified, as suggested earlier, then such motifs figure in certain origin myths. For example, Denise Palme discusses several West African tales centering on the theme of the origin of death. In one, Death gives a hunter some meat and later returns for payment. The hunter
gives Death one of his children. This tale, “Trading with Death,” traveled from Africa to places like Jamaica and French Guiana. In another text, “The Two Brothers,” Death demands that the spider say his name before he will give him meat. He then curses the spider’s brother for having given him Death’s name (Lebe). In the third text, a mother pretends to give her daughter to Death in exchange for meat, but tries to trick Death into letting her keep her daughter too. Another text, from the Kaa, tells of a youth who agrees to serve a giant in exchange for some food. The giant lets him leave for a while if he will bring back another boy in his place (he brings his brother). The next time that the boy leaves, the giant demands a girl to marry (the boy brings his sister). Finally the boy asks again and the giant tells him to go into the giant’s hut and take whatever he wants: he finds his sister’s bones. Palume ties these stories to kinship structure, arguing that giving one’s daughter to Death represents the loss of a female child through marriage to another lineage (Palume 1967).

Other variations on the theme of a bargain with the devil include M21.1, “Man unwittingly sells soul to devil,” an element in medieval folktales. That for which the person sells his soul can vary tremendously (including seeing water turn into wine, visiting home in flying boat, magic power to escape capture, performing one specific job, granting of wishes, helping with robberies, assistance in reaching the priesthood, winning a woman, or securing an heir).

LATER LITERATURE

In elite literature, the bargain with the devil motif has been further developed. Adelbert von Chamisso’s Peter Schlemihls Wundersame Geschichte (1814) tells the story of a man who bargains away his shadow but subsequently finds himself so alienated from human company that he soon rue his decision (Elkhadem 1981; Dimic 1988). Oscar Wilde’s character Lord Henry Wooten in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) is another example of a man selling his soul, in this case, for eternal youth. Stephen Vincent Benét’s story “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1937) takes place in New Hampshire, where a farmer named Jabez Stone sells his soul for ten years’ worth of riches. He, like others, signs the contract with his blood. When the length of the contract expires, Jabez enlists Daniel Webster to take his case before an American jury and wins his freedom through invocation of the American self-image of individual liberty (Spivack 1988). In 1947 Thomas Mann published Doktor Faustus, in which the Faust character, Adrian Leverkühn, agrees to give up love for success. But here the devil only exists in Leverkühn’s mind (Spivack 1988). Similarly, in modern movies, the theme continues to strike a chord with the popular psyche, ranging from comedies like Bedazzled (starring Elizabeth Hurley as a female devil) to the disturbing Angel Heart (in which an ostensible voodoo plot is framed by a man’s ill-fated bargain with Satan).

Natalie M. Underberg

REFERENCES

Curses

Motifs M400–M462

Cursing can be understood as an attempt to “call down evil upon God or creatures, rational or irrational, living or dead” (Catholic Encyclopedia 1999). Thompson classifies curses as a subsection under Chapter M, Ordaining the Future.

In early Christianity, Saint Thomas addressed cursing under the term *maledictio* (Catholic Encyclopedia 1999). Power traces the etymology of the word *curse* to the ancient Gaelic word *cúrsaichd*, which, in the ninth century, denoted “abuse.” From this word and another one commonly used, *maledicton*, we can derive two basic elements of cursing: abusing and speaking evil (Power 1974).

In the traditions of the ancient world, two well-known curses figure in the book of Genesis: first, when God drives Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden they and their progeny are cursed with the travails of human suffering; second, after killing his brother Abel, Cain is cursed by God and condemned to wander the earth. Curses appear a number of times throughout the Bible: “in various books of the Old Testament there are long lists of curses against transgressors of the Law [in Leviticus and Deuteronomy]. . . . So, too, in the New Testament, Christ curses the barren fig-tree [Mark] . . . pronounces his denunciation of woe against the incredulous cities [Matthew] . . . against the rich, the worldling, the scribes and the Pharisees, and foretells the awful malediction that is to come upon the damned [Matthew]” (Catholic Encyclopedia 1999).

