


Unnatural Cruelty
Cruel Parents

Motif 510

*Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales)*, the title selected by the Grimm brothers for their famous collection, was well chosen, but although fairy tales may largely be about and for children, youngsters do not always fare well in these stories. Traditional collections are replete with accounts of innocent children who receive little but blows and scorn from the adults in their lives. These blameless heroes and heroines vindicate themselves as their stories unfold, and this vindication often includes retribution against the adults who tormented them at the beginning. Such stories have an obvious charm for children who feel that they too have been disciplined unfairly, a category that—at one time or another—could include almost everyone. The battered urchins who become kings and the overworked Cinderellas who become queens are appealing role models in a fantasy world, and the retribution episodes give youthful listeners a vicarious release of hostile feelings.

Earlier generations looked askance at “coddling” or “spoiling” a child. A switch stood in the corner of every kitchen, always visible and ready to correct a wayward child. Proverbial “wisdom” defends violence that today would be called abuse: “A father who spares the rod hates his son, but one who loves him keeps him in order” (Proverbs 13:24). And, as the following Dutch proverb suggests, if a parent beats a child, the child deserved it: “The child will tell that it has been whipped, but not why” (Jente 1947, no. 697).

The learning and proving process that parents put their children through can be cruel, “taught to the tune of the hickory stick,” or worse. The Old Norse Saga
of the Volsungs (1990) offers a case in point (ch. 6). Sigyn, doubtless her two young sons' courage, stitches their shirt cuffs to their wrists. Crying out in pain, they fail this ordeal, and a second test as well, so Sigyn has them killed.

An even crueler test, documented in countless legends from northern Europe, is used to determine if a child who fails to grow and develop properly is a changeling, the offspring of fairies, who has been substituted for a human child. There is a benign test: to make the suspected changeling show surprise by doing something unusual, such as brewing beer in eggshells. But the more common method is to torture the child, and if it is a changeling, the fairy parents will rescue it, bringing back the stolen human child in the process. Thomas Croton Croker, writing in 1825 and quoted here by William Butler Yeats (1883, 49), tells how parents who suspect their child might be a changeling are advised "to roast it alive on the griddle, or to burn its nose off with the red hot tongs, or to throw it out in the snow on the roadside" (F321.1.4). History has not recorded how many children, failing to meet their parents' expectations of growth and development, were subjected to such trials, but folklore evidence suggests that it is not a small number.

A century ago, few would have questioned the parents' right to discipline their children however they saw fit or, in earlier epochs, to decide whether or not their offspring should live. Myths and legends are replete with accounts of heroes who as infants were abandoned and left to die of exposure (S301), but who were miraculously rescued. Romulus, Remus, and Oedipus are but three prominent examples. Fairy tales also reflect, if not an acceptance of, then at least a recognition of the reality of infanticide by abandonment. Thus, in Straparola's The Facetious Nights (3-4), when a childless couple decide to adopt a son, "they betook themselves to a certain spot where young children who had been cast off by their parents were often left, and, having seen there one who appeared to them more seemly and attractive than the rest, they took him home with them." Stories of the Hansel and Gretel type (AT 327A), built around the motif of children abandoned because of poverty (S321), are among the most widely distributed and popular of all international folktale.

History suggests that such tales are not merely products of delusional minds and literary fantasy. Belief in the natural right of parents to dispose of their children as they saw fit was apparently a significant obstacle that early Christian missionaries had to overcome in converting Europeans to the new faith. The account of the Christianization of Iceland (in the year 1000) contained in Njáls Saga (Heimskringla 1997, 3:1-220) illuminates the conflict. A Christian priest summarizes the compromise that led to the formal conversion: "This will be the foundation of our law," he said, "that all men in this land are to be Christians and believe in one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and give up all worship of false idols, the exposure of children, and the eating of horse meat. Three years' outlawry will be the penalty for open violations, but if these things are practiced in secret there shall be no punishment" (ch. 105).

Jacob Grimm, in his study of ancient laws, emphasizes that Germanic tribesmen claimed the right to abandon newborn children under numerous circumstances (1899, 1:628-635). Children with birth defects or other disabilities and those of questionable paternity were especially vulnerable. In this regard, children born from a multiple conception were particularly threatened. Not only did twins, and triplets place an additional burden on parents, but past generations also suspected that multiple births were caused by multiple sex partners, thus raising serious paternity questions (S314, "Twins (triplets) exposed").

Charles Perrault's "Little Thumb" (AT 327B), first published in 1697, offers a related example. An impoverished woodcutter and his wife have seven sons between the ages of seven and ten, for the mother, we are told, never had less than two at a time. But "their seven children inconvenienced them greatly," so they abandon the whole lot of them in the woods. However, the boys find shelter with an ogre, from whom the youngest brother steals a fortune, and they all return safely to their now joyful parents.

English folklore's most famous prolific breeder is the old woman who lived in a shoe. Iona and Peter Opie give a number of nursery rhymes about this woman and her brood, all of which depict violence against the children (1991, 434-435). The line "She whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed" is still familiar. A variant current in 1797 is even more drastic: "And she borrow'd a beetle [a heavy wooden pestle], and she knocked 'em all o' the head." A number of versions include the line "And when she went in, she found them all dead." The tone of these rhymes is disingenuously humorous, but playfulness notwithstanding, these rhymes are about the abuse, possibly fatal, of unwanted children.

Whatever was the rationalization for not accepting a child in ancient Europe, Jacob Grimm emphasizes that girls were more often abandoned than were boys (1899, 1:629; Motif S322.1.1, "Father who wanted son exposes (murders) daughter"). Patriarchal societies throughout the ages have placed a higher value on male than on female offspring. Gender-based infanticide is well documented both in fantasy tales and in believed legends. Thus the opening paragraph of the Italian tale "Wormwood" (Calvino 1980, no. 157; AT 882, The Wager on the Wife's Chastity) exhibits a matter-of-fact cruelty that seems quite natural in the medieval world of fairy tales: "Over and over it has been told that once upon a time there was a king and queen. Every time this queen had a baby, it was a girl. The king, who wanted a son, finally lost patience and said, 'If you have one more girl, I shall kill it.'"

