"Where do babies come from?" is a question that has preoccupied children as well as adults since the beginning of time. Notions of how one might conceive are as vast and diverse as the human imagination. Many motifs on this subject are classified in the Motif-Index under Chapter T, Sex, which contains motifs on wooing, sexual relations, marriage, and the birth of children.

There is an extensive listing of "miraculous conceptions" (T510), and since extraordinary conceptions often precede the birth of extraordinary beings, many of these conceptions belong to stories about demigods and heroes and are cross-referenced under the entries "Birth and rearing of culture hero" (A511) and "Birth of culture hero" (A511.1).

A common example of miraculous conception is through eating (T511), including the consumption of various fruits, flowers, roots, and leaves. Also common is conception from a wish (T513), through a dream (T516), from sunlight (T521), moonlight (T521.1), and falling rain (T522). In his celebrated book The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, Otto Rank highlights the archetypal patterns underlying the birth of culture and religious heroes, from the Babylonian Sargon and Moses to the Norse hero Siegfried. Such narratives begin with a prophecy before or during pregnancy, warning that the child, generally of royal lineage, may endanger his father. At birth, the hero is cast into waters and miraculously saved, usually by animals or low-ranking characters, and eventually becomes a king or prophet (Rank 1964, 65). Although the birth of the hero typically concerns a male child, the Chanson de Florence provides an example of a female culture hero whose birth is prophesied to bring disaster (R. Walker 1982, 7).
MIRACULOUS CONCEPTIONS

One of the best-known miraculous conceptions is that of the Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Christ, son of God. A foundational myth of Christianity, the idea of a virgin becoming pregnant nevertheless has perplexed many, as Barbara Hanawalt contends in her discussion of medieval English folk songs (1980, 132–133). Poking fun at the notion of immaculate conception, Roberto Rossellini wrote and directed The Miracle, in which Anna Magnani stars as a simple peasant woman whom a man gets drunk and rapes. Unaware that a man has had sexual relations with her, Magnani’s character believes she is a second Virgin Mary. Well before it was believed that Mary conceived miraculously of Christ, the Greeks and Romans were telling the story of Perseus, the son of Danaë, whom Zeus/Jupiter impregnated through a golden rain shower. In many different cultures and eras, apparently sterilized women pray to God or the gods to become fertile, from the Judeo-Christian and Muslim stories about Sarah and Rachel, to the Nigerian tale of a woman who promises her first born to a god if he makes her fertile (B. Walker and W. Walker, 1980, 69–70). In seventeenth-century France, Louis XIV came to be known as “the God-given,” for it was believed that his mother, Anne of Austria, was barren and that God finally granted her a child, who was to become one of France’s greatest kings.

Praying to gods could be considered one form of conception from a wish. The western European fairy-tale tradition offers another common archetypal narrative of this type of impregnation, usually involving a lower-class male character who, out of anger and humiliation, wishes a princess to become pregnant. In Straparola’s “Pietro the Fool” (1550), Luciana, daughter of King Luciano, becomes pregnant when Pietro wishes it so. Basile takes up the same theme in “Peronella” (1634), in which the good-for-nothing hero similarly wishes Princess Vastella to become pregnant. Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy modifies the tale by focusing on the principal male character’s ugliness and making him noble in “The Dolphin” (1698), whereas the Grimm’s combine lower rank with a hunchback back to create their hero (see Zipes 2001).

Just as Zeus impregnates Danaë through rain, the Sun impregnates the mother of Weneya, the Chippewa culture hero, in a gust of wind. Conception from sunlight is a common theme in origin myths of Woodland, Plains, and Southwest Indians (see Barnouw 1977, 13–14). Folk traditions provide numerous examples of conception through contact with wind, rain, and sunlight. Impregnation can also occur by consuming everything from flowers to fish to plants. In the Nigerian tale “Three Wives and a Porridge,” the porridge in question contains a remedy for sterility (B. Walker and W. Walker 1980). An Indian tale, “The Mother Who Married Her Own Son,” includes an example of conception from bull’s urine, while Chinese tale, “Why the Horns of Cattle Are Curved,” seems to combine the latter theme with conception from eating a vegetable: a woman eats a beet that floats down a stream and becomes pregnant with a girl; the father is a saintly ox who ate the leaves of the beet; it is this indirect contact that brings about the pregnancy (see Ramanujan 1997; Eberhard 1965).

CRAVINGS, BIRTHMARKS, AND BIRTHRIGHS

As tales from Basile’s “Petrosinella” (1634) and Charlotte-Rose de La Force’s “Persinette” (1698) to Friedrich Schulz’s “Rapunzel” (1790) and the Grimms’ “Rapunzel” (1857) reveal, fairy-tale authors have been preoccupied by the idea of maternal cravings and their effect on the fetus or the fate of the baby. (Such concerns are also found in folk culture; see, for instance, Jethy 1971 [15–16] and Sébilo 1968, 1–4.) In Basile’s tale, the pregnant Pascadaizia craves the bed of parsley belonging to an ogress and fears that her baby will be born with parsley on its face if she does not yield to her desire. Although La Force transforms the ogress into a fairy, and the Grimms make her a sorceress, the narrative remains strikingly similar in all cases: the mother craves the forbidden parsley or rapunzel; she promises her unborn child to a supernatural creature; a daughter is born, locked in a tower, and becomes pregnant by a prince; the daughter goes through more trials and tribulations and, after much suffering, lives happily ever after. According to Holly Tucker, maternal cravings were deemed dangerous in folk and literary traditions, resulting, it was believed, in miscarriage or birthmarks. Cravings were associated with what was forbidden and, as Tucker contends, daughters of mothers who succumb to temptation in such tales are forced to redeem the sins of their mothers (Tucker 2000, 2003).