A connection to an archetype may be made with the figure of the outcast, of which Cain is the prototypical figure. As Burrows, Lapidus, and Shawcross explain, “The outcast is the alienated character, the outsider, the criminal. . . . the figures of Ishmael, the Wandering Jew, the Ancient Mariner, and the Flying Dutchman have been a part of our consciousness and unconsciousness” (1973, 357).

In ancient Greek mythology, Cassandra, famed as a seer, is cursed by Apollo so that no one will ever believe her predictions again after she broke a promise of love to him. Her prophecies thus go unheeded, to the peril of the city of Troy and of Agamemnon. The curse of Cassandra appears in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as well as Virgil’s *Aeneid* (ca. 30–19 BCE). Also in the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas leaves Dido, Queen of Carthage, she places a curse on him and his people before she commits suicide.

In Greek mythology, a curse placed on Labdacus (father of Laius and grandfather of Oedipus) and his progeny results in the ill fate of Laius, Oedipus, Antigone, and others (Elkhadem 1981, 58).

In Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (1592–1593), Queen Margaret utters such a passionate curse against Richard and his allies that Buckingham says, “My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses” (1.3.303).

Two well-known condemnations, mentioned above in connection to archetypal theory, delivered as a punishment for blasphemy, can be considered curses. A sea captain, known as The Flying Dutchman, utters a blasphemous oath and for the rest of time he must sail around the Cape of Good Hope. The Wandering Jew (Aarne-Thompson Type 777), is condemned to walk the earth until the last day because he either uttered a blasphemous oath or struck Jesus Christ on his way to the crucifixion (Aarne and Thompson 1987; Elkhadem 1981).

Curse motifs (M400 and related motifs) are prolific in number and variety. One type of curse is the “cursing match,” also known as flying (M401). Hughes explains the custom as it existed in ancient Germanic society:

> The Old Norse root, *flyta*, seems initially to be restricted to a heroic ambitence. In this brand of flying, the insults are deliberately provocative, designed, to use another Northern word, to *egg* the opponent into action. . . . Skill in barred insult, dexterity in the wounding phrase, is very much part of heroic language of the North, where the complexity of word-play reaches astonishing proportions in skaldic verse, which was delivered *ex tempore*. It is the verbal equivalent of virtuoso sword-play. (Hughes 1998, 47)

This was also a feature of Irish cursing in the early days of Christianity, which involved two individuals who uttered imprecations against each other in the form of a conversation. An important element in these cursing contests is the increasing vehemence of the curses from beginning to end, moving from insult to death wish (Power 1974).
The identity of the curser can range from a person cursing himself or herself (M411.0.1) to family members cursing other family members (for example, M411.1, "Curse by parent"). In the Child ballads, for example, jealous mothers curse sons and thereby destroy them and their new families. In "The Mother’s Malison" (also known as "Clyde’s Water," Child 216), the son refuses his mother’s request to stay at home with her, intending instead to spend the night with her lady love. The mother utters this curse: "Clyde’s water’s wide and deep enough/My malison drown thee!" (cited in Stewart 1993, 62). The son subsequently drowns trying to return home from his lady’s house. In "Prince Robert" (Child 87), a mother curses her son’s marriage and poisons him; later, her widow is cursed by the unremorseful mother and dies (Stewart 1993). Mothers can also utter curses unintentionally, with nonetheless disastrous results. For example, in Type S13A, The Accursed Daughter, a woman unwittingly curses her daughter to the devil through a careless statement (this tale appears in the Russian Afanasiev collection) (Aarne and Thompson 1987).