Such fairy tales do not differ substantially from their ostensibly more
credible counterparts, legends. The account of the birth of Helga the Fair, the leading female character in the Icelandic Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue (Heinemann 1997, 1: 305–333), offers a compelling example. At the beginning of the story, we read that her father, a powerful chieftain, was “wise, tolerant, and just in all things.” His wisdom, tolerance, and justice notwithstanding, he instructs his pregnant wife, “You are soon going to have a baby. Now if you have a girl, it must be left out to die, but if it is a boy it will be brought up” (ch. 1). However, the episode has a happy ending. The woman does give birth to a girl, but cannot bring herself to abandon the child. Instead, she gives the infant to relatives to raise, telling her husband that his order has been carried out. Years later, the father meets his daughter, and, after learning the truth of her birth and rescue, accepts her lovingly.

In addition to gender-related and poverty-induced infanticide, there is also a large body of folklore describing human sacrifice (most often, children sold for this purpose by their own mothers) as a means of protecting vulnerable buildings (S261, “Foundation sacrifice”). If the folkloric record can be believed, this practice extended into the Christian era in Europe. Consider the following Baltic legend, quoted here in its entirety:

When Christianity was introduced to Rügen, they wanted to build a church in Vilmnitz. However, the builders could not complete their task, because whatever they put up during the day was torn down again by the devil that night. Then they purchased a child, gave it a bread-roll in one hand, a light in the other, and set it in a cavity in the foundation, which they quickly mortared shut. Now the devil could no longer disrupt the building’s progress. It is also said that a child was entombed in the church at Bergen under similar circumstances. (Haas 1903, no. 195)

Another ancient and widespread folktale depicting parental atrocity (but this time with a magical happy ending) is “The Girl without Hands” (AT 706, same title). The Grimms tell the story succinctly (KHM 31). A mysterious stranger offers to make an impoverished miller rich, in exchange for “that which is standing behind your house.” The miller, thinking of his apple tree, agrees, but later he discovers that the stranger was the devil and that the item then standing behind his house was his own daughter. Because of her purity, the devil cannot take the girl, so he threatens the miller, offering to release him only if he will cut off his daughter’s hands. Without hesitating, the father accepts the devil’s bargain and chops off his daughter’s hands (Motif S211, “Child sold (promised to devil) (ogre)”). He then offers to care for her the rest of her life, but she, unwilling to remain with the person who has thus abused her, sets forth alone. In fairytale fashion, she marries a king, who has silver hands made for her; then, with time, God causes her natural hands to grow back. Nothing more is said about the father who cut off his daughter’s hands to save himself.

A child’s mutilation by her own father is a vivid symbol of any unspeakable act. In some versions of this tale, the horrible deed is precipitated, not by a father’s desperate effort to save himself, but by his unsuccessful attempts to seduce his daughter. In their commentary on the Children’s and Household Tales, the Grimms relate another version of this tale in which the father, angered by his daughter’s refusal to marry him, cuts off her hands and her breasts, then sends her into the world to fend for herself (1856, 3:57–58; Motif Q451.1, “Hands cut off as punishment”).

Even more abhorrent to most humans than mutilation is the act of cannibalism, and more than a few folklore sources depict parents eating their own children, usually tricked into doing so by their spouses. An example from Norse mythology is found in The Saga of the Volsungs. Gudrun (known in The Nibelungenlied as Kriemhild) holds her husband Atli (known elsewhere as Attila the Hun) responsible for the death of her brothers. To exact revenge, she seizes her and Atli’s two sons as they play by their beds, slits their throats, then serves their blood, mixed with wine, and their roasted hearts to their unsuspecting father (G61, “Relative’s flesh eaten unwittingly”).

“My mother killed me; my father ate me” are two lines from a folksong sung by Gretchen in Goethe’s Faust (part 1, lines 4412–4420), written about 1774. Essentially the same song is an integral part of a folktale recorded in Low German by the painter Philipp Otto Runge and later incorporated into the Grimms’ Children’s and Household Tales under the title “The Juniper Tree” (KHM 47; AT 720, My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me). The deed behind the song is terrifying. A boy’s stepmother tricks him into leaning into a large chest with the promise of one of the apples inside. She then slams down the lid onto his neck, cutting off his head (Motif S1211, “Murder by slamming down chest-lid”). To hide her crime, she cooks him in a stew, which she feeds to the boy’s unwitting father. The boy appears in a new incarnation as a bird, singing repeatedly, “My mother killed me; my father ate me.” This is, of course, a fairy tale, and by the story’s end the cruel parent is dead, and the boy is restored to his human form.

Although the Grimms’ version of this tale is an indictment of a stepmother’s cruelty, not that of a natural parent, the quoted song—“My mother killed me; my father ate me,” which is integral to most versions of the tale—suggests that in the story’s earliest form it was a mother who committed the murder. Variants of Type 720 tales that do feature mothers as murderers occur in many countries, for example, Austria (Zingerle and Zingerle 1852, no. 12), England (Briggs 1970, 1: 476–477), Scotland (Chambers 1870, 49–51), and North America (Dorson 1967, no. 119). In at least one version, “The Dove” from the Ukraine, father and mother conspire together to kill and eat their son (Olesch 1980, no. 3).

Various motivations prompt these acts of cannibalistic cruelty. In the tales
involving a stepmother, she is motivated by jealousy. In *The Saga of the Volsungs*, the mother kills her children to punish her husband. In “The Satin Frock” (Briggs 1970), the mother kills her daughter as punishment for getting her clean dress dirty, then cooks the girl in a stew to hide the body. In a number of tales, including “Eating the Baby” (Dorson 1967), a woman eats her husband’s dinner while preparing it, then attempts to hide the theft by killing her child and substituting it for the stolen meat. Whatever the motivation behind these acts of murder and cannibalism, these tales reflect the worst fears of a child who perceives himself or herself as being unwanted. Whether the threats thus portrayed were real or only imagined, the wide distribution and longevity of type 720 tales suggest that they must have been very deeply felt.

