P

Society
Sister and Brother

Motif P253

The basic kinship unit of brother and sister constitutes a theme ranging from the mundane to the spectacular and from the licit to the illicit. The sibling relationship is not dependency-based but is a relationship between equals; for a brother or a sister the other is a friend, a colleague, a companion, and a source of love and affection (Kerényi 1975, 113). The network of social interactional patterns stemming from this basic kinship tie encompasses an expanding circle of relatives, especially the roles of a woman's brother as a maternal uncle to her child (P253.0.1, "Sister's son," and P297, "Nephew (Sister's son)"; (Gummers 1901; Bell 1922). Yet the significance of this theme cannot be inferred from the available folklore indexes of global coverage.

In his Motif-Index, Thompson assigns the sister and brother motif to AT 450. Little Brother and Little Sister: In AT 450, the siblings escape from home and live together in the wilderness; the brother disobeys his sister and is transformed into a deer (or like animal); the sister is taken as wife by the king, and her brother helps save her and her newborn child from a rival's plot. Similarly, The Types of the Folk-tale cites Motif P253 only in association with AT 450 and gives a derivative of the Motif—P253.3, "Brother chosen rather than husband or son"—as the basis for AT 985, which bears an identical title (Aarne and Thompson 1964).

In spite of this seemingly infrequent occurrence of Motif P253 as reported in the two standard indexes, the sister and brother theme appears with great frequency in folk traditions as well as in all other facets of culture and society. It is found in most of the twenty-three chapters of the Motif-Index's classificatory schema. For example, in the Mythological chapter the following motifs...
appear: “Brother-sister marriage of the gods” (A164.1), “Demigod son of king’s unmarried sister by her brother” (A511.1.3.2), “Sun-brother and moon-sister” (A736.1.2), “Paradise lost because of brother-sister incest” (A1331.2), and “Brother-sister marriage of children of first parents” (A1552.3); under Magic, the following intrinsic motif appears: “Girl exchanges form with sorceress in order to visit her brother and get a son by him” (D45.4); under Tests, the motif “Brother unwittingly qualifies as bridegroom of sister in test” appears (H310.2); and under The Wise and the Foolish, the following erotic motif is listed: “Boy strikes a blow on his sister’s breast; it turns into nipple and girl thinks it due to brother’s caress” (J1833.1.1); under Chance and Fate, the following motif is cited: “Brother and sister unwittingly in love with each other” (N365.3.1); under Society, we encounter such motifs as “Sister faithful to transformed brother” (P253.2), “Clever sister saves life of brother” (P253.8), and “Woman dies of sorrow for death of brother” (P253.9); under Captives and Fugitives, we find “Sister escapes to the stars to avoid marrying brother” (R321.1); and under Sex, we find such motifs as “Brother-sister marriage” (T415.5) and “Man unwittingly ravishes his own sister” (T471.1).

The explicit listings of the presence of the brother-sister theme in the various units designated in Aarne and Thompson’s (1964) The Types of the Folktales is incomplete. Numerous tale types carry indicative titles such as Girl Flees from Brother Who Wants to Marry Her (AT 313E*), The Faithless Sister (AT 315), The Cannibal Sister (AT 315A, Motif G3488, “Sister as devastating cannibal”), Little Brother and Little Sister (AT 450, cited above), The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers (AT 451), The Sister Seeking Her Nine Brothers (AT 451A), Brother and Sister (AT 872*), and the sketchyly Clever Girl Flees Her Brother from Prison (AT 879C*). Yet other tale types revolving around brother and sister do not carry labels that indicate the presence of the theme, nor is the theme provided in the general alphabetical index of the Types of the Folktales. These unlisted tale types in which the brother-sister motif plays a major role include the following: Hansel and Gretel (AT 327A), in which the siblings face treacherous parents and a dangerous external world; and Gregory on the Stone (AT 933), in which a son who was born of brother-sister incest is abandoned and undergoes penance. Also, the incestuous nature of the plot of Brother and Sister Heal the King (AT 613C*), in which the siblings flee from their father who wants them to marry each other, is not indicated; nor is it compared to its thematic match in AT 313E* or to the equally incestuous AT 510B, The Dress of Gold, of Silver, and of Stars (girl flees from her father who wants to marry her).

In other tale types, the brother-sister theme is less overt; nonetheless, it plays a significant psychological role in the development of the narrative’s plot. Such is the case with AT 1538*, The Jester-bride, and AT 1542, “The Clever Boy. Peik with his fooling-sticks,” in which a trickster, with his sister as confederate, seduces the daughters and/or wives of the rich and powerful in his community. Also, the brother-sister theme is underreported in The Three Golden Sons (AT 707, III, d) in which a sister rescues her brother(s) (e.g., Grimm, no. 96; El-Shamy 1980, no. 9).

