Captives and Fugitives
Abductions

Motifs R10–R99

Listed under Captives and Fugitives, motifs of kidnapping or abduction by supernatural creatures are numerous. Whether the abductors are gods, spirits, fairies, dwarfs, goblins, witches, or aliens from outer space, there are striking similarities. The seduced or captured abductee is always taken to another place, used or manipulated in some way, and, if released, returned in an altered form or with continuing aftereffects. Abductions by humans are also a part of folklore and literature, but Thompson did not include many motifs about human abductors in this chapter.

Perhaps the earliest forms of abduction are those associated with shamanism or priestly initiation rites, which may be compared to magical transformative journeys. Shamans, who gain power from their intercourse with the spirit world, are taken out of their bodies and into a spirit world where, in trance or semitrance, they are tested and tried, returning to the ordinary world with new powers and a new way of life. Abduction can thus be seen as a form of spirit or even demonic possession.

HELLISH ABDUCTIONS

An abduction motif that can be treated in an unusually humorous manner is R11.2, “Abduction by devil”; R11.2.1: “Devil carries off wicked people.” An example is the Scots ballad “The Farmer’s Curst Wife” (Child 1965, 278). The devil approaches a man plowing his fields and announces, “One of your family I must have now.” When the devil says that he wants the farmer’s wife, the man replies, “O welcome, good Satan, with all my heart! I hope you and
she will never more part.” The devil hoists the wife on his back and runs down to hell. Of course, she is such a shrew that the devil ends up bringing her back to her husband, remarking, “I have been a tormentor the whole of my life, / But I ne’er was tormented so as with your wife” (Child 1965, 108, version A). This song was brought to the United States, where numerous variants were collected.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, one of the most famous and haunting images from Greek myth is the abduction to the underworld of the maiden Persephone, who is grabbed by Hades, lord of the dead, as she is gathering flowers in a meadow (R10.1, “Princess (maiden) abducted”). Another crucial abduction in Greek myth is that of Helen, wife of King Menelaus, by Paris, which is the cause of the Trojan War (some scholars including Thompson, characterize the act as an elopement rather than an abduction (R225, “Elopement”).

Abduction of a maiden by a monster or an ogre (R11.1) is an important motif in several tale types (AT 301, 301A, 301B, 302, 311, 321). A representative tale, “Fitcher’s Bird” (“Fitcher’s Vogel,” KHM 46; Type 311, Rescue By the Sister), was collected by the Grimms: “There was once a wizard who used to take the form of a poor man, and went to houses and begged, and caught pretty girls. No one knew whither he carried them, for they were never seen more” (Grimms’ Household Tales). One day the wizard appeared at the home of three sisters. “He begged for a little food, and when the eldest daughter came out and was just reaching him a piece of bread, he did but touch her, and she was forced to jump into his basket. Thereupon he hurried away with long strides, and carried her away into a dark forest to his house, which stood in the midst of it.” He tells her that she may go into any room in the house but one (C611, “Forbidden chamber”). When she leaves the house, she enters the room and finds “a great bloody basin . . . in the middle of the room, and therein lay human beings, dead and hewn to pieces, and hard by was a block of wood, and a gleaming axe lay upon it.” For disobeying his command, she suffers the same fate as the others she had found, and the wizard goes back to her house and takes her middle sister, who also ends up in the basin, and then her youngest sister, who manages to outwit the wizard, restore her sisters (E30, “Resurrection by arrangement of members. Parts of a dismembered corpse are brought together and resurrection follows” [a particularly ancient motif in world mythology]), and effect their rescue and his demise.

An ancient example of Motif R11.1 (”Princess (maiden) abducted by monster (ogre)”) is found in the Ramayana (the oldest Sanskrit text dates from between the second century BCE and the second century CE). Sita, wife of the god/prince Rama, is abducted by the demon Ravana, who keeps her captive on the island of Lanka for many years. With an army of monkeys, Rama is able to kill Ravana and rescue Sita. Doubting Sita’s chastity despite her avowals, Ravana subjects her to an ordeal by fire (H221, “Ordeal by fire.

Suspected person must pass through or jump over fire to determine guilt or innocence”). Sita “called on the fire to protect her, and entered the blazing flame; but the god of Fire placed her in Rama’s lap, assuring him that Sita had always been pure in thought as well as deed. Rama reinstated her, but when he doubted her again she disappeared forever back into the earth” (Doniger 2002, 105).

In some stories, it is the hero who abducts a princess, for example in Faithful John (AT 516). Versions of this story have been collected all over Europe as well as in Turkey, India, the Middle East, South America, and the West Indies. With the help of his faithful servant, a king abducts a princess after he has fallen helplessly in love with her portrait in a room of his father’s castle that he was warned not to enter (C611, “Forbidden chamber”). Mozart’s opera The Abduction From the Seraglio (1781) (based upon the libretto by Gottlieb Stephanie) features a hero abducting a princess from a Turkish harem, after she had been abducted by pirates and sold to a pasha (R12.1, “Maiden abducted by pirates (robbers)”).