Throughout the centuries, acts of horror sometimes have prompted, in addition to the expected feelings of disgust, a reaction of humor, perhaps as an expression of denial, by turning the event into a cruel joke. Such “sick jokes” are part of children’s repertoires in many cultures, for example, a sketch collected in Ohio in the 1950s: “But Mommy, I don’t want to go swimming.”—“Shut up, brat, and get back in the bag” (Coffin and Cohen 1974, 42). The present writer recalls an even cruder joke from Idaho, also from the 1950s: “Mommy, Mommy, why am I running in circles?”—“Shut up, or I’ll nail your other foot to the floor.” Stories of cruel parents are not yet extinct.

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See also: Abandoned or Murdered Children; Cannibalism.

REFERENCES


Cruel Spouses

Motif S60

Cruel spouses, especially husbands, are a common fixture in international folktales, and domestic violence against a wife is seldom condemned. One of the rare folktales that criticizes a husband’s arbitrary cruelty toward his wife, while at the same time depicting a woman more clever than her husband, is AT 888A, *The Wife Who Would Not Be Beaten*, from India (Bompas 1909, no. 28).

Told throughout the Indian subcontinent, this tale opens with the matter-of-fact sentence, “There was once a raja’s son who announced that he would marry no woman who would not allow him to beat her every morning and evening.” He finds a woman who agrees to this condition, but when he first raises a stick against her, she chides him, saying that because he has his wealth and position only through inheritance, he does not deserve to beat her until he has personally proven himself in the competitive world. Accepting her challenge, he sets out on a trading expedition, but forthwith loses all his goods, and his freedom as well, to a foreign raja. Learning of his fate, the wife wins back his freedom and his lost goods by engaging his new master in a rigged game of chance. After returning home, the newly freed husband takes up his old despotic habits, only to have his wife remind him of his recent servitude, and that she was the one who rescued him. Having learned this humiliating lesson, he gives up all ideas of beating his wife.

Historically, wife beating has not been considered cruelty, but simply sound family management, according—at least—to the folkloric record, which offers endless examples around the world. Folktale Type 670, *Animal Languages*, as represented by “The Bull and the Ass” from the One Thousand and One Nights (Burton 1885–1888, 1:16–23), graphically depicts this bias.

The tale opens when Allah grants a man the ability to understand the language of animals with the condition that, under penalty of death, he keep this gift a secret. One day, while eavesdropping on a humorous conversation between a bull and a donkey, the man laughs aloud. His wife wants to know what he finds so funny. He responds that it will cost him his life if he tells her, but she persists. He finally decides to give in to her wheedling; then, while making preparations for his death, he overhears a rooster bemoaning the situation with a dog: “I can control fifty wives,” boasts the rooster, “but our master cannot manage one. He could solve his problem easily. He need only beat her until she dies or repents.” The man takes heart from the rooster and beats his wife nearly senseless. She finally says, “I repent. With Allah as a witness, I will never again question you.” Her parents and other members of the household rejoice, and thenceforth the husband and the wife live together the happiest of lives.

One must not assume that this cruel tale, a cornerstone of the *One Thousand and One Nights* frame story, marks a misogynistic bias found only in Arabic culture. Essentially the same story is found in the sacred Jataka tales of Buddhism (vd. 3, no. 386), and in numerous versions scattered throughout the Christian world. It is particularly revealing and sobering to discover this tale (and others similarly promoting wife beating) in English collections prepared specifically for children only three or four generations ago—for example, “The Snow, the Crow, and the Blood” (MacManus 1900, 153–174; AT 507A, *The Monster’s Bride*) and “The Language of Beasts” (Lang 1903, 55–61; AT 670, *The Animal Languages*). In the first story, the hero marries the princess and breaks a blackthorn over her every day for ten days in order to dispossess her of the devil (D712.5, “Disenchantment by beating”).

Although nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folktale publishers frequently apologized to their readers for any hints of vulgarity that might have slipped through the editing (and censorship) process, no such warnings were deemed necessary for stories promoting wife beating. For example, Andrew Lang’s preface to *The Crimson Fairy Book* states specifically that the tales in his collection “are adapted to the needs of British children” (1903, v), but he shows no compunction for offering a story (“The Language of Beasts”) that concludes: “As soon as the man understood this, he . . . seized a stick, and called his wife into the room, saying, ‘Come, and I will tell you what you so much want to know;’ and then he began to beat her with the stick, saying with each blow, ‘It is that, wife, it is that!’ And in this way he taught her never again to ask why he had laughed” (1903, 61).

A survey of novellas and jests from European medieval and Renaissance collections shows how deeply rooted this acceptance of wife beating is in the Western world, to say nothing of other regions. Boecaccio’s *Decameron* (1972,
9:9: AT 910A, Wise Through Experience, Margaret of Navarre's Heptameron (sixteenth century) (1922, 5:46), and the anonymous Hundred Tales (1960, no. 97), to mention a few prominent examples, all contain stories that defend brutal corporal punishment of wives.

In the Boccaccio story (told by a woman), it is the biblical Solomon who offers the advice that leads to a wife's beating, thus suggesting that such behavior is divinely endorsed. Similarly, in the tales from the One Thousand and One Nights and the Isanaka tales cited above, the beatings appear to be sanctioned, even ordered, by Allah and the future Buddha, respectively.

No part of the world seems free from such attitudes. Even the Kalevela, the Finnish national epic, instructs, ostensibly with divine authority, a young bridegroom how to chasten a recalcitrant bride—with a birch switch, behind closed doors, and taking care not to strike her in the face (1963, poem 24).

According to a traditional proverb, "Sauce to the goose is sauce to the gander," but folklore does not treat women and men at all alike when it comes to discipline. There are relatively few folktales about wives who physically abuse their husbands, two examples being "Mr. Vinegar" from England (Jacobs 1898, 28-30; AT 1009, 1415, 1653) and "Two Out of the Sack" from Russia (Afanasiev 1975, 321-324, AT 564).