The theme of unwitting incest between brother and sister occurs in early Egyptian mythology (see below). It also occurs in the Thousand and One Nights Motif N365.3.4., “‘Man meets a girl of unknown genealogy and marries her; she proves to be his sister’” (“The story of the King Omar Ibn al-Nu lavoro and his sons Sharkan and Dau’ el-Makân”; see Chauvin 6:112, no. 277). Meanwhile, consensual brother-sister incest is the core of the story told by “The First Mendicant,” in which a brother and sister escape to a tomb abode to live together as husband and wife: they are miraculously stricken dead with a thunderbolt (Chauvin Society 5:196, no. 115).

The actual commission of incest between brother and sister, unwittingly or unwittingly, has been designated as a new tale type: 932A§–933, Brother-sister Incest: The Sethian Complex. In addition to the Icelandic text given above, it appears frequently in Middle Eastern traditions dating back to ancient times and continuing to the present—932A§ (formerly 0932A§, The Sister Who Does a Son Sired by Her Brother Achieves Her Goal: The Unsuspecting Brother, and 932B§, A Mother’s Own Daughter as Her Daughter-in-Law: Bride Behaves as a Daughter-in-Law (El-Shamy 1999, nos. 49 and 44 respectively).

Beside the manifest expression of sexual desires, the brother-sister incest theme may occur in less overt terms. In narrating a tale, a tale-teller may be confused about who is who among its personae, unwittingly revealing brother-sister incest. In its strongest form, this psychological mechanism of identification may be called identity transformation, whereby one person is simply recast in the role of another.

Another case of ambiguity and character transformation is found in Sudanese and Egyptian renditions of AT 313E*. The Sudanese tale illustrates a girl’s flight to avoid the advances of her incestuous brother, who has become infatuated with physical attributes. Yet the separation between brother and sister is often temporary and/or the girl marries a person who may symbolically be equated with her brother (El-Shamy 1999, no. 46). This situation is most vividly illustrated in another Sudanese text titled “The Son of Nimêr,” narrated by a fifty-year-old widow: “The son of Nimêr once took his horse to the river. There he found a lock of hair with which he could [have been able to] tie his horse. He said, ‘I’ll marry the girl to whom this lock of hair belongs even if she happened to be my sister, Fatimah.’ The sister runs away and hides inside an old man’s skin. She is captured in that disguise by ‘the son of Nimêr.’ They play a game and in the end ‘the son of Nimêr’ beat the old man
and tore the garment of dry skin that Fátimah had, and there was a beautiful girl. They . . . got married” (El-Shamy 1999, 320, no. 46). Although the assumption is that the two characters in the son of Nimrā are unrelated, the psychological implications are evident: the girl marries either her brother, after having been reared in a different context, or a brother-substitute.

The same unintentional (noncognitive) “error” is manifested in the Egyptian rendition of the tale. In that incomplete text, the brother persuades his fleeing sister to climb down from a tree in which she sought refuge. Yet the incestuous act is expressed through the use of the formulaic ending “And they lived in prosperity and stability and begot boys and girls,” thus indicating the same affective implications in the Sudanese variant (El-Shamy 1999, no. 46–1).

The Russian fairytale titled “Prince Danila Govorila” (given here with motif identifications and minor deletions) may be classified as a combination of AT 313E*, AT 1121, and a theme comparable to tale type 872B$; The Murdered Sister Is Reincarnated and Betrothed to her Brother: The Talking Bed (El-Shamy 1995, 427).

A young prince was given a magic ring by a witch, with the stipulation that he must marry none but the girl whose finger the ring fits (new Motif H361.1&); “Girl whom ring (bracelet, anklet bracelet, etc.) would fit to be chosen as bride”). When he grows up he goes in search of a bride, but the ring fits no one. So he laments his fate to his sister, who asks to try on the ring. It fits perfectly (new Motif H367.5; “Sister unwittingly qualifies as bride of brother in test”); H310.2, “Brother unwittingly qualifies as bridegroom of sister in test”). Thereupon her brother wants to marry her, but she thinks it would be a sin and sits at the door of the house weeping (new Motif C162.5.1&); “Tabu: brother-sister marriage”). Some old beggars (Motif N826, “Help from beggar”) comfort her and advise her: “Make four dolls and put them in the four corners of the room. If your brother summons you to the wedding, go, but if he summons you to the bedchamber, do not hurry!”

