



Daughter of the Goddess, Sister of Man. Matriarchal Patterns in International Fairy Tales

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Abstract

My way of analysing fairy tales is based on a new method using structures instead of isolated motifs; these guide us to a new understanding of this important folk tradition. It can be shown that the general matriarchal patterns of the goddess and her partner, the holy king or heros which abounds in international mythology, are also to be found in international fairy tales. This reveals these folklore traditions as hidden matriarchal myths, made anonymous and passed on through millennia. The matriarchal structures in fairy tales are demonstrated here using some examples which emphasize the relationship of the goddess to the woman and of the woman to the man. At the end, it will be shown how the matriarchal patterns in fairy tales have been systematically transformed into patriarchal patterns.

Keywords: matriarchy, fairy tales, Goddess structure, heros structure

Résumé

Mon analyse des contes de fée se base sur une nouvelle méthode considérant les structures plutôt que des motifs isolés, ce qui nous guide vers une compréhension nouvelle de cette tradition. On peut démontrer que les schémas matriarcaux unissant la déesse et son partenaire, le roi divin ou héros, qui abondent dans la mythologie du monde, sont aussi présents dans les contes du

* This article presents some ideas abridged from a chapter in my early book *The Goddess and her Heros*, published in 1980 in German. In 1995, this book was translated and published in English; it is now re-published and available on my website (www.goettner-abendroth.de). The density of material in this article is due to the concentration needed to bring a long and detailed chapter of the book dedicated to a matriarchal analysis of international fairy tales into just some pages.



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monde. Les traditions folkloriques se révèlent alors comme des mythes matriarcaux, devenus anonymes au cours des millénaires. Nous démontrons la présence des schémas matriarcaux dans les contes à l'aide de plusieurs exemples qui mettent l'accent sur la relation de la déesse avec la femme, et celle de la femme avec l'homme. Par la suite, nous verrons comment les schémas matriarcaux des contes de fée ont été systématiquement transformés en schémas patriarcaux.

Mots-clés: matriarcat, conte de fée, la déesse, la structure héros

Introduction: Matriarchal Mythology

My knowledge of the matriarchal cultural epoch expanded steadily through continued study and extensive travel until, finally, I recorded it in a major work entitled *Matriarchal Societies*.¹ But the implications of this knowledge developed in my mind much earlier and I decided many years ago to begin with one segment: matriarchal mythology, since its symbolic image-systems clearly illuminate matriarchal worldview and values. It also seemed appropriate to begin with the spirituality of these cultures. This led to the publication of my first book in this field: *The Goddess and Her Heros*. It includes an analysis of mythology from India via Persia, Egypt and the Mediterranean area until it arrived in Europe through excavating the oldest layers, the matriarchal ones, of diverse mythological systems that have been written down much later.

The range of this historical survey accounts for the profound impact that the epoch of matriarchal societies had on the subsequent patriarchal societies which destroyed or usurped them. If we reintegrate knowledge of the matriarchal epoch into our own historical perspective, then we can easily discern remnants of those matriarchal patterns, mythical symbols, and ideals in later times. They become tangible as a sort of 'matriarchal opposition' at work within socially and geographically marginalized groups and sub-cultures. This is especially true for the spreading of the international, so-called 'fairy tales,' which are hidden matriarchal myths rendered anonymous to protect the bearers of this old worldview and wisdom.

However, this wide-ranging historical spectrum contains such a wealth of material that it can prove fruitful only if it is supported by a solid methodology. I would like to discuss that methodology just briefly here. For my present purposes, I use a schematic outline of matriarchal mythology which has also proven sound for the analysis of fairy tales. Since my intent is not to present the history of religious ideas nor to research all the variants of just one individual motif, I am working with structures that include all the necessary characteristics that make a certain mythology a matriarchal one. This structure of matriarchal mythology has been developed inductively from a vast amount

1 Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies. Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*, New York 2013, Peter Lang Publishing.

of material and provides common denominators. In this sense, it is a structural definition of 'matriarchal mythology.'

Furthermore, I will not confine myself to the mythological motifs and images alone, but I will also include the economic and social background of matriarchal societies as it has been given by archaeological and anthropological research.² Even if this background is not provided in a systematic manner here, a general consideration of economic and social patterns supports my interpretation of mythology and fairy tales. This means that I understand them from a *socio-historical point of view* which rejects romanticized, esoteric, aesthetic, formalistic, psychoanalytic interpretations, and the (unsubstantiated) theory of Jungian archetypes.

Additionally, I take mythology and mythological fairy tales seriously as an expression of a complex worldview and ritual practices, as well as a substantial source of information concerning the religious mentality of early matriarchal societies. In this context, mythology is not ideology in the Marxian sense, which functions as a guise for dominance of the ruling classes (patriarchies), because there are no ruling classes in matriarchies. The mythological motifs and images function here as a reflection of what is believed and ritually practiced in those societies.