Indeed, various public penalties evolved whose purpose was to quash such tendencies before they spread. In Germany, the guilty woman might be led through town riding backward on a donkey, holding its tail in her hands (Grimm 1899, 2:318-319; Bächhold-Stäubli 1930, vol. 2, col. 1016-1017). A punishment even more graphically symbolic of the perceived danger was the ancient practice of roof removal. If it became known that a woman had beaten her husband, a procession of neighbors would advance on the guilty couple's house and with great ceremony dismantle its roof (Grimm 1899, 2:319-322; Bächhold-Stäubli 1930, vol. 2, col. 115-116; Lyneker 1854, 231-233). This custom, which was known, if not actually practiced, for many centuries throughout Germany, served not only to put both husband and wife to public shame for a socially unacceptable reversal of roles, but also—symbolically at least—to release from the house the evil spirits that were causing the problem.

Mental cruelty may be a term invented by modern divorce lawyers, but it is an ancient concept, although, like corporal punishment, its legal use is often sanctioned by the folkloric record only when used by a husband to correct or to test a wife.

Two widespread folktales cycles offer dramatic examples: AT 887, Griselda, and AT 900-904, The Shrewish Wife Is Reformed. Each group has been immortalized by one or more classic authors, the former by Boccaccio (1972, 10:10), Potrarch (De Obidenita ac fide usoria mythologiae), and Chaucer ("The Clerk's Tale"); and the latter by Shakespeare (The Taming of the Shrew). In

Shakespeare's dramatization, the machinations used by Petruchio to transform his spirited wife Katharina into a conformable household Kate are too well known to require elucidation here. All of Petruchio's tricks, and many more of like kind, are found in folktales of types 900-904.

Griselda is less familiar today than is The Taming of the Shrew, although the basic plot is well represented in medieval and Renaissance ballads, chapbooks, and novellas throughout Europe. The story, in Boccaccio's version, begins with a certain marquis proposing marriage to a young woman named Griselda. In accepting his proposal, Griselda promises always to try to please him, never to be upset with anything he might say or do, and always to obey him. Shortly after the birth of their first child, a daughter, the marquis decides to test her promised patience. Claiming, for no specific reason, that she and her daughter are unworthy of their position, he demands that she surrender the newborn, ostensibly to be killed, and the wife dutifully and without complaint gives up the child. Later, Griselda gives birth to a son, and the marquis repeats his demand, taking this child away as well. Although Griselda believes that both children are dead, the father secretly has placed them in foster care.

Many years later, the marquis subjects Griselda to a final ordeal. Announcing his intentions to abandon her and to take a new wife, he orders her to make preparations for the wedding and for the new bride's arrival. All this Griselda does efficiently and without complaint, thus passing his last test of obedience and proving herself to be an ideal wife. As a reward, the husband restores to her her daughter (now twelve years of age) and her six-year-old son. The marquis's subjects congratulate him for his wisdom in designing and carrying out such a test, even though the trials to which he had subjected Griselda were considered extreme. The story thus has an ambiguous conclusion, the marquis being both praised and criticized in the same breath. Griselda, however, is unreservedly acclaimed for her wifey devotion.

In folklore and mythology, cruel husbands are rarely criticized, much less punished. A further case in point is the tale "The Son of Seven Mothers" from the Punjab (Steel 1894, no. 10; AT 462, The Outcast Queens and the Ogress Queen), with a very similar story also being told in Kashmir ("The Ogress-Queen," Knowles 1893, 42-50). In the Punjabi version, a king with seven wives falls in love with a bewitchingly beautiful young woman, who agrees to marry him only if he will prove his devotion to her by giving her the eyes of his other wives, all of whom are pregnant. He fulfills the young woman's wish, then throws his blinded wives into a dungeon, where they survive only by eating their babies as they are born.

Only one child survives, who is thus symbolically the son of seven mothers. He miraculously escapes and recovers the blinded women's eyes, restoring
their sight. The king, now recognizing that he has married an ogress, has her put to death, brings the other seven wives back to the palace, and—the storyteller assures us—"everybody lived happily." Thus the tempress who seduced the husband into an unspeakably cruel act against his other wives is executed, but the man who actually performed the wicked deed is not so much as criticized.

This double standard of morality is nowhere more evident than in most cultures’ attitudes toward extramarital relations, which for men typically are condoned, but for women almost universally are condemned. Punishments, as depicted in folklore, for women caught in adultery give new meaning to the legal term cruel and unusual. One such penalty often featured by medieval and Renaissance writers, including Boccaccio (1972, 4:9; AT 992, The Eaten Heart) and Margaret of Navarre (1922, 4:32; AT 992A, The Adulteress’s Penance), is a husband forcing his adulterous wife to eat her lover’s heart or to drink from his skull.

Another common punishment for adultery—at least in folklore—is physical mutilation. In a Danish example, recorded in the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus (1894, book 2), the mistress of the legendary hero Hjalte asks her master how old a man she should marry, if she were to lose him. Hjalte considers her thoughts of marriage to another man to be proof of “the lecherousness of her soul.” His response is to cut off her nose, thus making her unattractive to any future lover.

Similarly, in “The Weaver’s Wife” from The Panchatantra (1964, 62–74), a man cuts off the nose of a woman who he mistakenly thinks is his unfaithful wife. Later, the victim expresses the fear that “he will do something worse next time, cut off ears and things.”

Finally, halfway around the world, accounts of life among the North American Indians are replete with depictions of adulterous women being punished by having their faces mutilated (for example, Kinzie 1857, ch. 27; and Schultz 1907, ch. 10). Whether or not these accounts authentically reflect actual custom and behavior, they do promulgate a belief system that in the end creates its own reality.

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REFERENCES


Abandoned or Murdered Children

Motifs S300–S399

Child abandonment is a many-faceted concept within myth, folktale, and literature. In studying heroes in myth and literature, scholars have found that their lives have many points in common, including, in their infancy, abandonment or attempted murder by the father. Boswell attests to the prevalence of abandoned children “from Moses to Tom Jones” (Boswell 1988, 6).

However, abandonment can often lead to the death of the child. “Hansel and Gretel” (AT 327A), perhaps the most famous fairy tale centering on abandoned children, provides a rare instance of a happy ending with the return of the children and the prosperity of the reconstituted family, a group without a mother figure. Jack Zipes voices a concern that the Grimms’ 1857 “Hansel and Gretel” actually rationalizes abandonment and abuse (Zipes 1997, 48). He observes that Wilhelm Grimm “went to great pains to explain and demonstrate why the father should be excutated in the end” (50).