After the wedding her brother summons her to bed (new Motif P605.5.2&); “A boy’s (man’s) sister in bed (scene, image)”; T59.1&; “Lovers’ play (foreplay): embracing, kissing, necking, etc.”). Then the four dolls begin to sing (new Motif N681.3.0.28; “Incest accidentally averted: talking furniture (bed, ornaments, etc.)”; N454, “Conversation of objects overheard”):

Cuckoo, Prince Danila
Cuckoo, Govorila,
Cuckoo, he takes his sister,
Cuckoo, for a wife,
Cuckoo, earth open wide,
Cuckoo, sister fall inside.

The earth opens and swallows her up (Motif R327, “Earth opens to rescue fugitive”, F942.3.1, “Earth opens at woman’s bidding to enclose her”). She goes along under the earth until she comes to the hut of Baba Yaga (the Russian arch-witch) whose daughter kindly shelters her and hides her from the witch (G530.2, “Help from ogre’s daughter (son)”).

The two girls seize the old woman and put her in the oven, thus escaping the witch’s persecution (cf. AT 1121, Ogre’s Wife Burned in His Own Oven). They reach the prince’s castle, where the sister is recognized by her brother’s servant. But her brother cannot tell the two girls apart, they are so alike (Motif H161.0.1, “Recognition of person among identical companions”). So the servant advises him to make a test: the prince is to fill a skin with blood and put it under his arm. The servant will then stab him in the side with a knife and the prince is to fall down as if dead (Motif K1875, “Deception by sham blood. [By stabbing bag of blood, trickster makes dupe think that he is bleeding!]”). The sister will then surely betray herself (Motif H421, “Tests of true lover”; J1171, “Judging by testing love”; Type 926.4, Test of Habitual Behavior (Love-Dependence, Hate-Avoidance). Usually between mother and child, husband and wife, owner and pet, etc.). The sister throws herself upon her brother with a great cry, whereupon the prince springs up and embraces her. But the magic ring also fits the finger of the witch’s daughter (Motif T101.6.1.1&; “Bride (sweetheart) in the likeness of groom’s sister”), so the prince marries her and gives his sister to a suitable husband.

(Jung 1966, 222–224)

According to Jung, the four dolls in the four corners of the room prevent the commission of incest by forming the marriage quadrature (an exchange marriage involving two pairs of cross-siblings). Thus, by putting four in place of two, the four dolls form a magic simulacrum that prevents the incest by removing the sister to the underworld, where she discovers her alter ego. It may also be argued that she goes through the process of individuation, emerging as an independent person.

Jung elaborates further that the incest constitutes an evil fate, motivated by “kinship libido.” Thus, incest cannot easily be avoided. He also asserts that the practical solution is a lesser form of still endogamous marriage: “The best compromise is therefore a first cousin. There is no hint of this in our fairy-stories, but the marriage quadrato is clear enough” (Jung 1966, 224).

This endogamous arrangement is considered the preferred form of marriage among many groups, especially Arabs—regardless of religious persuasion.

Two tales from Yemen, one narrated by an elderly Jewish woman and the other by a young, Muslim female university student, project the same incestuous trend and conclude in a manner comparable to Jung’s “marriage quadrato” (El-Shamy 1997, 28; 1999, 299–304, no. 39).
A brother and sister live alone. The brother marries; his wife doesn’t like his sister. She gives the sister something to eat and the sister becomes pregnant. The brother discovers the pregnancy through his wife. The wife and the brother bury the sister alive. A palm tree grows where she was buried. The tree helps women with their laundry; but it humiliates the brother’s wife. At the insistence of the wife the palm tree is cut down. The tree transforms itself into an egg. An old woman finds the egg, takes it, and the sister secretly comes out of it to help the old woman with housework; then returns into the egg. The old woman discovers her. Meanwhile the brother accuses his wife of killing his sister, kicks her out and wanders penniless around the world. He searches the city where his sister is. The brother works for the king. “The brother [...] sees his sister” and falls in love with her. He asks the king for the girl in marriage. The king arranges for the two to wed. An angel warns the sister that she is about to marry her brother; she requests a number of beds to be made of various materials. The brother is about to consummate the marriage with her and each bed says, “How can one marry his sister [...]” Finally the sister reveals her identity; they return to their old home. The sister marries another man and the brother marries a good wife. (El-Shamy 1979, 28; Noy 1963, 129–131)

In both Yemeni versions, the sister on the wedding night leads her brother coquettishly—fully cognizant of his identity—from one bed to another. The beds speak up and wonder: “How could marriage between a brother and his sister be legitimate!”—designated as Motif N681.3.0.2.§, “Incest accidentally averted: talking furniture (bed, chair, ornament, etc.).” After this extended seductive act, the sister tells her brother the truth. He gives up his plans to marry his sister and both return to their paternal home where each marries someone else.