Birthmarks or other deformities signal the mother’s sin. Golden chains and stars on foreheads, on the contrary, could be read as signs of a mother’s virtue. Moreover, such objects and signs authenticate the children’s noble birth at one point in the narrative of these stories. The legend of the Swan Knight is one of the earliest European versions of this type of tale. As the Grimms recount it, Oriant takes the beautiful and virtuous Beatriz as his queen. Beatriz has seven children, each of whom is born with a silver chain (1981, 2:171–178). Some tales have the heroine predict that her children will be born with necklaces or stars on their foreheads, as in Straparola’s “Ancilotto, King of Provino” (1550), d’Aulnoy’s “Princess Belle-Etoile and Prince Cheri” (1698), and Antoine Galland’s “The Jealous Sisters and Their Cadette” (1717). In each story, the queen’s jealous mother-in-law and/or sister(s) wish to destroy her babies, replace them with dogs, and accuse the heroine of having given birth to animals. After being unjustly punished, the queen finally is reunited.
with her children, in part thanks to the necklaces (Zipes 2001; see also Berlizoz Brémont, and Velay-Vallantin 1989, 141–154).

Concerns about the process of pregnancy have also made their way into folk and fairy tales. Viewed in certain traditions in terms of sin, maternal cravings were believed to mark the fetus with the object of the mother's desire, manifest in the birthmark, whereas objects like gold chains around the necks of newborns usually signaled their true noble identity and eventual good fortune. As H.A. Rose has documented in the Punjab, good and bad fortune can also be determined by the day or date on which a baby is born (1907, 220–224). Although stories about multiple births and women giving birth to animals initially represent the situation as problematic, if not horrifying, their plotlines eventually lead to an unexpectedly happy or heroic resolution.

MALE PREGNANCY

When we think of conception and birth, we usually have women in mind. However, folk traditions also provide numerous examples of male pregnancy.

Surprisingly, the notion that a man could become pregnant is a motif in many different folk traditions (T578, "Pregnant man"). Often male pregnancy occurs by eating, as in the Scandinavian tale noted by Stith Thompson, in which a man catches a magic fish intended for his wife, eats it, and becomes pregnant with a girl, who is cut out of his knee (S. Thompson 1977, 123). In two Nigerian tales, a male becomes pregnant by eating porridge. In "The Man and the Fertility Porridge," a man goes to a diviner, who warns him not to eat the porridge, but the man stumbles, the porridge spills on his finger, he licks it, and eventually both he and his wife give birth. The hero of "The Tortoise and the Forbidden Porridge" meets a different fate. A male tortoise cannot resist the smell of the porridge he acquires from a diviner for his wife, eats it up, and dies from the pregnancy (B. Walker and W. Walker 1980).

Other tales about male pregnancy involve misdiagnosis or trickery. Roberto Zapperi has traced Italian stories about the pregnant man of Monreale to visual representations, in the Sicilian city's cathedral, of Christ healing a man with dropsy, who indeed appears to be with child. In the Italian tale "The Pregnant Priest," a priest has a peasant take a urine sample for him to the doctor. The peasant accidentally knocks over the bottle of urine and then asks a woman, who happens to be pregnant, to refill it. Fearing he is pregnant, the priest unsuccessfully seeks an abortion to avoid scandal, ends up throwing himself from a tree, falls over a hare's nest, and believes he has given birth to a rabbit (see Zapperi 1991). Richard Burton recorded a story from the Arabian Nights, "Tale of the Kadih Who Bore a Child," in which a wife takes vengeance on her avaricious husband by filling him up with beans. After the husband discharges, she pulls out a neighbor's newborn. Believing he has given birth, the husband flees to Damascus in shame, but eventually the couple are reconciled (Burton 1887). Although few examples exist of successful male pregnancy, Zapperi has pointed out that in medieval European iconography, Eve emerging from Adam's side represents a most powerful image of a man giving birth (Zapperi 1991, 3–32).

MULTIPLE AND OTHER EXTRAORDINARY BIRTHS

Tales in the tradition of the Swan Knight provide examples of stories in which multiple births are represented in a positive light. Sometimes, however, multiple births are viewed in negative terms. In Marie de France's twelfth-century tale "Le Fresne," a woman accuses her neighbor, who has just had twins, of having committed adultery. It was believed that a woman who gives birth to two children must have had sexual relations with two different men. Upon having twins herself, the woman regrets having made the accusation (1986). In other stories concerning the birth of five or more children, like "The Boy in the Fish Pond" and "The Birth of Aistulf," only the child who grasps the king's or his father's lance is spared (Grimm and Grimm 1981, 23, 38).