The structure of matriarchal mythology provides the cornerstone to understand its patterns in cohesion and the reflection of matriarchal patterns in international fairy tales. This structure encompasses a great deal of information: first, it includes a rich world view that prevailed in matriarchies; second, because of my socio-historical point of view, we can see there an enormous potential in terms of cultural and social history.

Matriarchal mythology adheres to a triangular structure in which all details are embedded. This triangular structure is twofold: on the one hand it applies to the personages, functions, and attributes of the goddess in matriarchies, who is imagined as a triple goddess. On the other hand, it applies to the personages, functions, and attributes of her consort and partner, the holy king, or *heros*.³ The Greek word *heros*, used throughout my work on matriarchal mythology, is not synonymous with the English word 'hero,' its derivative. *Heros* refers specifically to the consort of the matriarchal goddess. Male gods as eternal beings did not exist in these cultures.

The names of the personages widely vary in the concrete myths. The functions ascribed to any given personage, however, remain constant. While the attributes

2 Systematic research on social and economic patterns of matriarchal societies has been given in: Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies*; Marija Gimbutas: *The Civilization of the Goddess. The World of Old Europe*, San Francisco 1991, HarperSanFrancisco.

3 This double triangular structure refers to late matriarchal societies of Bronze Age, when men became associated with goddesses in the role of holy kings. This constellation was first researched by Robert Graves: *The Greek Myths*, New York 1955, Penguin Books. In the Neolithic Age the constellation was different, see for this: Marija Gimbutas: *The Language of the Goddess. Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, San Francisco 1989, Harper and Row.

encompass a given stereotypical range, they are variable within that range. To provide a better overview, I have brought these defining characteristics of matriarchal mythology into the following schematic outline.

Goddess Structure (Triad)

| | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Personage: | Maiden | Woman and Mother | Crone |
| Region of Residence: | Heaven | Earth and Sea | Underworld |
| Season: | Spring | Summer | Fall and Winter |
| Function: | Bringer of Light, Huntress, Amazon | Giver of Love and Life | Giver of Death and Rebirth, Magic, Wisdom |
| Cosmic Incarnation: | Stars and Universe | Incarnation of the Land | Incarnation of the Depths as Cave or Bottom of the Sea |
| Lunar Symbol: | Crescent Moon | Full Moon | Black Moon |
| Symbolic Lunar Colour: | White | Red | Black |
| Symbolic Animals: | White Birds, Falcon, White Deer, Lions, Leopards | Doves, Bees, Cow, Goat, Sheep, Pig | Snake, Dragon, Owl, Raven, Crow, black and white Hounds |
| Symbolic Objects: | Bow and Arrow, Chariot drawn by Lions, Cats, or White Deer | Chalice, Apple of Love, Orchard Paradise, Magical Belts and Rings | Thread or Spindle of Fate, Scales of Fate, Apple of Death, Paradise in the Depths |

Heros Structure (related to the goddess triad)

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Personage: | (just one) | | |
| Function: | Initiation by the Goddess in spring | Sacred Marriage with the Goddess in summer | Death and Rebirth through the Goddess in fall and winter |
| Fulfillment of Function: | Fulfillment of magical Tasks of Wooing the Maiden Goddess | Sacred Marriage in the Presence of Symbols of Fertility | Sacrificial Death, followed by a Journey through the Underworld until the Happy Rebirth or Return |

Symbols of the *Heros*: Great variety, relative to the character of the goddess. For example:

1. She is the universe; his symbol is the sun (colours: gold and red)
2. She is the land; his symbol is the water or vegetation
3. She is the underworld; he is one of her underworld-animals.

Some comments:

The Goddess Structure shows the everchanging power of eternal renewal. The goddess reigns over the astronomical cycles (the rise and fall of sun, moon, and stars), and thus over the cycles of vegetation and the cycles of human life. She is, therefore, the Mistress of Cosmic Order, of the Earth and the Underworld. All her three personages combined form one single deity, and can never be completely severed from one another. This single deity is the matriarchal Great Goddess of the three spheres of the world – as the world order was understood at that times. Her most widespread symbol is the moon, one entity with three phases: crescent, full moon, and black moon. The white crescent moon is symbolic of the Maiden Goddess and her ceremonial hunting bow. The red full moon on the horizon is symbolic of the crimson world egg, which is an attribute of the Woman Goddess who created everything living. The black moon, invisible but nonetheless present, is symbolic of the paradoxical Crone, the Goddess of the Transition from light to dark, or from life to death, and from dark to light, or from death to life.