THE BROTHER-SISTER MOTIF IN MYTHOLOGY

Union between cross-siblings (opposite sex) seems to provide an archetypal answer to the dilemma of how human life multiplied after the creation by a creator of the first human pair (Motif A1270, “Primal human pair”). Ancient Egyptian, Greek, Hebrew, Arab, and numerous other groups espoused sacred ideologies based on this “sinful” principle. More recently, some contemporary Christian writers seem to reconcile themselves to this notion (archetype).

In ancient Egypt, Geb-and-Net, Osiris-and-Isis, and Set-and-Nephthys are examples of divine brother-sister marriages (Ions 1968). In certain cases, love between the twins is reported to have been prenatal (Motif A164.1.0.1.§, “Twin sister and brother in love even when in mother’s womb”) (El-Shamy 1995). A contemporary folk theme that may date back to ancient times is “Twin infant sister and brother nourished by sucking each other’s thumbs” (Motif T611.1.2.§); this motif recurs in many Egyptian renditions of AT 707 (El-Shamy 1980, 65, no. 9).

Ordinary mortals copied the practice of their deities and divine kings, whose universal custom in Egypt was for the brother to marry one of his sisters. The custom of these marriages, which to us appear incestuous, was so firmly seated that the Ptolemies eventually complied with it. The celebrated Cleopatra had her two brothers in succession as husbands.

In Greek mythology, Zeus, god of the sky and ruler of the Olympian gods, is also husband to his sister Hera, with whom he fathers Ares, the god of war; Hebe, the goddess of youth; Hephastus, the god of fire; and Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth. It is reported that Zeus and Hera had their first sexual experience together as youths while still living in their parents’ abode; Zeus compares subsequent intercourse with Hera to that first encounter (Motif J10.1.18, “Unforgettable first experience”; J10.1.1.2.§, “Unforgettable first intercourse”; El-Shamy 1995, 2004, 1088).

Other famous Greek brother-sister couples are Oceanus, who marries his sister Tethys, and Cronus, who is wed to his sister Rhea.

In Metamorphoses, the Roman poet Ovid (born in 43 BCE) presents a series of narratives about the history of the world. One of the myths is about Byblis and her twin brother Caunus. The cross-siblings are the children of Miletus and Tragusa, who live on Crete. Byblis falls into a consuming love for her brother Caunus. When her erotic love is not welcomed, she writes him a letter citing many gods who were siblings and together as husband and wife. The brother, disgusted with the idea of incest, flees to foreign lands. But the lovesick sister, in tears, pursues him across many countries. When she arrives in Phoenicia, her torrential tears dissolve her, and she turns into a spring. The city in which this transformation takes place is named Byblis after her (Ovid 1955, 215–221).

According to the Shinto creation myth, the islands of Japan are the “children” of the copulating brother-and-sister deities Izanagi and Izanami, who also give birth to the sun goddess Amateratsu, mythical progenitor of the Yamato line of emperors. These two siblings are descended from seven pairs of brothers and sisters who appeared after heaven and earth had separated out of chaos. A mighty bridge floats between the heavens and the primordial oceans; standing on this, Izanagi and Izanami stir the waters below with a jeweled spear to form the first land mass. Their union gives birth to the islands of Japan and to various deities.

What may now be termed “incestuous” cross-sibling unions account for the beginning of life among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Religious texts say that Adam and Eve were the only human first pair that God created; they lived as man and wife and multiplied.
A mythical account of the origin of Satan (Eblis, Lucifer) as a failure to comply with a paternal command for brother-sister marriages appears in the *Thousand Nights and a Night*. So radically different is this account from the Qur’anic and biblical dogma that no oral rendition or other written counterparts of it have so far been reported. Moreover, it seems that virtually all literary commentators ignore the significance of its incestuous nature. The story is told by the mythical character Sakhr, the king of jinn, to a human seeker of the ultimate truth. This episode may be titled “Eblis: Disobedient Son Transformed”:

As for us [jinn, said Sakhr], the Almighty Maker created us of the fire; for the first that he made in Jannah were two of His host, whom he called Khalif and Malit. Now Khalif was fashioned in the likeness of a lion, with a tail like a tortoise twenty years’ journey in length and ending in a member masculine; while Malit was like a pied wolf whose tail was furnished with a member feminine. Then Almighty Allah commanded the tails to couple and copulate and do the deed of kind, and of them were born serpents and scorpions, whose dwelling is in the fire, that Allah may therewith torment those whom He casteth therein; and these increased and multiplied. Then Allah commanded the tails of Khalif and Malit to couple and copulate a second time, and the tail of Malit conceived by the tail of Khalif and bore fourteen children, seven male and seven female, who grew up and intermarried one with other. All were obedient to their sire, save one who disobeyed him and was changed into a worm which is Iblis. (Burton 1885–1888, 5:319)