In stories like "Ancilottolo" and "Princess Belle-Etoile," the queen is only led to believe that she gave birth to animals. Tales in the tradition of Straparola's "The Pig Prince" (1698), however, concern a queen—and in the case of the Grimms, a farmer's wife—who truly gives birth to an animal. D'Aulnoy's "The Wild Boar" (1698) and Henriette Julie de Murat's "The Pig King" (1699) closely follow Straparola's tale: a fairy capriciously wishes a queen to give birth to a pig, who can take human form only after marrying three times. In the Grimms' "Hans My Hedgehog" (1857), it is the farmer, angry he has no children, who wishes for a child, "even if it's a hedgehog" (Zipes 2001, 96). In the end, all the animals are transformed into handsome young men, usually after the animal skin is destroyed (see Zipes 2001; d'Aulnoy 1998).

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See also: Hermaphroditism; The Hero Cycle; Monstrous Births.

REFERENCES

Monstrous Births

Motifs T550–T557

Found under Chapter T, Sex, “Monstrous births” is a large cross-cultural heading that includes all deformed babies, such as those born as formless lumps of flesh (T551.1.1.), with two heads (T551.2.), or without mouths (T551.6.). It also includes hybrids such as babies born with limbs or heads of animals (T551.3–T551.3.4.2.), those who are half human and half fish (T551.5.), and those who are human and demon or alien blends (T556.). Children who have unusual powers (T550.2.), have adult characteristics (T551.13.2.), or are abnormally large or small at birth (T553.) are also classed as monstrous.

Seeing monstrous births as portents of divine will was a belief commonly shared in ancient, medieval, and early modern periods in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Only after the scientific revolution in the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did the religious and moral interpretations of monstrous births come to be defined as “folk” or “popular,” in contradistinction to the naturalized or medicalized “official” interpretations of birth defects or deformities (Smith 1980; Park and Daston 1981). Therefore, these folk narrative motifs outline moral universes, by definition, in their focus on the causes and effects, public or private, of women giving birth to monsters. Several examples follow.

AMERICAN INDIAN MYTHIC MONSTROUS BIRTHS

North American Indian origin myths are replete with monsters, which vary by tribe and region, such as the water monster Unktchi, the Great Rolling Head, and the giant Yeito, cannibals all. Anthropologist Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin notes specific examples of births of monsters from the Jicarilla Apache:
Birth of the monsters whom Killer-of-Enemies, Jicarilla Apache culture hero, kills before the Apache are created, is specifically accounted for by the Jicarilla Apache. Among the First People were women who misbehaved, became pregnant, and give birth to a Giant Elk, a monster eagle, a kicking monster, the two running rocks, a monster rock (Flint Man), Big Owl, a giant fish—all of whom Killer-of-Enemies disposes of. (Wheeler-Vogelin 1972, 743)

In the beginning, the private indiscretions of First Women cause the monstrous births of cosmic beasts who must be overcome to establish cultural order and harmony for the Apache.

For the Wintu, in a variant of “Rolling Head,” a menstruating girl breaks a taboo by following women into the woods to strip maple bark. Bark splinters enter her finger, which bleeds without stopping. Sucking the blood causes the girl to crave it, then to cannibalize herself and so give birth to herself as cannibalistic monster:

So she ate her little finger, and then ate her whole hand. Then she devoured both her hands. Then she ate her leg, ate both her legs. Then she ate up her whole body. Then her head alone was left. It went rolling over the ground... [S]he bounced up to the west across the river to the flat on the west, where she threw the peoples into her mouth. Without stopping, she turned the village upside down as she devoured them all. (Eldoes and Ortiz 1984, 210-211)

**THE DEVIL BABY**

In Judeo-Christian contexts, however, monstrous births do not cause community disasters so much as signal them, although these births too may have dire public consequences. A biblical passage (1 Esdras 2: 4–8), noting signs and portents, has often been quoted in this regard:

The sunne shal suddenly shine againe in the night, and the moone thre times a day. Blood shal drop out of the wood, and the stone shal give his voyce. . . . There shalbe a confusion in many places, and the lyre shal off breake forthe, and the wilde beastes shal change their places, and menstruous women shal beare monsters. (quoted in Park and Daston 1981, 25)

Perhaps Motif T556, “Woman Gives Birth to a Demon,” is the most well-known monstrous birth as sign within a Christian framework. In Europe and England, demonic births as a result of intercourse with the Devil or a demon or through witchcraft were, as noted, commonly believed in earlier times. Alleged appearances of the Devil Baby in the New World occurred in 1637 and 1638. Anne Hutchinson, a pious Puritan who was labeled a religious heretic, was brought to a civil trial in Boston in November 1637 for sedition; a church trial for heresy would follow. Hutchinson was, in addition to a preacher, a skilled midwife and mother of twelve children. She was apparently pregnant during her church trial, but either miscarried or had a tumor which she expelled. What is more certain is that her close friend and follower, Mary Dyer, had given birth to a premature, deformed infant in October 1637, and Hutchinson had been present at the birth. Writing many years later, Cotton Mather affirmed in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) that Mary Dyer was delivered of as hideous a monster as perhaps the sun ever looked upon. It had no head: the face was below upon the breast: the ears were like an ape’s, and grew upon the shoulders... it had on each foot three claws, with talons like a fowl,... The midwife was one strongly suspected of witchcraft. (cited in Johnson 1995, 100–101)