The *Heros* Structure is less differentiated because he represents the power of the human in contrast to the cosmic goddess. His dimensions are more limited; he has only one personage and each of his functions is relative to the goddess. It is through her that he is first granted access to knowledge and status (Initiation); then, he is integrated as a contributor to her all-encompassing fertility (Sacred Marriage); at last, it is through her that he is able to experience for himself the passages of Death and Rebirth inherent in the cycle of life. In this way, he is – like every human being – embedded in the eternal cycles of the feminine divine as cosmos and earth. The life journey through Initiation, Sacred Marriage, Death and Return is not reserved to the

man as *Heros*, but, in a more ancient pattern of matriarchal mythology, is also undergone by women as priestesses of the Goddess.

Matriarchal Mythology in Fairy Tales

Fairy tales, like myths, are neither expressions of a generalized 'soul of the people' (interpretation of the Romantic period) nor simple explanations of not-understood natural phenomena (naturalistic interpretation). Nor do they symbolize 'primordial human ideas' such as 'love' and 'death' (interpretation of history of ideas), nor does their interpretation necessitate incomprehensible psycho-spiritual 'archetypes' or 'neurotic complexes' in the form of images and dreams (psychological interpretation). They are, as myths, reflections of the world view and ritual practices of early societies which are primarily matriarchal. In my view, a cultural-historical interpretation of fairy tales is the only interpretation with a scientific foundation. It puts back this valuable tradition into the cultural framework from which it originates and is, therefore, capable of providing us with enduring insights.

During the first period of research on fairy tales, they were considered to be degenerated myths.⁴ This interpretation was later rejected when the differences between the genres of 'myth' and 'fairy tale' were subjected to hairsplitting, formalistic analysis.⁵ Today, the trend is again toward the first stance, which I support wholeheartedly, because the differences between 'myth' and 'fairy tale' are easily explained by the process of social decline. These differences emerged not because the common people were incapable of remembering the complex framework of the myths, or the names of mythical personages, and so simplified them and typified the figures (opinion of the formalists).

Rather, these differences developed because matriarchal myths, when repeated explicitly and by name, were antagonistic to patriarchal societies, and regarded as 'hostile' and 'heathen' to the patriarchal Christian religion. In spite of this pressure, the matriarchal world view thrived uninterrupted in the lower social classes, sub-cultures and marginalized people. But they were forced to conceal themselves, so they no longer referred explicitly to the Mother Goddess, but spoke of the 'mother,' they no longer called the daughter Goddess, high priestess, or hereditary daughter by name, but spoke simply of the 'daughter' or 'princess.' Similarly, they did not call the *Heros* by name, but referred to him only as the 'hero.' In that way, in order to keep their forbidden goddess veneration clandestine, people transformed individual divine figures

4 The Brothers Grimm propounded the notion of fairy tales being 'sunken' myths in the following works: Jacob Grimm: *Vorrede zu den Volksmärchen der Serben*, Karadschitsch 1854; Wilhelm Grimm: *Vorrede zum zweiten Band der KHM (Kinder und Hausmärchen)* 1856.

5 The difference between these genres has been discussed by Jolies, De Boor, Lüthi, De Vries; see: André Jolies: *Einfache Formen*, 1972 (5.); Helmut de Boor: "Märchenforschung," in: *Zeitschrift für deutschen Unterricht* 42 (1928); Max Lüthi: *Das europäische Volksmärchen*, 1974 (4.); Jan de Vries: *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie*, Freiburg-München 1961. Later, researchers returned to the opinion that fairy tales emerged from myths, as the Brothers Grimm had suggested.

into nameless prototypes. Nevertheless, the old mythical structure within which these figures act remained unaltered. Thus, the fairy tale, being a veiled myth, conveys the same religious message as the myth, and is equally complex.

The discovery of this underlying structure is credited to the abstract intuition of Wladimir Propp, who researched Russian fairy tales and discovered an astonishing regularity in two sequences commonly found in fairy tales.⁶ Propp, though, did not understand the meaning of them and, consequently, his discovery ossified into abstract formulas. The unwavering precision of the fairy tales' two sequences demonstrates nothing other than the matriarchal Goddess-Heros Structure, with its cardinal ritual acts of Initiation and Sacred Marriage (first sequence), Death and Rebirth (second sequence). This puts us, in turn, in a position to understand the content behind the fairy tale formulas.