Another curious aspect of this myth is that it endorses twin brother-sister marriage and metes out humiliating punishment for the one who opposes it (an example of Jung’s “kinship libido”). In this respect, the myth contradicts earlier accounts of first marriages among the children of Adam and Eve. The Qur’an mentions only the incident of fratricide due to acceptance of an offering from one brother but not from the other (Qur’an 5:27). Yet pararellogramic literature argued that first marriages were deemed legitimate only between cross twins. The first murder was argued to have been a fratricide committed over tabooed marriage to one’s own twin sister—Motif A1297.1§, “Cain killed Abel in order not to lose own twin sister as wife” (El-Shamy 1993).

Some evidence suggests that an East European (Hungarian) tale may have been derived from our present narrative-complex (or vice versa). The tale belongs to AT 613C*. *Brother and Sister Heal the King*, although *The Types of the Folktale* ignores the brother-sister incestuous theme and stresses the healing aspect. It may be presumed that characterizing this plot as a subtype of AT 613 was done on the basis of the shared theme of magic healing, rather than the flight of brother and sister to escape incest. Additionally, the classifier (Thompson) perceived the female protagonist as a daughter to a father rather than as a sister to a brother. Consequently, this classification is nonsystemic. However, the description of the contents of AT 613C* provides evidence of its presumed link (or parallelism) to our present narrative-complex.

A king with seven sons and seven daughters wants his sons to marry his daughters but the youngest son and daughter do not agree to this plan and leave. They sleep under a tree. The daughter has a dream about an ill king who could be healthy again if he takes a bath in the water coming from that tree.’’ [The sister (daughter) masks as a man and, along with her brother, heals the king, who marries her afterward.] (Aarne and Thompson 1961/1964).

The tale type and the myth share the following pivotal themes: the number of brothers and sisters, the demand by the father, the rejection of the incestuous marriage by the children, and the healing of the king (which appears at the close of the *Thousand Nights and a Night* narrative-complex) (Burton 1885–1888, 5:389–394). However, the determination as to whether AT 613C* is actually related to our myth or whether the similarities are archetypal (incidental) must await further research.

From the above, it may be concluded that the brother-sister theme is underrepresented in folkloristic theory and literature. This fact reflects a corresponding sketchy representation in psychological theory, especially the Freudian psychoanalytic and neopsychoanalytic approaches.

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN LITERATURE**

In literature, androgynous mergings often occur between male and female twins. As pointed out above, opposite-sex twins are a recurring symbol in literary works: “Throughout European literature, from the Greeks onward, the ‘identity’ of these twins has been continually stressed, as have in more outspoken periods, the incestuous impulses of the pair” (Freeman 1988, 55–56). In addition to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Freeman points out that in book 3 of the epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590–1596), Edmund Spenser describes opposite-sex twins enclosed in their mother’s womb displaying an urge toward union with each other (Motif A164.1.0.1§, “Twin sister and brother in love even when in mother’s womb”). Another literary work that portrays the strong attraction between opposite-sex twins is John Barth’s novel *The Sot-Weed Factor*, in which Anna is driven toward fusion with her twin brother, Ebenezer. In a manner that recalls the love letter that the Roman Byblis of Crete wrote to her brother, Anna evokes a comparison from Burlington (another character in the story) with Aristophanes’ version of the ancient split of the whole into parts that eternally seek each other.
Your sister is a driven and fragmented spirit, friend; the one half of her soul yearns but to fuse itself with yours, whilst the other half recoils at the thought. It's neither love nor lust she feels for you, but a prime and massey urge to coalescence. . . . As Aristophanes maintained that male and female are displaced moieties of an ancient whole, and wooing but their vain attempt at union, so Anna . . . repines willy-nilly for the dark identity that twins share in the womb, and for the well-nigh fatal closeness of their childhood. (Barth 1960, 117)

In a similar manner, the hero of Lord Byron's "Manfred" (1817) sees his own likeness in his twin sister, for whom he expresses a passionate love. And Thomas Mann's story "Walsungensblut" ("Blood of the Walsung," 1921) depicts Siegmund and Sieglinde, a brother and sister from a rich family who find themselves in sexual embrace (Freeman 1988, 55–56).