The Jersey Devil, or Leeds Devil, is a Devil Baby legend associated with the southern New Jersey pine barrens. The legend, said to originate in 1740, involves Mother Leeds—a suspected witch or, in some versions, a woman who did not want another child, and cursed it, saying, “Let it be born a devil”—who gave birth to what first appeared a normal baby. A description from 1896 continues:

[It] soon took the shape of a dragon, with a snake-like body, a horse’s head, a pig’s feet and a bat’s wings. This dreadful being increased in strength as it gained in size, until it succeeded the bulk and might of a grown man, when it fell on the assemblage [of people attending the birth], beating all the members of the party, including its own mother, with its long, forked, leathery tail. (Skinner 1896, 240).

The beast escaped, killing children and causing numerous agricultural disasters. For years afterward, the creature was blamed for many eerie noises and mysterious happenings that were seen as portents of disaster, shipwrecks, and wars (Perticaro n.d.). The Jersey Devil’s “finest hour” seems to have come in 1909, when a flurry of sightings and descriptions was reported in newspapers in southern New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania (Sullivan and McClay 1974, 233–239). The creature is said to still live, apparently becoming immortal or at least having an extremely long life span. The Web site, The Jersey Devil of the Pine Barrens, relates sightings as late as the mid-1970s and notes that an episode of the popular television series *The X-Files* borrowed the legend for a story idea, however changing the beast into a savage woman (Perticaro n.d.).

Many alternative versions of the Jersey Devil’s origins, shape, and escapades have been reported. The creature often takes the form of a hybrid beast,
more like American Indian monsters than humanoid figures as in most other Devil Baby legends, although some of its features, such as cloven hoofs and a pointed tail, suggest a human/Devil blend.

Another famous version of the Devil Baby legend localized itself at Hull-House, a Chicago immigrant settlement house founded in 1889 by social reformer Jane Addams. The story began in 1914. Addams related the story in a number of publications, citing an "Italian version" and a "Jewish version" as follows:

The Italian version, with a hundred variations, dealt with a pious Italian girl married to an atheist. Her husband in a rage had torn a holy picture from the bedroom wall saying that he would quite as soon have a devil in the house as such a thing, whereupon the devil incarnated himself in her coming child. As soon as the Devil Baby was born, he ran about the table shaking his finger in deep reproach at his father, who finally caught him and, in fear and trembling, brought him to Hull-House. . . . the Jewish version, again with variations, was to the effect that the father of six daughters had said before the birth of a seventh child that he would rather have a devil in the family than another girl, whereupon the Devil Baby promptly appeared." (Addams 1916, 3-4)

People came to Hull-House wanting (even demanding) to see the Devil Baby, which they had heard was housed there. Perhaps because of her feminist leanings, in the version Addams relates, the mother is always seen as victim, not perpetrator, of the blasphemous act that leads to the Devil Baby’s birth. It is interesting to note that Baughman has isolated a traditional motif implicating the mother of monsters (G303.25.21.1.1.5, “Blasphemous Mother Bears Monster Child”) that is applicable to all the monstrous births discussed so far, but none directly blaming the father, as in Addams’s published versions (Baughman 1966).

MONSTROUS BIRTHS AND HASTY WISHES

Mother Leeds’s curses in the Jersey Devil legend and the father’s curses in the account of the Devil Baby at Hull-House connect Motif T556, “Woman gives birth to a demon” with Motif C758.1, “Monster born because of hasty (inconsiderate) wish of parents.” In the two examples that follow, childless couples each wish for a child with disastrous results.

In the medieval European legend of Robert the Devil (S223.0.1), a diabolical baby is born to a childless couple as a result of an appeal to the Devil to help in the child’s conception (S211). Reputed to have been a historical figure, Robert the Devil was born, in some versions, with a full set of teeth (T551.13.2) and wreaked havoc with his wet nurse, or even killed her. When he grew to maturity, he was saved from further evil by appealing to the Virgin Mary (Hibbard 1960, 49–57; Rudwin 1931, 179).

The story of Robert the Devil deviates from later Devil Baby legends in that no redemption is offered in the later versions. In the popular 1968 American horror film Rosemary’s Baby, for example, Rosemary’s maternal gaze at the end of the film implies that her demon child will live. And in the 1976 horror film The Omen, a couple whose own baby had been stillborn adopts a demonic child. The movie spawned two sequels, and in the third and last movie, the child, grown to maturity, attempts to prevent the Second Coming of Christ.