Here, I would like to limit myself to the interpretation of only a few examples. I refer to the *Children's and Household Tales* which are most familiar to us from the collection of the famous Brothers Grimm.⁷ This does not mean that I concern myself exclusively with German fairy tales, for 'German' fairy tales as such do not exist. These are simply fairy tales collected in Germany, each of which belongs to an international treasury of stories - as their many variants demonstrate. I employ all of the variants to show, on the one hand, the whole spectrum of symbols, and on the other, to reconstruct the full order of the sequences, which frequently has been cut in half. Typically, these variants encompass a territory that expands beyond Europe into the Mediterranean region, from there to the Near East, and further on as far as India - precisely the same regions in which highly advanced matriarchal religions flourished.⁸

I have organized these samples from the Brothers Grimm into three exemplary groups according to the part of the structure of matriarchal mythology to which it belongs. Of these groups, the first two: the 'Abundance-Giving Woman in the Other World' and the 'Gift-Giving Woman in a Deathlike State,' show the symbolism of the Goddess Structure. The third group, 'Fairy Tales of the Redeemer,' demonstrates the Heros Structure.⁹ Because of the limited space which I have here for the analyses, I will

6 Wladimir Propp: *Morphologie des Märchens*, 1972.

7 Grimm, Jacob/Grimm, Wilhelm: *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Göttingen 1856. Johannes Bolte and Georg Polivka (eds.) *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm (KHM)*, Reprint, 1963, 5 volumes. - The first three volumes of this five-volume work include the collected fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm as well as a lot of explanations and an extensive index of variations on the fairy tales.

8 See the international motif-index developed by Aarne/Thompson: Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson: *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki, 1961 (3.), FFC 184; Stith Thompson: *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements*, Copenhagen 1955-1958 (2.) More than 40,000 individual motifs are catalogued here in six volumes.

9 These concepts have been formulated by August Nitschke: *Soziale Ordnungen im Spiegel der Märchen, Bd. 1: Das Frühe Europa*, Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart, 1976. - The book is a stimulating reading. Nitschke's knowledge of anthropology and cultural history, though, is utterly superficial, so his treatment of matriarchy, which he acknowledges as a period of prehistory in which women dominated, is mistaken.

present just samples from the first and second group and omit the third one.

Woman as Daughter of the Goddess: the Abundance-Giving Woman in the Other World

In the first group, I analyze *Mother Holle, or Mother Hulda* (KHM 24) and *Cinderella* (KHM 21).¹⁰

Mother Holle, or Mother Hulda

In this fairy tale, the central figure has not yet lost her mythical name. Mother Holle is the pre-Germanic underworld goddess 'Hel,' or 'Hella,' who, in the Christianized word 'hell' (German: 'Hölle') came to epitomize the sinister and the negative. In that way, Mother Holle was extremely demonized. In the old belief, though, she was the Earth and Underworld Goddess, Hel-Hella-Holle, who manifested the ultimate good, fertility, justice, and maternity, much as in the fairy tale Mother Holle still does.

It is not exactly clear where Mother Holle dwells: in Heaven in a house of clouds, from which she lets snow or rain fall. Here, we see her creating the weather. Yet she also lives in the Underworld. The name Holle, being akin to 'Höhle' (Gr. *cave*), is in itself an allusion to the depths. Golden Mary, the young woman who is tormented by her stepmother, finds her beneath the well into which she sprang out of despair. The well is an entry shaft into the Underworld of Mother Holle, so she is both: Goddess of Heaven and of the Underworld. Moreover, her Underworld is a paradise called the 'Garden Evergreen.'

Golden Mary falls into a beautiful meadow full of flowers, where an apple tree in the field is so overburdened with apples that it cries out for help. Apples, we can recall, are fruits of love and death. Furthermore, Golden Mary meets a cow on the verdant landscape whose udders are bursting with milk. The cow is the sacred animal of the Mother Goddess. An oven filled with bread, the product of an agricultural society, is not absent, either. In it, the bread seems to reproduce itself so quickly that Golden Mary has to pull it from the oven with haste.

A heavenly house, maternal fertility, and a paradisiacal underworld are the characteristics of the Great Goddess in her three personifications of Maiden, Woman, and Crone. Through her triple manifestations she steers the seasons and the world, just as the Goddess Structure demonstrates.

Thus, Mother Holle is truly an Abundance-Giving Woman in the Other World. At the end of the tale, she literally showers wealth upon Golden Mary: gold rains down on the young woman from the arched gateway covering her hair and body like a beautiful dress. In mythology, the value of gold has nothing to do with economics. It refers instead symbolically to the wealth deep in the womb of the Earth: seeds, germs, and

10 My numbering of the fairy tales corresponds to Bolte/Polivka.

little animals, that is, fertility, the richness of life. Golden Mary is allowed to bring this abundance from the Underworld to the world of the living.