Arabic literature is replete with expressions of affection and strong bonding between brother and sister. Perhaps one of the most celebrated examples is the work of the pre-Islamic (mid-seventh century CE) poet nicknamed al-Khansa'. She lost her brother, Sakhr (no relation to Sakhr the king of jinn mentioned above) and spent the remainder of her life eulogizing him in heart-wrenching poems (Motif P253.9.1§, "Sister becomes insane due to death of brother. (The Khansa' Syndrome)"); Type 917.1§, Insanity (Death) from Death of Beloved Sibling (Brother or Sister). (The Khansa' Syndrome); El-Shamy, 2004, 1020).

Nagib Mahfuz, the Egyptian Nobel-laureate for literature (1988), gives a modern example of the brother-sister bond. The setting is Cairo across three generations, starting in the 1910s and concluding with the 1950s. In his autobiographical trilogy, the novelist presents himself as the family's youngest child, Kamal; he has an awe-evoking father, a kind and loving mother, two brothers, and two sisters, Khadejah and 'Aishah. Mahfuz describes Kamal's love for his sister 'Aishah, closest to him in age.

Kamal's love and emotional attachment to 'Aishah were deep. . . . He responded to her love with love to the extent that he would not drink a swallow of water out of the water pot without inviting her to drink ahead of him so that he would place his lips on the spot which had been wetted by the moisture of her mouth. (El-Shamy 1976, 58–59)

POPULAR CULTURE

A Japanese motion picture, The Profound Desire of the Gods (1968), which takes place on a remote rural island of Japan, illustrates the centrality of the brother-sister theme in the native traditional culture. The prominent director Shohi Imamura is reported to have used the Shinto creation myth (cited above) as an emotional backdrop for the film. The plot's protagonists include a brother and sister who are lovers; the sister is regarded as a shamaness by her tribe. In local legend, a similar union spawned the island's early population. Kim argues that in older times such an incestuous union would not have been seen as a serious violation of social mores. Currently, however, the spread of modern values makes the lovers' fellow tribal folk ashamed of their old customs. Consequently, they persecute the siblings for breaking the incest taboo.

In the motion picture trilogy Star Wars, The Empire Strikes Back, and The Return of the Jedi (1977, 1980, 1983), Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker seem to be falling in love. However, their love cannot be fulfilled for they prove to be brother and sister (Motif T415.4, "Two lovers give each other up when they learn that they are brother and sister").

In The Shipping News (2002), a sister exacts revenge against her brother who had raped her during their early youth (Motif T471.9.1§, *"Incestuous rape: brother (sober) rapes his sister")*. She pours his cremated remains into a toilet and relieves herself on them (Motif E478.1§, *"Indignities to corpse (by living person)"").

CONCLUSION

Ernest Jones argues that Freud's adherence to the Oedipal tale limited his vision into the abundant myths that told of the brother-sister marriage as well as the love and Eros between opposite-sex siblings (Jones 1949, 157–158). This psychoanalytic dominance has also been characteristic of the study of folklore, where the Oedipal school of interpretation allows for no alternate approaches.

It has been shown in sociocultural context from Ireland that certain family living conditions are conducive to the occurrence of actual incest. However, when compared to parent-child (Oedipal) incest, brother-sister incest proved to be "free of gross personality disorder, neurosis or psychosis" (Lukianowicz 1972, 309); this finding may also be extended to Egypt (El-Shamy 1981, 320). Therefore, Jung's archetypes related to the sister and brother theme, though developed independently of actual social interactive conditions, offer a more adaptive system for dealing with kinship in general and the brother-sister bond in particular.

Hasan El-Shamy

See also: Incest; Individuation; Hermaphroditism.
REFERENCES


Gammer, Frances B. 1901. Sister's Son. Oxford: “ privately printed from an English Miscellany Presented to Dr. Farnell.”


Step Relatives

Motif P280

“Stepmothers hate their husband’s children.” This proverbial statement from the Iraqi folktale “The Little Red Fish and the Clog of Gold” (Bushnuq 1986, 181; AT 510A, Cinderella) expresses a sentiment found in thousands of tales around the world. There are many reasons why fairy-tale villains are so often cast as stepmothers (P282, “Stepmother”).

To begin with, mortality rates were very high in the preindustrial times when most traditional fairy tales were evolving. Economic pressure to remarry quickly following the death of a spouse led to many matrimonial mismatches, or at least the expectations of the twenty-first century would label them as such. Substantial differences in emotional makeup and age were common. For a child to have a stepparent was not unusual, and often the replacement parent would be quite unlike the deceased one. But why are the female stepparents, rather than their male counterparts, so often cast as villains by traditional storytellers? This familiar observation is at first view all the more puzzling when one considers that household stories were transmitted primarily by women. One explanation is socialization, for in a strongly patriarchal society no one, not even in a fantasy tale, would be comfortable laying too much blame on male characters. Further, by placing other mother figures in bad light, the female storytellers could make themselves look good by comparison. These tales of abusive females also serve as a warning to the man of the house, who—given the realities of mortality—soon might be looking for a new wife.