In the folktales “Mundig” told by Mrs. Marian Serabian and recorded in One Hundred Armenian Folktales, an old couple’s hasty wish for children results in unusual births mitigated only by the world of fantasy. The old woman attracts a passing dervish, a holy man, and asks him what she should do to have a child. He tells her to get a handful of sissair chichipeas, and sit on them and she will have a child. She does what the dervish suggests with these disturbing results:

And sure enough! a whole bunch of babies, about as big as your thumb, were scattered all through the room! “Oh, what shall I do with all these little things?” the poor woman said, hitting her hands on her knees, pulling her hair and crying, “What shall I do with all these tiny things?” In the midst of all this, she remembered suddenly that she had to prepare her husband’s lunch. So she hurriedly heated the oven and started to bake the bread. “I know what to do! I’ll put all these babies in the oven right now and get rid of them.” After she had baked the bread, she took all the babies and put them in the hot oven. Of course, they all died immediately. (Villa 1966, 235)

Although one baby, Mundig, escapes to live a while longer than his siblings, this tale exemplifies the dangers of entreating outsiders for help in conceiving a child.

EARLY DEATH OF MONSTROUS BABIES

Although Robert the Devil and other demonic children in American films live to be adults, most monstrous babies either die or are killed in infancy or early childhood, as indicated in the story of “Mundig.” Various folk beliefs, showing a faint trace of the medicalized model of monstrous births in which severely deformed children are seen as not viable, suggest the moral inappropriateness of monsters living. Beliefs recorded among the Kosovo Rom, for
example, report that a child born of a vampire father and a human mother will have no bones and will die shortly after birth (Wilson 1970). This belief is an example of a related motif, C101, “Sex tabu broken: Child born without bones.”

In macabre variations of widespread Japanese legends about a ghostly mother feeding her living child, children are made monstrous because they are born posthumously in their mothers’ coffins. In *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, Iwasaka and Toelken present a story about an *Ukabe* (the ghost of a mother who gave birth to her baby after she was buried):

> When they dug her up, they found not only that there wasn’t any change in the color of her skin but also saw that she was clutching a little baby dressed in funeral clothes. This baby had a curved back, and had a rice cake in its hand and was licking it. Apparently the baby had been born after the woman’s burial and had survived somehow. (1994, 64)

Iwasaka and Toelken note what might not be apparent to non-Japanese readers, that “the storyline itself may go back to an older (but residually persistent) idea that it is the baby who is the powerful and dangerous entity. The baby born in the grave, and thus unritualized as a newcomer . . . is a potential danger to any passerby, to society, to the world.” (1994, 64, 66)

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**See also:** Bargain with Devil.

**References**


Incest

Various Motifs in A (and T)

In almost all cultures, incest is viewed as the ultimate taboo that, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, is at the foundation of human culture itself. While it is often portrayed in terms of shame and horror, incest can be viewed positively when it constitutes the foundational myth of a particular culture, and it is extremely common in creation myths around the world. Usually, incest between gods is a divine marriage, but incest between mortals is profane. This duality is reflected in the classification of incest motifs in the Motif-Index: incest between various family members who are gods or demigods occurs under A, Mythological Motifs, such as A164.1, “Brother-sister marriage of the gods,” and A164.1.1, “Mother-son marriage of the gods.” Incest between mortals is classified under section T, Sex, with the incest motif (T410) located under Illicit Sexual Relations (T400).

Incest has been the subject of intensive scrutiny and theorizing by anthropologists, and there are varying ideas on why the taboo, which is virtually universal, arose. Known exceptions to the incest taboo involved marriages between royal family members in Hawaii, the Inca Empire, Central Africa, and Egypt, where ritual incest was an expression of sacred kingship. In general, those societies in which incest was condoned have myths that take a neutral view of incest.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

A number of creation myths resort to incestuous peopling of the earth for purely pragmatic reasons. If the first humans were few in number, possibly only two, then their offspring had no choice but to mate with siblings. A myth from the Kabyl people of North Africa tells that the first humans were a man and a woman who had fifty children, half boys and half girls. When mature, they married (A1552.3, “Brother-sister marriage of children of first parents”), and thus the entire human race has descended from twenty-five brother-sister unions (Frobenius and Fox 1937, 49–57).

The first book of Moses (Genesis 4:1–17) implies a similar beginning. Although only two of Adam and Eve’s children are named, there must have been more, for Cain, after killing his brother Abel, lay with Abel’s wife and had a son. The Bible does not identify this unnamed woman as Cain’s sister, but at least two folktales (Sheykh-Zada 1886, 395; Hanauer 1935, 240–241) specifically state that each brother had a twin sister. God directed each one to marry the other’s twin, but Cain, perceiving his own twin sister to be more beautiful, rejected God’s order, thus bringing about the conflict that ultimately led to the fratricide.

Famously, in Egyptian mythology, Osiris marries his sister Isis, and brother-sister marriages among the Egyptian pharaohs were not uncommon, with the practice existing among commoners as well. Marriage between brother and sister serves as the foundational myth of the Inca: Ini, the sun god, marries his sister, the moon goddess Mama Quilla. Their children, Maco Capac and his sister and wife Mama Occllo (or Oello), are sent to earth to found Inca society (Vega 1961, 3–8).