There are a number of motivations for abandoning a child. Exposing a child to avoid the fulfillment of a prophecy, as in the story of Oedipus in Greek mythology, is one scenario (M371; AT 930 or 931, depending on the emphasis). Sometimes children are killed as a sacrifice, to appease a god, as in Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia (S263.2), or as a foundation sacrifice to ensure the stability of a structure (S261). Sometimes children are abandoned or killed due to fear of social censure (T586.3, “Multiple births as indicator of sexual promiscuity”). Still other abandonments or murders are done as acts of revenge (S302) as in Medea, and even as acts of outright cruelty. These tales also intersect with Motif C867.1, “Tabu: abusing women or children.”

Even if the child survives the ordeal of abandonment, as Oedipus does, the results are seldom happy. Abandonment is often associated with fear, jealousy, or dislike of the child or with deep poverty and looming hunger (S321) or the potential death of the adults in the family.

Tales of burying children alive in the foundations of buildings or bridges convey the sense that this is a terrible, though oddly necessary sacrifice of an innocent (S261, The Hüster Ghost, for example) that arises out of a superstition that the dead child will somehow guarantee the success and safety of the structure. The sacrificial object in some foundation stories is chosen at random—in one case because the child is alone and is thus a target of opportunity (one example is a German story, “The Secured Foundation Stone”).

At the other end of the spectrum are children who are singled out because of their relationship to the adult who is about to harm them. Euripides’ Medea is a case in point—the demise of no other children but Medea’s own sons by Jason would cause him the pain she wishes to inflict as part of her revenge on him for marrying the princess and abandoning her. There are also cases of eliminating a child specifically because of her gender (Chinese—Western Yugur). The Mexican legend of “The Crying Woman” (La Llorona) tells of a woman who, like Medea, kills her own children out of anger when her lover (the children’s father) betrays and abandons her. As Medea helps Jason steal the golden fleece from Colchis, so the woman helps Cortéz conquer Mexico; thus both women betray their countries. A key element in the Mexican tale that does not appear in Euripides’ story is that La Llorona can be heard crying for and seeking her dead children.

The exceedingly cruel tale type, AT 720, My Mother Slew Me, My Father Ate Me, has many versions, including the Grimms’ story “The Juniper Tree.” In this tale, the stepmother kills the stepson, serves him up to his father, and tosses the child’s bones away. His half-sister buries the bones, and the boy, who comes back initially as a bird, announces the stepmother’s perfidy in his song (N271.4, “Murder discovered, knowledge of bird languages, Birds point out the murder”), The bird brings gifts to his father and sister, but brings a millstone for his murderer, thus crushing her to death. After her death, the murdered boy reappears as a boy and the new family gathers. Maria Tatar sees the tales of this type by the Grimms and Perrault (“Le Petit Poucet”); AT 327B, Exchange of Caps) as tales of development. “Development is thus traditionally defined in terms of growing away from the mother, who represents dependence and domesticity, and turning toward the father” (Tatar 1992, 226).

In The Folktale, Thompson claims that “in many countries it is quite impossible to disentangle the two tales” of “Hansel and Gretel” and “Le Petit Poucet” (1946, 37). The child’s capacity for independence prompts Lüthi to say, “children in fairy tales are by no means helpless; many of them free themselves by
Child abandonment (Motif S301) is a motif that occurs in myth, folklore, and literature. Heroes are often abandoned by their parents as infants and are found and raised by surrogates. From Geoffrey de Latour Landry, *Der Ritter vom Turm* (1495).

their own ability and cunning" (1976, 65). Another tale of abandonment in the literary fairy tale tradition, “Snow White” (AT 709; Motif S322.4.2, “Evil stepmother orders stepdaughter to be killed”), involves a child who seems unable to help herself, but survives anyway.

Even in cases when the children do not save themselves, the culprit is often revealed. A tale that has a key element of revealing the murder of the child is AT 780, *The Singing Bone*. The singing bones appear in stories by the Grimm brothers, and in tales from Italy, Russia, England, Nigeria, and Switzerland. Unlike the boy in AT 720, restoration of the dead child is not usually the outcome (the Russian story “The Silver Plate and the Transparent Apple” is an exception). Justice, however belatedly, comes to the murderers (Q211, “Murder punished”). The murder is usually the result of sibling treachery triggered by a parental promise of inheritance or some other prize for the one who finds a particular object. Jealousy because one sibling possesses an object the others desire can also be the motivation to murder.

Parents may get rid of a child born out of wedlock by exposing or abandoning it (S312, “Illegitimate child exposed”), but in some cases the dead child haunts the abandoner. In both a tale from Iceland and in George Eliot’s novel *Adam Bede* (1859), a mother abandons her baby only to be haunted into a state of mental disarray. The Icelandic story tells of a mother who, after abandoning the child, is unhappy because she does not have the clothes to go to a party. At this shallow moment, the voice of her dead child sings to her and drives her mad. Eliot’s Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* gives birth to the illegitimate child of the local squire and tries to hide the event by abandoning the baby, but its cries follow her.

In the case of multiple births, which were unfortunately linked to suspicions that the woman had slept with multiple men (T586.3), we also see attempts to kill or abandon a child or children. In the Grimm’s “As Many Children As There Are Days” (AT 762), a countess accuses a woman who gives birth to twins of promiscuity. The countess is then punished by giving birth to a child a day (Ashliman 1987, 155). A tale from the twelfth century lais of Marie de France, “Le Fresne,” includes the same accusation about a woman who bears twins. As Boswell points out, the woman first thinks about killing one of the twins, but “her companions dissuade her from this, arguing that it would be a sin. Abandonment, however, was not” (Boswell 1988, 369). Most of a group of Sioux villagers in the story “The Bound Children” also have no objection to a mother who abandons her children. She leaves them so she can make an advantageous marriage with the chief’s son. The majority view, however, does not find support in this tale. The woman’s daughter throws filth in her mother’s face, which transforms the coldhearted mother into a hag. The chief’s son orders the children to be bound and abandoned when the camp moves on, but the old woman cuts their ropes and tells them where to find sustenance. In the end, the children save the villagers from the ravages of famine by supplying them with meat; however, the children give their abandoner only substandard fare and the old woman the best food, calling her grandmother. (S351.1.1, “Abandoned child cared for by grandmother (aunt, foster mother”).