Moreover, these accounts may reflect the workings of a “selfish gene,” to quote sociobiologist Richard Dawkins (1976), theorizing about an inherent tendency for all living things to promote their own genetic material to future generations. If true, such theories would explain a natural proclivity for a stepparent to favor his or her own offspring over those of a new spouse. Recent sociological studies indicate that this may be the case. See, for example, Daly and Wilson (1999), Case and Paxson (2000), and Case, McLanahan, and Lin (2000).

Whether or not the evil stepmothers of folklore reflect a past or present reality, they serve a number of important psychological functions, as pointed out by Bruno Bettelheim (1976, 66–73) and others. Fairy tales provide a socially acceptable outlet for the venting of pent-up aggressive feelings toward authority figures. Thus Hansel and Gretel (KHM 15; AT 327A, Hansel and Gretel) kill the witch who has both nurtured and terrorized them; then, upon returning home, they discover that their stepmother has died. In other tales, the previously victimized stepchildren directly witness (or perhaps even order) the execution of their stepmothers, and these are not gentle deaths, as illustrated by a few more examples from the Grimms’ collection. Snow-White’s stepmother is forced to dance herself to death wearing red-hot iron shoes (KHM 53; AT 709, Snow-White). Her counterpart in “Little Brother and Little Sister” (KHM 11; AT 450, same title) is burned to death. The murderous stepmother in “The Juniper Tree” (KHM 47; AT 720, My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me. The Juniper Tree) is crushed by a millstone, dropped on her by a bird, a reincarnation of the stepson she killed earlier in the tale.

A stepmother’s own daughter, whom she favors at the expense of the heroine, often shares the older woman’s punishment. In the Grimms’ “The White Bride and the Black Bride” (KHM 135; AT 403A, The Wishes), the evil stepmother and stepsister are stripped naked, placed in a barrel studded with nails, then pulled through the countryside by a horse. Two tales from the Orient are even more drastic. Both the Vietnamese “Tâm and Cam” (Thang and Lawson 1993, 75–89; AT 510A, Cinderella) and the Indian “Teja and Teji” (Ramanujan 1991, 219–224; AT 511, One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes) end with the execution of the scheming stepsisters, whose flesh is then fed to their conspiracy partners, their own mothers.

In addition to providing graphic fantasies of revenge on authority figures, tales about wicked stepmothers also assist children in addressing their ambivalent feelings toward their closest parent, who is at once both nurturer and disciplinarian. By placing a hateful being in the revered office of motherhood, storytellers provide a character with two mutually contradictory parts, thus helping children cope with the often chaotic demands of growing up. This ambiguity is reflected in countless folktales and is especially obvious in some of the Grimms’ best-known stories. Particularly revealing
is their characterization of the woman who badgers her husband into abandoning Hansel and Gretel in the woods. In the Grimms’ original version of this tale (1812), the shrewish woman is unambiguously identified as the children’s mother, not their stepmother. However, in their final version (1856), they introduce her as a Sistemutter (stepmother) but then proceed to call her Mutter (mother) twice in the text, and simply Frau (wife or woman) fourteen times.

Another infamous stepmother in the Grimms’ collection also began her fairy-tale career as a mother. In the first edition of “Little Snow-White” (1812), the jealous queen who tries to kill the beautiful princess is clearly identified as the heroine’s mother. In the second edition (1819), the Grimms added the explanation that Snow-White’s mother died during childbirth and that the jealous queen was the father’s second wife, hence Snow-White’s stepmother. Yet another ambiguous mother-stepmother is found in the Grimms’ “The Twelve Brothers” (KHM 9; AT 451, The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers). Here the evildoer is the heroine’s mother-in-law, the king’s mother. She is called “mother” until the end of the tale when her perfidy is revealed, and then, we read, “the wicked stepmother was brought before the court and placed in a barrel filled with boiling oil and poisonous snakes, and she died an evil death.” It seems, in this story at least, that the word “stepmother” has been redefined as “unworthy mother.” This extended definition is authenticated in the dictionaries of several European languages. For example, Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (1966) lists among the definitions of stepmother, “one that fails to give proper care or attention.” No corresponding negative definition for stepfather is given.