Now, let us have a look at the developmental arc of Golden Mary. By jumping into the well, she sets out for her journey to the Underworld, which is a journey of initiation. She patiently suffers Death and therefore experiences her own Return as 'Golden Mary.' She is initiated by the Goddess during her stay in the Underworld, for it is there where she learns all the matriarchal crafts, arts, and magic. These encompass much more than the completion of routine household chores, as the bourgeois version of the 'diligent' Golden Mary would have us believe. They include the arts of agriculture, symbolized by the bread; the cultivation of plants, symbolized by the apple tree; the domestication of animals, symbolized by the cow; and the art of magic weather-making to keep the seasons in balance. It is no wonder, then, after she has learned all this from Mother Holle, she is herself blessed with an abundance of fertility, symbolized by gold, because she knows how to make everything bear fruit.

Golden Mary thus becomes the earthly representative of the Goddess: her priestess. From the mythological perspective, the Goddess is a mother and Golden Mary is her human, but elevated, daughter. Here the basic matriarchal relationship, the mother-daughter relationship, becomes apparent in its economic, social, and mythic dimensions, for by her initiation, the daughter inherits all from her mother.¹¹

Cinderella

In this fairy tale, the Underworld journey that initiates a young woman into her matriarchal culture is minimized; still, other characteristics of the Goddess structure are better preserved. The constellation of three sisters, with the youngest and prettiest being the hereditary daughter, is typically matriarchal (principle of ultimogeniture). However, the principle of ultimogeniture is overshadowed by the patriarchal legal situation, which we can see here already instituted. Cinderella's right of inheritance is called into question because the father has a second wife with older daughters. He is therefore the one who bequeaths, which is a patriarchal principle. By the principle of ultimogeniture, however, it is the mother alone who bequeaths and, in this fairy tale, it is she who acts from the Underworld to assist Cinderella in asserting her right to the estate and crown. Cinderella, however, is no longer a sovereign woman; she becomes a princess only by marrying a prince. Thus she is defined, both as a daughter and as a wife, by her relationship to the male. In matriarchy, a prince with a crown and an estate was an impossibility.

The episodes that reflect Cinderella's relationship to her natural mother run contrary to the patriarchalization of this fairy tale; they are filled with beauty and magic and make the entire story possible. Cinderella's mother is 'dead,' which means that she lives in a grave, a house of the Underworld. From there she actively supports her daughter,

¹¹ A similar journey of initiation can be seen in the Russian fairy tale *Wassilissa the Beautiful*. Wassilissa sets out for her journey to the Underworld and, there, she meets the goddess Baba Yaga; from her she learns all the arts and magic of her matriarchal culture. See Elisabeth Borchers (ed.): *Wassilissa die Wunderschöne*. Frankfurt, 1974.

which makes her appear to be more the Abundance-Giving Woman in the Other World than a dead mortal mother. First, she lets the magical tree that Cinderella planted as a twig grow out of her grave. Magical birds (talking doves) are perched in its boughs. Then, gold and silver rain down on Cinderella from the twigs of the tree in the same way that they came from the arched gateway for Golden Mary in the Mother Holle story. Here, too, the silver and gold cling to the young woman like magic dresses. Cinderella now goes to the ball radiating the symbolic value of life's abundance and is therefore magically irresistible to the prince. The silver or golden dress is not only a graceful symbolism of abundance, but also of the art of weaving, an authentic matriarchal art which was invented by women. (Even Golden Mary sprang into the well for a lost spindle and received it back from the hand of the spinning Mother Holle). At the close of the fairy tale, the talking birds ensure justice for Cinderella, a motif that figures prominently in the Mother Holle story, too, who protects Golden Mary from her stepmother and jealous stepsister.

The fact that Cinderella's mother dwells in the Underworld, sending the doves as symbols of Heaven and making the tree grow as a symbol of the Earth, gives evidence that she is the triple Great Goddess herself, even though she is hidden and does no longer appear in person. In one variant, she at least reaches out from the grave to personally give the magical dresses to her daughter. This is a relic of her personal, active involvement, just as Cinderella's daily tarrying and mourning at her mother's grave is a relic of what had once been the Underworld journey. Planting the magic sapling, too, is a relic of matriarchal arts which the hereditary daughter had to learn, because Cinderella's real task is not to clean house and to dig peas from the ash, but to be initiated into matriarchal knowledge.

In the end Cinderella is the triumphant, rejuvenated image of the Goddess herself: she is red and white as a 'rose and snowball,' because this was how her mother had wished she would be born (in one variation¹²). She has golden hair and is posed in golden garment; she is encircled by fluttering doves, like a daughter of the Goddess of Love.¹³ It is she who chooses her partner, the prince, as partner for the Sacred Marriage, not vice versa.

Woman as Sister of Man: the Gift-Giving Woman in a Deathlike State

In this second group, I analyze *Snow White* (KHM 53) along with *The Twelve Brothers*, *The Seven Ravens*, and *The Six Swans* (KHM 9/25/49); the latter three tales form a special sub-group because they are perfectly parallel to each other, and to some more of this kind.