The Aborigines of Australia have a myth from northeastern Arnhem Land that recounts how, during the “dreamtime,” a brother and two sisters (the Djangawulp) wandered over the earth creating plants, animals, and the ancestors of the Aborigines—the sisters were constantly being impregnated by their brother (Poignant 1967, 130–131).

An account from the Indian Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad tells of an androgenous and incestuous pairing that is viewed more equivocally. In the beginning was self, in the shape of a person. He said, “I am,” but felt no pleasure. Wishing for a second being, he caused himself to separate into two pieces, and thus were born husband and wife. He approached her, but she said, “How can he embrace me, having produced me from himself? I shall hide.” She then became a cow, but he became a bull and united with her, and thus cows were born. She became a mare, and he a stallion, and thus horses were born. She became a ewe, and he a ram, and thus sheep were born. In like manner he created everything that exists in pairs, down to the ants (Upanishads 1897, vol. 2, Adhyaya 1, Brahma 4, stanzas 1–4). Another incestuous encounter occurs in the dialog from the Rig Veda (10:10) between Yama, the first son of the sun, and his twin sister Yami. Here, in alternating stanzas, we hear Yama’s pleas for intimacy and his sister’s polite but firm refusals. In the end, he resigns
himself to finding another woman. This is an unusual example in myth of the incest taboo enforced.

In the Norse creation myth, the giant Ymir produces a man and a woman from beneath his arm, and one of his legs begets a son with the other leg. This is the beginning of the frost ogres. Moreover, many of the gods have a heritage marked by incest. The earth is Odin’s daughter and his wife as well, and by her he has his first son, Thor (Snorri 1954, 33-34, 37). An episode from Norse mythology as recorded in the Sagas of the Volsungs (1990, ch. 7) is an example of incest condoned in a royal family. Sigyn, a princess of the Volsung dynasty, is unhappy with the cowardly sons produced by her exogamous marriage, so she seduces her brother Sigmund (T415) and conceives by him a son named Sinfjotli, who with time proves to be a champion worthy of the Volsung name and blood.

Creation myths often include accounts of catastrophic floods, resulting in the necessity of repopulating the earth with only a few potential parents, and sometimes they are brother and sister (A1006.2, “New race from incest after world calamity”). In Ovid’s account of a Greek flood myth (1981, book I), the only survivors are a son and a daughter of Prometheus, Deucalion and Pyrrha (although they have different mothers). They repopulate the earth, but not through sexual procreation. Instead, they throw stones behind them, and the stones grow into men and women. Classical mythology, of course, does not shy away from tales of incestuous relations. Zeus was the oldest son of the Titan brother and sister, Cronus and Rhea (Apollodorus 1975, 1.4; A112.1, “God from incestuous union”), and Adonis was the product of Smyrna’s seduction of her father (Apollodorus 1975, 3:183-184; A112.11, “God from father-daughter incest”), to mention but two of many instances.

In a flood myth of the Miao people of China (Werner 1922, 406-408) A-Zie and his sister (for whom no name is given) are the sole survivors of a great deluge. The brother wishes the sister to become his wife, but she objects. Finally she agrees to a test (H300, “Tests connected with marriage”). Each will roll a millstone from opposite hills into a valley, and if they come to rest, one lying atop the other, she will marry him. The test is carried out, but A-Zie rushes to the valley floor and sets one millstone atop the other before his sister arrives. Still reluctant, the sister proposes a second trial. This time they will throw knives into the valley, and if both land inside a single sheath she will marry him. Again A-Zie arrives there first and places both knives in one sheath. Brother and sister marry and have a child, but it is born without arms or legs. A-Zie kills the misshapen baby and cuts it to pieces. The next day the pieces have become men and woman, and thus the earth is repopulated.

One account of the genealogy of the North American Chippewa culture hero Winabago entails sister-brother incest, also not viewed in neutral or positive terms. In “The Incest of Wenebojo’s Grandparents,” a sister sleeps with her brother at night without his knowledge. When the brother discovers he has been having intercourse with his sister, he is ashamed and sends his sister through a hole in the earth to punish her. When the sister comes out the other side, she must promise a turtle the daughter she carries. Wenebojo is the son of the daughter and the turtle (Barnouw 1977, 73-74).

The folklore “Kora and His Sister,” from India (Bompa 1909, no. 50), appears to be an etiological tale explaining the origin of the tabu against brothertwin marriages. A young man named Kora declares that he will marry the woman who picks a certain flower, and his own sister (whose name is not given) picks the flower. Insistent on carrying out his declaration, Kora pursues his sister, who flees from his advances. After much privation, the sister seems to accept her fate and lies down by Kora’s side, only to cut her own throat. Seeing that she has killed herself, he too cuts his throat. Their blood flows in opposite directions, and when they are cremated, the smoke from their bodies rises in two separate columns. Seeing that neither the blood nor the smoke will mingle (F1075), those present conclude, “It is plain that the marriage of brother and sister is wrong,” and from that time forth such marriages have been discontinued (A1552.1, “Why brothers and sisters do not marry”).