A child’s ambivalent feelings toward maternal authority are further demonstrated when one compares different versions of the same tale where storytellers have assigned the same role to different mother figures. Three Type 511 stories, all with essentially the same plot, illustrate this point. In the Grimms’ “One-Eyes, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes” (KHM 130), the villain is the heroine’s mother. In “The Wicked Stepmother” from Kashmir (Knowles 1893), the title indicates, the stepmother. And in “Teja and Teji” from India (Ramanujan 1991, 219–224), the villain is the father’s elder wife in a polygynous marriage.

Almost every tale featuring an abusive stepmother asks implicitly, “Why does the abused child’s father permit this mistreatment?” But this question is rarely posed directly, much less answered. The German proverb, “Whoever has a stepmother also has a stepfather” (Wander 1867, 4, col. 854) refers to a perceived inability or unwillingness of fathers to curb stepmothers’ cruelty, a major subtext in fairy tales, and one that for the most part remains unmentioned. In too many tales to enumerate, the widowed father, having taken a new wife, simply disappears from the storyteller’s view, and the conflict between the new mistress of the house and her stepchildren unfolds apparently without his knowledge and certainly without his intervention. One notable exception is the Russian tale “Baba Yaga” (Afanas’ev 1975, 363–365, AT 313H*; Flight From the Witch), where the heroine’s father, after establishing his wife’s guilt, skips her to death.

A curious detail in many folktales about wicked stepmothers is the matchmaking role of the father’s daughter, thus laying part of the guilt for future abuse on the victim herself. An extreme example is found in “The Cat Cinderella” from Basile’s Pentamerone (1932) (1:6; AT 510A). As the story opens, the heroine kills her cruel stepmother, hoping afterward to make a match between her father and a more amiable woman. But her second stepmother turns out to be even more abusive than was the first, and to make matters worse, she brings into the marriage six daughters of her own that she had kept in hiding until then.

A number of tales, including the Grimms’ “Three Little Men in the Woods” (KHM 13; AT 403B, 480), begin with the depiction of two girlfriends, one the daughter of a widow, the other the daughter of a widower. The widow approaches the man’s daughter with the straightforward proposal, “Tell your father that I would like to marry him, and then you shall wash yourself in milk every morning and drink wine, but my own daughter shall wash herself in water and drink water.” The heroine convinces her father, who is at first very reluctant, to marry the widow. Predictably, the stepmother keeps none of her promises, instead viciously turning against her stepdaughter, while favoring her own daughter at every turn. Also predictably, the stepmother’s and stepdaughter’s cruelty is repaid in kind. At the story’s end, the king (who in the meantime has married the heroine) places the two evil ones into a barrel pierced with nails and rolls them down a hill into water.

In keeping with the “selfish gene” theory mentioned above, the cruelty of fairy-tale stepmothers is not entirely arbitrary. Typically a stepmother’s abuse is motivated by her attempts to promote the welfare of her own offspring, usually one or more daughters, the heroine’s stepsisters (P284). In her mind, and probably rightly so, her own daughters are in competition with their stepsister for limited rewards, typically a wealthy and powerful husband. Most Cinderella stories (AT 510A), the world’s most popular folk tale, center around such a competition between stepsisters. Most versions of “The Black and the White Bride” (AT 403, 403A, 403B) and “Little Brother and Little Sister” (AT 450) also feature stepsisters competing for a husband. In each of these tale types, the evil stepsister (with the help of her mother) is
willing to kill her virtuous counterpart, but the murdered heroine is miraculously brought back to life, and her stepsister and stepmother are duly punished. Another tale type featuring the competition between stepsisters is “The Kind and the Unkind Girls” (AT 480), but here the competition is more for wealth than for marriage, with the reward, as one would expect, going to the kind and generous girl, rather than to her unkind and selfish stepsister.

In preindustrial households, competition among male children must have been just as fierce as that among their female counterparts. There are a great many international folktales depicting fraternal rivalry, but the antagonists are virtually always identified as brothers, not stepbrothers (P283). Similarly, stepfathers (P282) play a much smaller role in traditional folktales than do stepmothers. One notable exception is the Gypsy tale “The Little Bull-Calf” from England (Jacobs n.d., 186–191; AT 511A, 300), which begins when the hero’s father dies, “and his mother got married again to a man that turned out to be a very vicious stepfather, who couldn’t abide the little boy.” At the story’s end, the hero marries a princess and takes over the kingdom, and “then his stepfather came and wanted to own him, but the young king didn’t know such a man.” Extrapolating from this and previously discussed tales, one might conclude that vicious fairy-tale stepmothers are tortured to death, whereas their male counterparts are merely disowned.

D.L. Ashliman

REFERENCES