In addition, several outcast figures, including beggars (M411.2) and old women (M411.5), can also deliver damning imprecations. This can be seen quite clearly in the realm of Irish folklore. The so-called Tinker’s Cant offers one example of a beggar’s curse: "That the midil may tasp you, you glódach crois oild beoir" (in standard English, "That the devil may take you, you dirty old woman") (O’Farrell 1995). The widow’s curse was, according to Power, among the most terrifying in Irish society: without a protector, without means of providing for herself, her wrath was still something to be avoided at all costs (Power 1974). In fact, wishing a widow’s curse on someone is itself a curse: "Maliacht na Rantra ort" ("The widow’s curse on you") (O’Farrell 1995, 94). In Irish folklore, the theme of a widow pronouncing a curse on the executioner who hanged her son is widespread. For example, one well-known hereditary curse (intended to affect both the individual and his or her lineage into future generations) was attached to the Bresford family: when a member of this family hanged a widow’s only son without justification, the widow cursed him and his lineage for seven generations (Power 1974).

Saints’ legends are replete with the maladictions of holy men and women (M411.8, "Saint’s (prophet’s) curse"). Saint Patrick, for example, is credited with driving the snakes out of Ireland with a curse (Jacob 1967). Irish hagiography (called facbala) also tells of the pronouncement of hereditary curses. Again, Saint Patrick offers an example. According to legend, he once cursed a cruel slave owner who refused to reform. St. Patrick “fasted against him” (an important first step in pronouncing an Irish curse), then spat on a stone and uttered the curse that the man’s family would never have a royal heir (Power 1974). Interestingly, one saints’ method of cursing, that of ringing bells (M411.8.1), is reminiscent of the way that, historically, the Catholic Church excommunicated members. This “cursing ritual” involved reading a sentence, ringing a bell, closing a book, and extinguishing a candle (Jacob 1967). Similarly, prophets could utter curses. The seventeenth-century curse of the Mackenzie clan offers an example. In 1609, Colin Mackenzie was named Earl of Seaforth. The third earl married another Mackenzie, Isabella, a woman with a fiery temper. As a consequence, the earl spent a good deal of time away from her. When she asked a local seer, named Kenneth Mackenzie but known as the Warlock of the Glenn, to use his divination skills to reveal where her husband was, the seer told her: in the arms of two other women. This so displeased the Lady Mackenzie that she had the warlock hanged. At the gallows, he once again consulted his divining-stone and foretold the end of the Seaforth Mackenzie line (Lewes 1911).

The priest’s curse (M411.14; also M411.15, “Curse by monk”), however, was probably the single most feared type in traditional Irish society. Power hypothesizes that this was because the priest was considered a kind of religious virtuoso and so presumably had an ability to harness potentially destructive supernatural powers (Power 1974). Legends also attest to the existence of the priest’s curse in England. One such curse from the sixteenth century was associated with the House of Cowdray. Sir Anthony Browne received an abbey from King Henry VIII as thanks for Browne’s role in closing down the monasteries. At a banquet Browne threw to celebrate successfully turning the abbey into a personal residence, a monk pronounced a curse on him and his descendants, specifying that they would die through fire and water. In 1793, the last of the line drowned and the family castle was destroyed in a fire (Lockhart 1971).

The poet’s curse (M411.18) also played an important role in traditional Irish society. In former times, poets were attributed mystical and even prophetic powers. The giam dicenn was a form of cursing ritual used by poets in ancient Ireland (Power 1974). In addition, curses can come from almost anyone, including a god (M411.4.1), a spirit (M411.7), an ogre (M411.10), a witch (M411.12), and an animal (M411.19).