The generic title of Type 313E tales, The Girl Flees from a Brother Who Wants to Marry Her, summarizes a group of stories especially well represented in eastern Europe. An example is the Russian tale “Prince DanilaGovornov” (Afanasiev 1975, 351-356).

FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Many variants of Type 706 folktales, The Maiden Without Hands, told throughout the world depict a girl mutilated by her father (or sometimes a brother) after she refuses his sexual advances. For examples see the Grimms’ commentary to their “The Girl without Hands” (KHM 31; 1980, 3:69-72). Type 706B folktales depict a woman beset by unwanted sexual advances, most frequently from a brother (T415.1). She responds by mutilating herself, then giving the amputated parts (usually hands or breasts) to her tormentor (S11.1). The best-known example of this tale is “The Girl with the Maimed Hands” from The Pentamerone of Basile (1932, 3:2).

A similar plot is also widely known among the indigenous people of the North American Arctic, but here as a solar myth. In one version, first collected in the nineteenth century, a brother seduces his sister under cover of darkness. Discovering who her partner was, the sister cuts off her breasts and throws them at him, then runs off into the night carrying a lighted torch. He picks up another torch and follows her, but stumbles, putting out his light. Then a windstorm lifts
them both into the sky. The sister becomes the sun and the brother the moon. She stays away from him as best she can, coming out only when he is not present (Erodes and Ortiz 1984, 161–162). In a twentieth-century version (Millman 1987, 21), the incestuous seduction takes place between the moon and the sun, with no humans mentioned. The end results are the same, with the female sun’s self-mutilation and her constant flight from her brother: “And still he pursues his sister, even today, to get her for his mate. But she is faster and always keeps well ahead of him. Thus, owing to the moon’s last, does night follow day.”

Many stories about father-daughter incest find ways to diminish the father’s guilt, while others eliminate his culpability altogether. In the Old Testament story of Lot and his daughters, Lot’s daughters get their father drunk before seducing him. Although this story as well as the story of Isaac and Rebecca condones incestuous marriage, later in the Bible incest is prohibited (Leviticus 18, 20). In the Greek tale of Myrrha, the heroine with the help of her old nurse tricks her way into her father’s bed. When her father discovers her identity, he tries to kill her; she flees and later gives birth to Adonis (Ovid 1981, 233–238). In both stories, the fathers are alleviated of all guilt, clearly having been seduced by the daughters.

The most widespread international folktale depicting attempted incest is Type 510B, The Father Who Wanted to Marry His Daughter; a close relative of the Cinderella tales. The Grimm brothers’ “All-Rights-of-Fair” (KHM 65) is exemplary. A dying queen extracts a promise from her husband that should he remarry, his new wife will be as beautiful as the queen. Although such a demand may be a ruse on the part of the wife, who in fact does not wish for her husband to remarry, it also legitimizes the husband’s desire for his daughter, since she is the only person to meet this requirement. The father proposes marriage to his daughter (T411.1), and to gain time, she requests dresses patterned after the moon, the stars, and the sun, and also a coat made of every kind of fur, all of which the king supplies. His daughter escapes by smearing her face with soot, wrapping herself in the fur garb, and running into the woods. Another king finds her there, and she becomes his kitchen servant, suffering many indignities. With time, however, the young king discovers her true beauty, and they marry. That the daughter is placed in abject situations and moves from her father to her husband suggests that it is the daughter who has undergone a process of penitence and substituted one object of desire for another, not the father, who in most versions drops out of sight and is not mentioned again after the daughter makes her escape (the exception being Straparola’s “Tebaldo,” where the father is quartered in the end). Modern retellings often highlight the problematic side of such tales. Robin McKinley’s Deerskin (1993), for instance, rewrites the story precisely in order to bring out the violence and paternal culpability absent from so many versions (see also Rutledge 2001).

In the various renditions of these archetypal stories, the father is depicted as being more or less culpable. Perhaps one of the oldest versions of such stories, Apollonius of Tyre, a Greek work that was translated into Latin and made its way into the Gesta Romanorum (Deeds of the Romans, late thirteenth century), tells the story of King Antiochus, who falls in love with his own daughter and rapes her. In this story, the father is represented in unambiguously criminal terms and eventually is struck dead by the gods. In Belle Hélène de Constantinople (thirteenth–fourteenth century), however, the culpability of the father is lessened because the pope approves of his plan to marry his daughter and because he eventually is reconciled with Hélène (Zipes 2001, 26–27). Although Hélène loses a hand over the course of the story, it is because of her mother-in-law’s machinations, not her father’s criminal behavior. In Philippe de Rémi’s La manékin (ca. 1270), the heroine mutilates herself in order to avoid marrying her father, for a king of Hungary cannot marry a disfigured woman. Much like Jole of La manékin, the heroine of Basile’s “Penta the Handless” (1634) has a slave cut off her hands, for the king of Pietrasecca, her brother, who wishes to marry her, finds her hands particularly attractive (Zipes 2001, 512–518; Basile, ca.1958, 190–198).