In these fairy tales the Abundance-Giving Woman is no longer a divine personage from the Underworld, but rather the Daughter herself, who is temporarily put into an

12 See notes 7 and 8 for variations.

13 Golden hair and sacred doves are characteristics of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite.

otherworldly state. The mother-daughter relationship recedes into the background in order to demonstrate the complete development of the daughter, for she is now both daughter and mother. Only in this combined role does the full breadth of riches acquired in the initiation become apparent.

The fairy tales of this second group demonstrate exactly this narrative pattern if we also include their second sequences. The second sequences are often cut off in the Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales*, but they are contained in the variants.

Snow White

In this fairy tale, the matriarchal symbolism is even more pronounced in this fairy tale. According to the wishes of her mother, who passes away into the Underworld as soon as Snow White is born, the daughter appears in the three sacred colors; they are her mother's gift to her. She is white like snow, red like blood, and her hair is black like ebony. She is the matriarchal ideal of beauty, like the triple Goddess herself. No wonder, then, that she surpasses all beauty. Furthermore, she is closely entwined with the magic apple of life and death. In the variant from India, she is even born from the apple and is called 'Little Pomegranate.' The pomegranate is the classical symbol of the apple of death. As a consequence, Snow White is put into a deathlike state by an apple at the hands of her stepmother.

Snow White sleeps in a place no less mysterious than the Underworld. It was not at all a glass coffin, which is merely a miniaturized version of the true location: she sleeps in the Glass Mountain or the Glass Castle (variant from Austria). The Glass Mountain, guarded by elf-like beings, is a place of the Underworld in pre-Celtic mythology. The Fairy Morrigan/Morgane had the habit of surrounding her resting places with an impenetrable wall of air, supplying the illusion that she was resting in a castle of glass. A passer-by could observe her, but in no way reach her. This was usually fatal because he would fall in love with her and lose himself in a trance, or in a lover's frenzy. This passion was evoked by her beauty, which lay in the fact that Morgane appears in three sacred colors - white, red, and black - which are, again, a magical symbol of the triple Goddess herself. In the fairy tale, the same thing happens to the prince at the sight of Snow White.

But Snow White is guarded by so so-called 'dwarves,' elf-like beings who themselves reside in the subterranean region and retrieve 'treasures' which symbolically represent fertility from the womb of the Earth. Dwarves are called *Alben* in pre-Germanic mythology, and they are powerful and mighty; in pre-Celtic mythology they are fairy kings, graced with charm and magical skills, who are the constant companions, guardians, and defenders of the divine fairies. In these mythological systems, they never are cute or silly figures, but rather are formidable opponents to the intruding males. It might thus not have been so easy for the passing-by prince to win Snow White as his beloved queen.

In order to recognize the full matriarchal pattern in the plot, we need to add the

second sequence of this fairy tale. In this second part, Snow White receives, still while sleeping, the prince's love and gives birth to two children, as a true Gift-Giving Woman in a Deathlike State. The children awaken her by sucking the ring of sleep from her finger. When she awakens, she calls her little daughter 'Moon' and her little son 'Sun' (Oriental version of this fairy tale). Here, though, these names do not represent just the children, but rather indicate that the radiating children of Snow White are the real heavenly bodies: the sun and the moon.

While awakening from the Underworld, Snow White proceeds through a chain of transformations which encompass the most splendid forms of vegetation: a sunflower, a mango tree, and several fruits (variant from India). These demonstrate the gifts of fertility she is bringing with her from the Underworld. Thus, she must be understood as the Earth goddess herself, awakening from her deathlike sleep during winter in the Glass Castle of ice. The moon and sun are awakening her in spring, reviving her and all of nature.

It must be added that, because Snow White gave birth to the lights of Heaven, moon and sun, she is also connected to the sphere of Heaven. And she knows the Underworld through her magic sleep in its depth. This might indicate that she has been seen as an image of the triple Goddess herself, whose three sacred colors are characteristic for the appearance of Snow White.

Here we see the transformation of the imperilled daughter to her full maternal powers. The Gift-Giving Woman in a Deathlike State finds herself in dangerous states of absence, such as sleep, muteness, or 'death,' which represent her journey through the Underworld. Finally, by becoming a mother herself, she participates in the powers of the Mother Goddess and is transformed into Her image.¹⁴

The Twelve Brothers, The Seven Ravens, The Six Swans

In this special group of fairy tales, the second sequence which leads from Marriage to the Underworld and to the Return of the woman has been perfectly preserved. Including both sequences, these fairy tales show the same precise patterns of action we see in *Snow White*, and similar ones: the imperilled daughter becomes queen (first sequence), then she suffers a dangerous, otherworldly journey in a deathlike state in order to return as the saviour and giver of life (second sequence).