Well-known literary examples of abandonment and child murder from Shakespeare and Homer highlight the trouble that comes from false accusations of infidelity (*The Winter’s Tale*) and the lengths people go to in order to guarantee victory in war (*The Iliad*) and political power (*The Tempest*). In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes, king of Sicily, thinks his queen, Hermione, has been unfaithful to him. His harsh treatment of her actually causes his son, Mamillius, to die of distress. Leontes orders that his newborn daughter, Perdita, be taken from his kingdom and abandoned. The man who abandons Perdita leaves articles with her that prove her nobility (S334, “Tokens of royalty (nobility)
left with an exposed child’). Miranda of The Tempest is set adrift with her father when her uncle seizes power. Politics and war lead to the cruel murders of prominent Trojan children in The Iliad. The Greeks throw the child Astyanax from a high wall and they kill Hecuba’s daughter, Polyxena, on Achilles’ grave.

Attempts to hold on to power also motivate both Herod in the Bible and Kamsa in the Bhagavata Purana. Herod commands that all recently born male babies be killed (S302.1, “All new-born male children slaughtered”) as he seeks to destroy the child who, it is prophesied, will best him. Kamsa, in his attempt to kill Krishna, has both male and female babies killed. Both Jesus and Krishna escape, but the mass murder of children attests to the threat both Herod and Kamsa perceive should their nemesis survive. Though both tales link to the broader motif of avoiding foretold events, the element of slaughter distinguishes them as M375, “Slaughter of innocents to avoid fulfillment of prophecy.”

Instead of being a potential joy, children in stories of abandonment or murder are problems or impediments for their guardians. Hunger and poverty, miseries in themselves, and superstitions can lead to abuse of the child. Children’s fates are often tied to the fates and situations of their mothers, broader needs for political power, and fear of prophecies of the burgeoning power of the child. Those who survive their ordeal of abandonment appear to flourish and find happiness, and in some tales even murdered children are restored.

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See also: Cruel Parents; The Hero Cycle.

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Persecuted Wife

Motifs S410–S451

In literature and folklore, the motif of the persecuted wife generally plays out according to three principal types of narratives. In the first case, the heroine’s persecution results from an unjust accusation of adultery by a male character whose advances she rebuffs. In the second, jealous female characters (sisters, mother-in-law, or friends) replace the heroine’s child or children with animals, usually dogs, leading to her ostracism. Finally, the third type of narrative revolves around the husband testing his wife’s endurance in particularly cruel ways, a story historically used as an exemplum of the perfect wife.

ALLEGED ADULTERY AND RESENTFUL MEN

Medieval tradition abounds in stories of wives unjustly accused of adultery. According to Roger M. Walker, the tale of Crescentia, more appropriately known as the “Conte de la femme chaste convoitée par son beau-frère” (“Tale of the chaste woman desired by her brother-in-law”), typically adheres to the following plotline: a husband goes on a trip and leaves his brother with his wife; the brother desires his sister-in-law, and she rejects him; the brother accuses his sister-in-law of adultery; the wife is condemned to be beaten and killed; she is rescued by a passersby, or flees; the heroine acquires healing powers; in the end, she is reconciled with her husband (1982, 2–3). The two main European sources for this tale type are the Gesta Romanorum and the Chanson de Florence, with the latter source providing a version of the story in which one of the husband’s men proves the wife’s accuser wrong, and it is the brother-in-law, not the wife, who is banished.
The story of Hildegard, Charlemagne’s wife, comes out of the Crescentia tradition. In Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s rendition, Charlemagne’s stepbrother Taland attempts to seduce Hildegard during Charlemagne’s absence, and she consequently imprisons him until her husband’s return. However, Taland succeeds in convincing Charlemagne that it was Hildegard who tried to seduce him. Charlemagne orders his wife to be drowned, but Hildegard flees to Rome, where she learns the art of healing. Struck with leprosy and blindness, Taland goes to see the woman healer of Rome, without realizing that this woman is in fact Hildegard. After Taland agrees to confess, Hildegard heals him; she is reunited with Charlemagne, and Taland is banished (Grimm 1981, 2:64–66). The story of Genoveve or Genevieve of Brabant follows a similar plotline. While the count palatine Siegfried is on an expedition against the infidels, he entrusts his wife and castle to the care of his vassal Golo. Golo is filled with passion for Genoveva, but the countess repels his advances. Upon the count’s return, Golo concocts the story that Genoveva committed adultery with the cook, who is the father of her child. Siegfried condemns to death wife and child, who end up taking refuge in a cave, where a dog nurses Genoveva’s son. Eventually Siegfried discovers Golo’s treachery, Genoveva and her son are reunited with the count, and a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary is built on the site where they had taken refuge (Grimm 1981, 3:165–168). Genevieve de Brabant’s story circulated in Europe throughout the early modern period in chapbooks (Remy 1910), and by 1859 Offenbach brought the legend to the opera house in a comical version. It is notable that such stories emerged at the time of the crusades. With husbands away fighting the “infidels,” the fidelity of wives and concern for the legitimacy of one’s progeny were important concerns. Sanctified through their power to heal, exemplary characters like Crescentia, Hildegard, and Genevieve glorified the fidelity and even martyrdom of wives.

The Indian tale “Hanchi” represents a more secular version of the type. After leaving home to avoid her brother’s incestuous desires and marrying the son of a wealthy man, Hanchi is pursued by the holy man Guruswami, her father-in-law’s chief counselor. Although Hanchi outwits Guruswami on several occasions, the lecherous and spiteful man plants false evidence in Hanchi’s room and declares to her father-in-law that he has surprised Hanchi with her lover. In order to force Hanchi to confess, her husband and his family beat and starve her, but to no avail. Finally, with the aid of an old woman, Hanchi clears her name, and her family asks her forgiveness (Ramanujan 1997, 74–79). Although “Hanchi” differs from its European counterparts in that the heroine does not become a saintly healer (in fact, Hanchi is more of a trickster character than a saint), it resembles Crescentia stories in that the false accuser is a person whom the husband trusts. All such tales emphasize the treachery and betrayal of the false accusation.