MOTHERS AND SONS

The most famous story of mother-son incest is that of Oedipus, told in bits and pieces by many ancient writers. Sophocles made the story the subject of one of the greatest Greek tragedies, Oedipus Rex. Many versions begin with an oracle before the birth of the hero that announces the tragedy to come, and, taking heed of such warnings, the usually noble mother exposes or abandons her child. However, the child is raised by a peasant family and survives to adulthood. The fact that the hero is abandoned as a child makes plausible the failure of both son and mother to recognize each other, and they marry. Although in many versions the son kills his father before marrying his mother, the episode of father-son rivalry is not an essential element of the story, as Slavic and Indian versions confirm (see Krauss 1984, 11–13; and Ramanujan 1997, 111–113). Usually, after the marriage, mother and son discover the truth about their relationship, which results in tragedy. Sophocles’ Oedipus tears out his eyes and Jocasta commits suicide.

The basic plot, having made its way into world folklore, is found in different settings in folktales from many nations (AT 931, Oedipus). One of the most intriguing is the apocryphal account of Judas Iscariot as recorded in The Golden Legend (1900, vol. 3). This biography of Judas almost exactly parallels that of Oedipus. On the night of his conception, Judas’s mother dreams
that her child will destroy their people. Acting on this dream, she and her husband set the child adrift in a basket shortly after his birth. A distant queen discovers the baby and raises him as her own. After growing to adulthood, he enters the service of Pilate, the provost of Jerusalem. One day, when the two of them are passing the garden of Judas’s natural father (who, of course, is not known to him), Pilate expresses a desire for some of the fruit that grows there. Judas jumps over the wall to satisfy his master’s whims. He is accosted by his father and killed in the ensuing struggle. Pilate’s reaction to the altercation is to seize the dead man’s goods and to give his widow to Judas in marriage. Judas thus unwittingly marries his own mother, adding incest to the list of sins he will later commit.

Thompson says, “The [Oedipus] story seems to be particularly popular among the Finns and has been collected several times in Hungary and Romania, and sporadically in Lithuania, Lapland, and from the Cape Verde Islanders in Massachusetts” (1977, 141). In an Albanian version, the son ends up killing himself, his wife/mother, and their son (Hasluck 1984, 6–7). However, not all such narratives end tragically. In an Oceanic version, after the son kills his father, he and his mother live together happily ever after (Lessa 1984, 57–60).

It is notable that few tales exist concerning same-sex incest. F.E. Williams (1984) did record a story from Papua New Guinea, in which a father sodomizes his son. However, his motivations are not explicitly sexual: the father wishes to help his son grow. The tale also offers an example of a mother-son incest, which differs from those discussed above in that the father ends up killing his son and is reunited with his wife.

**BROADER DEFINITIONS OF INCEST**

Although the proscription against incest usually lessens as kinship distance from the nuclear family increases, in many traditions incest is defined broadly to extend beyond the nuclear family. Both the Bible (Leviticus 18:6–18, 20:17–21; Deuteronomy 27:20–23) and the Koran (4:22–23) prohibit sexual intercourse not only with blood relatives, but also with specified in-laws and step- and foster relatives. These Old Testament definitions carried over into Christianity, as evidenced in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (5:1–2), in which he expresses indignation that a Christian had married his own widowed stepmother.

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1:5), Claudius’s marriage with his murdered brother’s widow is labeled “incestuous.” In the earliest record of the legendary story upon which Shakespeare based his play, the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (1894, book 3), we read that the murderer “took the wife of the brother he had butchered, captioning unnatural murder with incest.” Hamlet’s own incestuous feelings for his mother are a subtext of the play, his rivalry with his father displaced onto his uncle.

Otto Rank has argued that stories like Hamlet and those classified as the Lustful Stepmother could be read in terms of the transference of the relations constitutive of the mother-son incest narrative from immediate family members to more distant ones. Mother-son incest often is transformed into a son’s love for his stepmother, as in the various renditions of Don Carlos, the most famous being the play of that name by Friedrich Schiller (1787), or a stepmother’s love for her stepson. Perhaps the most famous lustful stepmother is Paeaedra, whose desire for her stepson Hippolytus is figured in particularly monstrous terms, Paeaedra’s mother, Pasiphae, had had sexual relations with a bull and gave birth to Paeaedra’s half-brother, the Minotaur. By association with her mother, Paeaedra’s sexuality thus is identified with transgression, even aberration, which is emphasized in Jean Racine’s 1677 play, *Phèdre* (1995). Emile Zola returned to the theme of Paeaedra in his 1872 novel *La Curée* (The Kill, 1990). Situating the story within a bourgeois family during the Second Empire, he makes of Renée’s incestuous desire for her stepson a sign of general social decadence.

Incest can also be treated in a comical way, as in the Ozark tale “Jack and His Family,” in which a brother tells his sister she is “lots better than Maw,” to which the sister replies, “that’s what Paw always says”; and the story of the boy who calls off his wedding because his fiancée is a virgin for, as his father remarks, if she “ain’t good enough for her own kinfolks, she ain’t good enough for us, neither!” (Randolph 1986, 18–20, 80–81).

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**See also:** Sister and Brother.

**REFERENCES**