However, the wealth of relationships enjoyed by the women of this group of fairy tales encompasses not only that of daughter and mother, but also that of sister and brother. In fact, being sisters is their primary role, as is evidenced by their deep commitment to their brothers throughout their hard work dedicated to them. They are prepared to sacrifice wealth, crown, reputation, the love of their husbands, even their children and their own lives, in the effort to rescue their brothers. The sister-brother relationship is so profound here as to far outweigh conjugal bonds. The reason for this lies in the fact

¹⁴ The fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* shows the same pattern and spiritual content as *Snow White*, if the second sequence, preserved in variants, is included.

that the relationship between sisters and brothers in these fairy tales is matriarchal, while the relationship between wife and husband, the king, is patriarchal. In matriarchal societies, the relationship between sisters and brothers is the closest after the relationship between mothers and daughters; their emotional bond is intense, for they are the children of the same mother.

The woman as priestess or queen plays a central and active role in matriarchies, for she has everything in her hands: the land, the crown, the matriarchal arts, the sacred knowledge, and her lifegiving powers. She has won all during her initiation from her mother, but she is supported by her brothers in every phase of her life. Sisters and brothers live together in their mother's clan house throughout their lives, and they share the social, economic, and spiritual responsibilities of the clan. Therefore, in matriarchal societies, the true female-male pair is sister and brother, not wife and husband.

In this group of fairy tales, the brothers, on the contrary, own nothing; they stray through the forests hunting prey and are not even truly human, for they appear in skins or feathers, while the sister wears beautiful self-made clothing. These men lack even a shirt on their backs! They have been cursed and banished to the wilderness by an old 'witch' – she usually is the demonized goddess of the Underworld, the Goddess of Fate, who was initiating the brothers' journey through the Underworld. Being enchanted into animal form is a symbolic representation of social death as a human. The enchanted brothers have not a clue as to how to escape their animal figure of horses, bears, ravens, swans, snakes, frogs etc. and to again become human.

Being children of the same mother and belonging together, the sister in each of these fairy tales apparently takes pity on her brothers in their wretched state. Therefore, she starts caring for them, because the brothers are totally dependent on her. The sister wants to transform them from the wild state to a human one again by giving them clothes and making them cultivated residents of her home. This act from her symbolizes redeeming her brothers. She employs a counter-magic that she has learned from her mother. If the Goddess of Fate has woven for them animal caps that enchanted them into animals, the sister now weaves human shirts for her brothers. If the Goddess of Fate plunged them to their death as human beings, the sister voluntarily participates in her brothers' departure from the human realm by entering the deathlike state herself. She remains silent and void of any expression of human emotion, as do her animal brothers. Thus, she appears to be mentally and emotionally dead and symbolically takes part in her brothers' journey through the Underworld. However, through this process she wins the power of redemption in order to reawaken their human life. This demonstrates that, by her own otherworldly journey, the sister comes to possess some traits of the Goddess of Fate, who had woven the animal caps for the men. Like the Goddess of Fate, the sister can, also through the art of weaving, cast spells and deliver her brothers from 'death.'

This behaviour and indeed this entire constellation is held suspect by the patriarchal

king who, in these fairy tales, has made the sister his wife because of her beauty. He did not ask for her consent, because, while weaving, the sister remained totally mute. Now it is the patriarchal king who makes himself important as husband, a position that a lover or mate never had in matriarchal societies. Now he – not she – owns the land, the castle, the crown, and now he generously places a crown on the sister's head by making her his queen, again not having asked her before (first sequence). In spite of these 'honors' by the patriarchal king, the sister does not abandon her matriarchal values and behaviour. She endures all suspicions and accusations, until she is found guilty of the most mortal sin: she is blamed to have killed her newborn child and is vilified to be a 'witch.' In fact, it is her wicked mother-in-law who has stolen the child. Then the sister is condemned by the king to be burned to death at the stake. This brutal fact concerns nothing more than mere physical death or pure destruction, whereas all the forms of death we have until now encountered in matriarchal thinking were always transformations into a higher life. The orchestration of these processes in matriarchies rested in the magic of the goddesses and in the hands of women, and they never meant destruction.

However, it does not come to the worst: the fairy tales of this group always come to the good end that, just in the moment when the flames start to blaze, the period of the magic year of weaving and silence draws to a close, and the animal-brothers happen by. The sister throws the human shirts over them, they are freed from the charm, and extinguish the flames. That is to say, it is the woman who saves the man from 'death' by transforming him into a human, civilized, and socially responsible partner. She delivers him first of all in the form of her brother.