**ANIMAL BIRTHS AND ENVIOUS WOMEN**

In the second type of tale concerning the persecuted wife (AT’07, The Three Golden Sons), jealous women replace the wife’s newborns with animals in order to incite the heroine’s husband to repudiate, imprison, or kill her. Stories about the Swan Knight, a champion of unknown origin who wins a princess’s hand, fused with a Germanic fairy tale about children who change into swans when their necklaces are removed (Remy 1910). This hybrid story became the model for European versions of the wife calumniated by the appearance of having given birth to animals. According to the Grimms’ version of the medieval legend, Oriant, the son of King Pyzron and Queen Matabruna, marries Beatrix. In order to rid herself of a daughter-in-law of unknown birth, Matabruna plans to murder Beatrix’s seven babies—all born with silver chains around their necks—and replace them with seven puppies. Believing his mother’s accusations that Beatrix had intercourse with dogs, Oriant imprisons his wife. In the meantime, an old hermit raises the seven children. But Matabruna discovers that the children are alive and sends a hunter off to kill them. However, the hunter, not wishing to harm the children, removes their necklaces to bring back to the queen as proof of their death. The children turn into swans. In the end, one of Beatrix’s sons, Helias, defends his mother’s honor, the truth is revealed, and Matabruna is burned at the stake (Grimm 1981, 1:171–178).

In the sixteenth-century tale “Ancilotto, King of Provino,” Straparola has the evil mother-in-law conspire with the heroine’s two sisters. The heroine, Chiaretta, predicts that she will marry the king and have two sons and a daughter, born with golden necklaces and a star on their forehead, which indeed comes about. The two jealous sisters, Brunora and Lionella, both of whom married below their sister, replace the children with pups and throw the children into a chest, which they cast into the river. While Chiaretta is punished by having to do menial labor, the children are rescued and raised by a miller and his wife. Eventually, the children return to their father’s court with a green bird, who reveals their true identity. The king’s family is reunited, and the sisters and mother-in-law are thrown into a fire (Zipes 2001, 220–229). Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy closely follows Straparola’s version of the story in “Princess Belle-Etoile and Prince Cheri” (1998), but has the two younger sisters, Blondine and Brunette, suffer together when their eldest sister Rousseette conspires with the mother-in-law to replace Blondine’s three children and Brunette’s son with puppies. D’Aulnoy notably makes the three sisters daughters of a dispossessed queen, providing them with a noble genealogy. Like Straparola’s Chiaretta, Blondine predicts her children will be born with gold chains and a star on their forehead, and like her Italian counterpart, she is
ostracized when her husband learns she gave birth to puppies. The story’s resolution is also similar: the children return to their father’s court with a green bird who reveals the truth, and the queen mother poisons herself (Zipes 2001, 229–263; d’Auñoy 1998, 343–406).

In his 1717 collection of Arabian Nights, Antoine Galland includes a similar story, “The Jealous Sisters and Their Cadette.” The youngest of three sisters marries a Persian sultan and predicts she will have a son with gold and silver hair, whose tears are pearls and whose smiles are roses. Her jealous sisters replace her first son with a dead puppy, her second son with a kitten, and her third child, a daughter, with a mole. All three children are saved by the caretaker of the sultan’s gardens. After the third birth, the sultan imprisons his wife next to a mosque with a window through which people spit upon and humiliate her. Again, the situation is resolved when the children return to court, and a talking bird reveals the truth (Zipes 2001, 270–302). The version related by the Brothers Grimm, entitled “The Three Little Birds” (1857), follows the general scheme of the other stories: the youngest sister of three marries a king, and she gives birth to a boy, whom the sisters substitute with a puppy; then she has a second son, again replaced with a puppy; and finally a daughter, who is switched with a kitten. The king imprisons his wife. A fisherman and his wife care for the children until they return to the king’s court with the talking bird, who reveals everything. Their mother is released, and her sisters are burned to death (Zipes 2001, 302–305).

Most of the later versions retain the golden or silver chains present in the medieval story, although the chains only serve the function of establishing the true identity of the children and lose their magical powers to transform the children into swans. Also present from Straparola on is the talking bird, who reveals to the husband the truth about his wife and children. In all versions, the wife patiently endures her humiliating situation and forgives her husband for having punished her unjustly. Whereas stories regarding a wife unjustly persecuted for adultery are initiated by a male character’s failure to seduce a virtuous wife, the stories in which the wife is persecuted for having given birth to animals are initiated by female characters who compete for status. While the queen mother fears for the status of her grandchildren and perhaps sees herself as her daughter-in-law’s rival for her only son’s affection, the sisters are jealous of a sister who marries above them and bears exceptional children, symbolized by the golden chains and the stars. Women’s value in many societies was based on producing children, which the heroine does exceptionally well, making her the envy of her sisters.

Certain tales present variations on the theme of animal births and alleged adultery, while others emphasize the unreasonableness of the husband. In Marie de France’s “Le Fresne,” for instance, a woman gives birth to twins, and her envious neighbor announces that the woman therefore must have had intercourse with two men. Adultery is combined with the “monstrous” birth of twins. Despite the good woman’s virtue, her husband begins to mistrust her, and he guards her as if she were in prison. Ironically, the neighbor herself becomes pregnant with twins (1986, 61–67). In “The Story of the Three Apples” from the Arabian Nights, a husband cuts his wife into nineteen pieces for having given an apple to her slave-lover, when in fact their son took one of the wife’s apples, and a slave stole the apple from the son (Burton 1991, 271–278; Haddawy 1990, 150–157). In two Japanese tales, wives are repudiated for minor, insignificant offences. In “The Golden Eggplant,” a woman married to a lord finds herself the object of her friends’ jealousy. Rather than replace her child with a puppy, the envious friends put cornhusks in her husband’s bed to make it sound as if the heroine broke wind before him. The lord immediately sends his pregnant wife away. Later the son confronts the father, who recognizes his hypocrisy and makes the boy his heir (Seki 1963, 173–175). In “The Bundles of Straw and the King’s Son,” a poor woman on her deathbed reveals to her son her true identity. She had been the wife of a king and one day exclaimed how magnificent she found a ship at sea, which caused people to stop their work and look at the ship. Her husband repudiated her because she led people to waste time. After relating the story, the mother dies, and the son finds his father, outwits him, and is declared king (Seki 1963, 175–179).