ABDUCTION BY ANIMALS

Abduction by all manner of animals occurs with great frequency in the world’s folklore. The Motif Index lists the following animal abductors: snake (R13.4.1), tiger (R13.1.4), wolf (R13.1.5), monkey (R13.1.7), rabbit (R13.1.8), leopard (R13.1.9), elephant (R13.1.10), fox (R13.1.11), and bird (R13.3). The motif of being carried off by a bird is particularly common. In the Grimms’ tale of “Snow-White and Rose-Red” (KHM 161), the protagonists rescue a dwarf whom an eagle tries to abduct: “Now they noticed a large bird hovering in the air, flying slowly round and round above them: it sank lower and lower, and at last settled near a rock not far off. Directly afterwards they heard a loud, piteous cry. They ran up and saw with horror that the eagle had seized their old acquaintance the dwarf, and was going to carry him off” (Grimms’ Household Tales). In “Fundevelog” (“Bird-founding,” KHM 51), a forester finds a child crying in the top of a tree, deposited there by a bird who had abducted it from its mother. A man is carried off to a cliff by a giant bird in a number of North American Indian tales (Thompson 1929, 318).

In Greek mythology, Ganymede is carried off to Mount Olympus by an eagle sent by Zeus, who had fallen in love with the youth when he saw him tending his flocks (R13.3.2, “Eagle carries off youth”). When Zeus falls in love with Europa, he changes himself into a bull and carries her on his back to Crete. In the Eskimo tale of “The Eagle and Whale Husbands,” which is widespread from Greenland to Siberia, two girls are playing with the bones of an eagle and a whale, respectively, and each is carried off by that animal. The girl abducted
by the eagle makes a string from the sinews of the little birds he brings her to eat and she slides down from his nest and escapes; the girl held by the whale is rescued by her two brothers who come for her in a boat (Thompson 1929, 160–161). The latter’s escape involves the obstacle flight (D672), in which she throws objects behind as they flee in order to distract and slow down the pursuer.

A story from the Tahltan Indians of Canada tells how a woman whose husband caught a killer whale cuts it up and then, as she puts her hands in the water to wash away the blood, she is pulled underneath and taken to the underwater kingdom of the killer whales. The husband enlists the aid of a shark to help him rescue his wife (Thompson 1929, 162–163).

ABDUCTION BY FAIRIES

One of the most widespread categories of abduction is by fairies (F320, “Fairies carry people away to fairyland”). Tales of captives taken to fairyland are especially prominent in the British Isles. Mortals, particularly attractive young women or men, are detained in a subterranean otherworld, either because they are entrapped by a fairy suitor, venture into a fairy hill, or are inveigled into eating fairy food or drink (C211.1, “Tabu: eating in fairyland”). Infants are most frequently stolen immediately after their birth and before baptism, while their mothers are sometimes taken to serve as wet nurses to weak fairy offspring. Sometimes human women are used to serve as midwives to fairy females, for whom childbirth is notoriously difficult.

According to several of the Irish folklorists, young men are often kidnaped for their physical strength, to serve as bond-slaves and as participants in sports and faction-battles, since the elfin peoples are thought to be strong in brain but weak in brawn. However, medieval accounts of Thomas the Rhymcr and similar figures suggest other, more typical motives. For example, Thomas is seduced and abducted by the beautiful Queen of Elfland, in part because of his poetic and musical skills and in part because she desires him. When returned to earth, he is an old man (time in fairyland differs from that on earth) but one with a special gift: he cannot tell a lie. More unvarnished and contemporary is the tale of John M’Namara, a man who spends “Twenty Years with the Good People.” On a trip to Limerick to buy some leather for brogues, John, a shoemaker, vanishes. When he returns twenty years later, he announces to his wife and grown son that he cannot tell them where he has been, that he lacks the power to do so. Everyone knows that he has been with “the good people”—when they see the strange and beautiful shoes and boots he now can make (Knox 1917, 215–216). The fairies are also suspected of abducting the learned clergyman Robert Kirk, the seventeenth-century author of The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies, holding him within a fairy hill, as punishment for revealing their secrets.

More frequently, though, the victims are young women taken to be brides of fairy kings and princes—though mortals think them vanished, tranceled, asleep, or prematurely dead. Sometimes, by following elaborate rituals, their friends or lovers can reclaim them, but more often, they remain in the other world. An instance of the former pattern is the Scottish tale of the “Stolen Lady,” in which a Highlander encountering a troop of fairies is suspicious about a bundle they carry. Making them exchange gifts with him, he discovers that the prize is a beautiful English lady, who lives with him for many years until found by her Saxon husband, who had thought her dead and buried (Keightley 1850, 391–392). In a similar story from Denmark, a smith rescues a woman from a troll and restores her and her newborn twins to her husband (Keightley 1850, 392).