The Moïf-Index also categorizes curses by the occasions of their pronouncement (M412, "Time of giving curse"). Two mentioned in Thompson’s index are M412.1, “Curse given at birth of child,” and M412.2, “Curse given on wedding night.” The former is part of Type 410, Sleeping Beauty, in which an offended fairy pronounces a death-curse on the newborn princess: she will die from pricking her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel. Another fairy mitigates the curse from death to a hundred-year sleep (F316.1). This story has appeared in a number of well-known literary collections, including Giambattista Basile’s II Pentamerone (1634-1636) and Charles Perrault’s Contes de ma mere l’Oye (1697). Also, Types 934E*, False Prophecy, and
934E**, Daughter Cursed at Birth, are related to this motif. In the former (a Greek subtype), a prophecy is made that at the age of sixteen a princess will ride around a public square on an ass—the prophecy is fulfilled when she is accused of theft. In subtype 934E**, a barren queen is granted a child but simultaneously cursed to see her only three times, and to lay a curse on her child each time (she does). This is an Icelandic variant (Arne and Thompson 1987).

An important folk concept with regard to curses, seen especially in Irish culture, is that curses are more powerful if uttered from a hilltop or other elevated location. This idea is even incorporated into the text of one popular Irish curse—"Blast you from a height" (O’Farrell 1995, 113)—and is related to motif M413.1, "Curse given from a height. Will fall with full effect on objects at which it is aimed").

Additionally, the method of cursing can vary (M418). Thompson includes the following example from an Anglo-American folktales: M418.1, “Curse by ‘building a fire of stones’ in fireplace. The person who removes the stones is cursed.” Generally, a form of sympathetic magic underlies many rituals associated with cursing. Imitative magic works according to the principle of "like produces like"—a voodoo doll is a good example. Contagious magic, on the other hand, operates on the idea that something that was once in contact with a person will continue to exert control over him or her even after it has been removed. Consequently, many curses require such objects as a lock of hair or nail clippings that once belonged to the curse (Jacob 1967; Frazer 1955).

In Irish folklore, cursing stones were used. The so-called fire of stones presumably was brought by immigrants to the United States (hence its appearance in Thompson’s Motif-Index as a part of Anglo-American tradition). A person would gather a heap of smooth stones and place them in a fire. Then, after kneeling to pronounce a curse, ending with a wish of ill-luck on the curse until the stones were set afire, the curser would hide the rocks. Cursing-stones were usually associated with ancient churches and monasteries in Ireland. The ritual was specific: one fasted, prayed, then turned the stone counterclockwise while uttering a malédiction on one’s enemy. Another cursing ritual was called “sweeping Colm Cille’s bed,” referring to a large rock in Ireland that, according to legend, was used by Colm Cille, one of three patron saints of Ireland, as a bed. People who wished to place a curse would come to this crevice between sunset and sunrise and “sweep his bed” with a shirt or chemise (depending on the gender of the curser) (Power 1974).

The types of curses that can be pronounced seem nearly limitless, but a number of them can be grouped into several main categories, including physical harm (M431), bad luck, curses on descendants, and death. Cursers can wish that, for example, the victim loses an eye (M431.1). This is an element of Type 1331, The Covetous and the Envious, in which an ostensible blessing is turned into a curse; a man is given any wish on the condition that his neighbor is given double (the wishes to lose one eye). This story appears, for example, in medieval Spanish exempla. Another bodily harm curse motif associated with a folktales is M431.2, “Curse: toads from mouth,” which forms part of Type 403, The Black and White Bride, and Type 480, The Kind and the Unkind Girls. In the former, the story begins with a neglected stepdaughter coming into contact with a stranger (or strangers) able to grant wishes. Because she is kind, she is granted beauty and the boon of being able to produce gold or jewels from her mouth. Her sister, however, acts unkindly in the same situation and is made ugly and cursed with having toads drop from her mouth.

This story appears in Giambattista Basile’s Il Pentamerone (1634–1636) and has been especially popular in Danish, Finnish, German, and Irish folklore. Type 480, The Kind and the Unkind Girls, ends like Type 403 with the unkind girl being punished with frogs falling from her mouth. This tale also appeared in Il Pentamerone, as well as in the German Grimm (KHM 24), Danish Grundtvig (no. 37), and Russian Afanasiev collections. The most versions of this tale have been collected in Germany, Ireland, Russia, and Sweden (Arne and Thompson 1987).