PATIENT WIVES AND CRUEL HUSBANDS

The third archetypal narrative of the persecuted wife is referred to somewhat problematically as The Patient Wife, whose best-known European heroine is Griselda (AT 887, same title). Whereas in the first two types of narratives the husband is merely the instrument by means of which the wife is persecuted by jealous men or women who manipulate him, in Griselda stories the husband himself carries out the persecution, arguably driven by his own insecurities and phantasms of control, but under the pretext of morality. “Griselda” first appeared in print in Boccaccio’s Decameron (1349–1353). The story concerns Gualtieri, the marquis of Saluzzo, who is unenthusiastic about marrying but whose vassals entreat him to take a wife in order to have an heir. The marquis marries the daughter of a poor shepherd, who swears to comply with all his wishes. At court people marvel at the shepherdess’s noble manners, and they find her admirable in conversation, virtuous, obedient, and devoted to her husband. Suddenly the marquis wishes to test his wife’s patience, subjecting her to unusually harsh trials. After the birth of their daughter and their son, he makes Griselda believe that he has put them to death, when in fact he
sends them to a kisswoman. Then the marquis repudiates Griselda, allegedly
due to her low birth, and sends her back to her father with only a shift to cover
her nudity. Years later, the marquis calls Griselda back to court, only to test
her yet again. He tells her he wants her to prepare a new bride for life with
him. Griselda stoically undergoes each trial without questioning her husband’s
wishes. The new bride turns out to be their daughter, whom he reunites with
Griselda, finally revealing the truth. The narrator of the story carefully notes
before relating it that he finds Guatller’s actions remarkable for “their sense-
less brutality” and clearly states that the marquis is not an exemplary hus-
band, although he praises Griselda for her singular ability to endure such trials (Boccaccio 1908, 783–795).

While Boccaccio’s tale is the earliest known written version of “Griselda,”
later written and oral versions grew out of Francis Petrarch’s Latin translation,
“Griseldis” (1374), which served as the model for many European rendi-
tions, evident in the wide use of the Latinized name (Golenistcheff-
Koutouzoff 1933, 24–150). Significant versions of the tale include Philippe
de Mézière’s Le Miroir des Dames Mariées, c’est assavoir de la merveilleuse
pacienc et bonté de Griseldis, Marquise de Saluce (The Mirror of Married
Ladies, or the Marvelous Patience and Goodness of Griseldis, the Marquise
of Saluce, 1384–1389), the main conduit for the tale in France; Geoffrey
Chaucer’s “The Clerk’s Tale” (1386–1400); Christine de Pizan’s version, which
appeared in Le Livre de la Cité des Dames (The Book of the City of Ladies,
1405); and Charles Perrault’s “Griselidis,” first published in 1691 and repub-
lished in his Contes en Vers (Verse Tales, 1695). Compared to Boccaccio’s
version, Petrarch Christianizes the tale and exaggerates the exemplary virtue
and obedience of Griseldis. He states, however, that his object is “not so much
to encourage the married women of our day to imitate this wife’s patience,”
but rather to urge his readers to emulate Griseldis’s constancy in their submis-
sion to God (Petrarch 1992, 2:668). That the relation between God and his
flock is expressed in terms of willing obedience to her husband (and Griseldis
notably tends sheep) is not, however, unproblematic.

With Mézière’s translation of “Griseldis” and despite Boccaccio and
Petrarch’s statements that Griseldis was not meant to be imitated, the tale
regularly was published in books on marriage, books for the education of
girls, and treatises on domestic economy and gastronomy in fourteenth- and
fifteenth-century France (Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff 1933, 38–55). By the
seventeenth century, the story of Griseldis was regarded as a tale told by mer-
chants and villagers. Because the Latinized “Griselidis” had come to be asso-
ciated with the lower classes, Perrault initially intended to name his heroine
“Griselde” in the tradition of Boccaccio (Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff 1933, 149–
150; Perrault 1981, 307). Perrault’s revival of the tale among the upper classes
cannot be separated from his critique of cultured aristocratic women, whom
he viewed as uncontrollable and corrupt and to whom he opposed Grisellidis,
the “natural” and domesticated woman whose will is that of her husband
(Duggan 2001, 151–153). Given the publishing history and wide diffusion of
the tale, it clearly was being used as a pedagogical instrument to inculcate
women of all classes with the notion that patiently obeying even cruel hus-
bands can eventually lead to happiness, thus reaffirming the unconditional
authority of the husband in the home.

While other types of narratives concerning the persecuted wife often in-
clude episodes probably influenced by Griselda tales (notably Marie de
France’s “Le Fresné” and d’Aulnoy’s “Princess Belle-Etoile and Prince
Chéri”), the tale itself was widely diffused in Europe and the Middle East. A
Jewish Moroccan tale, “The Patient Wife,” closely follows the archetypal tale.
A father boasts about his daughter’s patience and marries her to a wealthy
merchant, who decides to put his wife’s patience to the test. As in the Euro-
pean versions, the husband successively takes away the children (two boys
and a girl), claiming he is sacrificing them to cure himself, but in fact has
them well educated. And as in the European versions, the husband informs
the wife that he is remarrying and wishes her to prepare the new bride, who is
in fact the daughter. In the end, the husband rewards his father-in-law, marries
his daughter to a rabbi, and lives happily ever after with his patient—or

It is interesting to note that in tales about the persecuted wife, the husband’s
cruelty is often justified to some extent because it results from the manipula-
tion of others or it causes the heroine to become an exemplum of wifely obe-
dience. Whether motivated by an evil brother, mother, sister-in-law, or his
wish to test the extent of his wife’s endurance, the husband’s responsibility
for his wife’s suffering is diminished. This cannot be better demonstrated
than in Jules Massenet’s 1901 opera Grisellidis, in which the heroine is put to
the test not by her husband, but by the devil himself.

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