Nursing mothers are also in demand to suckle fairy and half-breed babies, and are in special danger between childbirth and churching. Sometimes the abduction is intercepted, sometimes the victim is successfully restored (usually after a number of years, which she does not know had passed), but often the attempt at rescue fails. “The Lothian Farmer’s Wife” is typical. Here, though the kidnapped wife repeatedly visits her children at night, telling them and her farmer husband how to rescue her, her spouse is not courageous enough to seize her from the trooping, noisy cavalcade of fairies (Briggs 1977, 62–63). However, mortal midwives to the fairies are almost always returned.
But it is babies and young and beautiful children that the fairies are most apt to steal. The thought is that such children are necessary to improve the fairy breed, since fairy women have much trouble in conceiving and in childbirth. Some people believed that since the fairies have to pay a tithe to the devil every seven years, they prefer to use human children as sacrifices rather than their own. Still others suggested that since the fairies’ fate at Judgment Day is uncertain, they need mortals to stand up and plead for them. Whatever the reason, accounts of the theft of babies are widespread over the British Isles, France, Germany, and Scandinavia. Sometimes an aged fairy, feeble elf, wooden log or stock, or a “changeling” is substituted, but often the human child is simply taken (F321.1, “Changeling. Fairy steals child from cradle and leaves fairy substitute”). Numerous accounts of changelings and fairy thefts may be found in the works of the Victorian English folklorists, in the popular press, and especially in Irish prose and poetry, including that of William Butler Yeats (1969). The frequency and geographical spread of such kidnap accounts indicate a widespread cultural anxiety about the fate of young children. In cases where no changeling substitute is left, the human child is seldom restored; if it is returned, it is deformed, insane, or simply “changed.”

ABDUCTION BY ALIENS

As traditional belief dwindled or was rationalized, kidnapping fairies from the otherworld became aliens from outer space who had much the same function and nature. The fairy-fascination subsided (though it did not die) in the 1920s, but before it was completely over the new kidnappers had appeared on the scene (F378, “Inhabitants of another planet (extra-terrestrial) visit earth”). As early as 1895, Colonel H.G. Shaw of California reported to have been nearly ab ducted by a group of pale, thin, seven-foot-tall beings. The colonel believed that the aliens had come to earth to gather human specimens, but that he had escaped because he was too heavy for the fragile creatures to carry (Schnabel 1995, 10).

Multiple abduction cases and research about them really blossomed in the late 1950s and 1960s. Among the first of the many famous or notorious accounts was that of Antonio Villas-Boas, a Brazilian farm worker who insisted that in October 1957 he had been taken aboard a spaceship by short, gray-suited aliens and subjected to a series of physical tests. The culmination of his experience was his seduction-rap e by a nude alien female and the aliens’ harvesting of his sperm in order to improve their stock (Schnabel 1995, 22–23). In 1966, Barney and Betty Hill from New Hampshire were the victims of a similar experience. Experiencing a loss of time, both recollected under hypnosis that they had been abducted to a flying saucer and subjected to sexual experimentation.

Whitley Strieber’s account of his own repeated abductions in Communion, his best seller of 1987, made both the imagery and the experience commonplace in American popular culture. Strieber’s tale of repeated and terrifying kidnappings in which he was paralyzed, carried off by three-foot worker aliens, taken to a mysterious round chamber where his mind was read by larger alien leaders wielding wands and his body sexually probed by a large-eyed alien femme fatale piqued the interest of the American public.

Now very much a part of our popular culture, abduction accounts continue to stream in—supplemented by new alien phenomena such as “circles” and “signs.” It is even possible to purchase UFO abduction insurance, as did the Heaven’s Gate cultists.

Critics relate these stories to the near-death experience, contagious hysteria, or some real but peculiar experiences. Many think that it is linked to dissociative disorders or multiple personality disorders. In people who suffer from these disorders, the boundary between ordinary reality and an alternative state is easily crossed (Schnabel 1995, 122).

It is worth noting, however, how similar UFO abduction tales are to folklore accounts of fairy kidnappings (Bullard 1989). Both involve a loss of time (F377, “Supernatural lapse of time in fairyland. Years seem days”) as well as transport to another world. Both involve capture and examination, resulting in physical and mental change. Both focus on sexual and reproductive functions. Abduction reports often sound like rewrites of older supernatural encounters even to the presence of wands or rods (fairy wands), mysterious lights (fairy lights), the ability of aliens to paralyze (fairy-stroke), and descriptions of the circular, domed chambers to which abductees are taken (fairy hills). Interestingly, the appearance of the aliens, smaller than human, fragile in body, and marked by large hypnotic eyes, is like an updated version of the descriptions of “little people.” Our old fears and fascinations are seemingly still with us; they have simply taken on a more technological and scientific form.

Carole G. Silver

REFERENCES


Unnatural Cruelty