Misluck constitutes another main category of curses. Irish and Yiddish curses offer pungent examples of these motifs. For example, an Irish curse declares, "That you may have forty-five ways of putting on your coat this harvest-time," a wish that a person would be so poor that his or her clothes would be ripped into rags (O’Farrell 1995, 93). In Yiddish folklore, wishing a bad year on someone is one of the most common kinds of curses, for example: "Ach, you are as hot as your father!" (Matisoff 1979, 61). Such a curse reflects the Jewish conception of the importance of a "year’s luck" (Matisoff 1979).

Similarly, in an Icelandic variant of Type 556B*, Curse and Countercurse, a chess player is cursed by his female opponent with restlessness until he completes certain tasks (M455, "Curse: restlessness"). But the curse is countered by the help of a stepmother and grateful animals (Arne and Thompson 1987).

One of the most common arenas of cursing in traditional societies concerns people’s lineages. Cursing someone’s descendants can be a type of group-curse (M460, "Curse on families"). Whole lineages are thus cursed—the wish being that the line will eventually fall to ruin (for example, M462, "Curse: race to lose sovereignty"). Max Lübke argues that such curses are characteristic of legendary rather than of the folktales.

In legendry, a curse affects whole generations; it takes effect for centuries and burdens all progeny. The folktales curse affects only figures who exist side by side; it never extends from early ancestors to later descendants. After
a curse is lifted, even people who have been bewitched for centuries do not hesitate to marry their young saviors, for savior and saved exist on the same level. ... The otherworld of the folklore is not only a different dimension, but in it the past stands at ease side by side with the present. (Lithi 1982, 22)

Scottish Highlander curses offer especially striking examples of family curses. Lockhart posits that most Highland families probably have had a curse in their history. He cites the “Curse of the M’Alisters” as an illustration of one such curse forecasting the end of a family line (Lockhart 1971). Similarly, among the Badaga (a South Indian group), the most serious curse is: “Kus: ledali (‘May you have no heirs!’)” (Hockings 1988, 152).

Finally, the death-curse is the most damning of all (M451, “Curse: death” and related motifs). Again, Irish and Yiddish curses offer abundant examples that can exist both as part and independently of folk narrative. Such curses often reveal customs and beliefs on the part of the group that pronounces them. For example, “Balma bpisin chugat! The death of the kittens to you!” refers to the custom of drowning unwanted cats in Ireland and is an example of motif M451.2, “Death by drowning” (Power 1974, 83). Another death curse that reveals an Irish custom is “Hungry grass grow around your grave” because this would prevent people from visiting the gravesite and thus saying prayers for the deceased (O’Farrell 1995, 76). Similarly, in Jewish tradition, wishing death on someone else is, not surprisingly, the most serious of all curses. However, one does not employ the word death (shaharim) specifically—perhaps as a protection against being seized by it oneself. Rather, the burial-ground, the earth (di erdi) is invoked. Such curses figure in short anecdotes such as one in which a man tells his friend that he and his wife get along wonderfully except for a certain “Agrarian Controversy.” Asked for an explanation, he replies that he says she should lie in the earth, while she says he should (Matisoff 1979).

Scholars of curses seem to agree that there is something of an inverse relation between a group’s amount of social power, on the one hand, and the proliferation of its cursing traditions, on the other. Power attributes the historical importance of curses among the Irish to their function as a “punishment-by-proxy”—people without real access to the means of power could achieve a sense of power through cursing (Power 1974). Similarly, Lockhart asserts that, in contrast to England, the curse in the Scottish Highlands was extremely common because it provided a means for the weak to confront the strong (Lockhart 1971). And Matisoff argues that, as with other traditions, Yiddish curses serve a therapeutic function, offering a “valve” to let off steam. This is because in traditional European Jewish society, uttering curses was one of the only ways to retaliate against oppression and prejudice (Matisoff 1979).

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