Transformations of Fairy Tales

Now that this comparative study has revealed the structure of international fairy tales to be based on matriarchal mythology and ritual practice, I would like to consider and compare the various transformations of that structure. These transformations are not arbitrary, but follow certain rules which become recognizable as systematic distortions of the original stories and their content. The distortions, in turn, inform us of the social motivations and political functions behind the deformations; they are due to patriarchal ideology and social patterns, which are mirrored in these distortions. I have already made references to this process by which matriarchal mythology was patriarchalized; now I would like to explain it in regard to the fairy tales.

The structure of the first fairy tale *Mother Holle* is very ancient, because the mother-daughter relationship predominates. It corresponds, in the field of mythology and ritual practice, to early matriarchal patterns. The mother-daughter relationship is the spiritual goddess-priestess relationship here. In terms of inheritance, it meant the bequeathing of cultic knowledge and magical powers. The characteristics of the all-encompassing goddess are that she is the Mistress of the Underworld, and of Heaven and Earth as the Triple Goddess of all three regions. The daughter goes through phases

of initiation in which she is withdrawn from the world. This enables her not only to become like the Goddess, but to be identified with her, for she wins the abilities of the Goddess.

At this stage, male partners play no role whatever; they are not even considered to be 'impregnators' because pregnancy is seen to be the result of eating a fruit or viewing a magical sign. This can be seen with *Snow White*, whose mother sees three magical drops of blood in the snow, and by regarding the three sacred colours white-red-black she becomes pregnant. The central action revolves only around mother and daughter. Problems arise through surrogate stepmothers and stepsisters who seek to deprive the daughter of the goddess of her spiritual inheritance. These figures are later interpolations, because they are connected to a 'father' who plays no role at all besides having married a second wife. This shows the first patriarchal deformations.

The structure of *Cinderella* has been much more altered. Even if the spiritual relationship between mother and daughter is at the core of the story, a patriarchal family pattern is, again, introduced and Cinderella's mother is diminished to a dead and nearly forgotten relative. In spite of her magical gift-giving powers, her name as a goddess is concealed – a typical patriarchal deformation. Now, the man is playing a role as 'prince,' but he is depicted as mate only, as the consort of the Goddess of Love to whom Cinderella is transformed in the end.

The most drastic alteration, however, is evident in the deformation of the original structure of fairy tales, which consists of two sequences. The first sequence is the dangerous way of the daughter through the process of Initiation, leading in many cases to Sacred Marriage; the second shows her journey through the Underworld and her Return into a higher life, in most cases as an image of the Goddess Herself. The far-reaching consequences of the loss of the second sequence can be seen in *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and, also, in *Sleeping Beauty*. These fairy tales close at a point that now the only goal worth pursuing seems to be marriage, to have a husband, especially a prince, a man of higher rank – the best patriarchal 'happy ending' for a woman. In that way, the mythical figures of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White are robbed of their cosmic dimension. Once these women have lost their cosmic dimensions, the major portion of their activity becomes obliterated. Thus, even though the princes have done nothing to earn the privilege, they find themselves in the position of being the final rescuers and redeemers. But it is precisely this second sequence that often includes the loss of the consort and the woman's subsequent mythical-magical search through the Underworld to find him; therefore, she is acting as *his* redeemer (*Cinderella*, *Frog King*). It is, then, no coincidence that the elimination of the second sequence is auspicious for the male, but results in a drastic reduction of the woman's powers.

When the second sequence is included in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the cosmic dimension of the woman becomes obvious: she brings forth the astral bodies sun and moon and the fertility of the earth. In this constellation, the prince as consort has little

importance, he is nothing else than a short-term lover, not even being able to wake the sleeping woman up. When she arises from her otherworldly state in the end, she has become a goddess herself, although without name. But this 'happy ending' as the final divine appearance of the woman is not at all wanted in patriarchy and has led to the intentional suppression of the second sequence.

The silencing of the women's mythological names and, through that, their simplification into stereotypical characters was just the beginning of patriarchalization. This is immediately followed by a demonization of the Goddess that is taken, in some cases, to absurdity. The Abundance-Giving Mother recedes more and more into the background, or is made into a 'witch' who curses her own children (*The Twelve Brothers*), or even wants to devour them (*Haensel and Gretel*). The rule of matriarchal inheritance is completely destroyed by putting in the giving mother's place a ruling, kingly father who owns everything and has complete command. The motif of the woman's sisterly love and deep commitment to her brothers arouses suspicion to be too matriarchal, therefore the sister must be married to a patriarchal husband. But this constellation makes the loyalty of the sister's support of her brothers an inexplicable motif; she is simply said to be a 'very good' sister.

In another group of fairy tales, the man acts as redeemer and the 'brothers' are considered to be related to each other, but not to the woman they woo (*The Four Ingenious Brothers* and similar tales). This has the function of placing the woman in the background. After all, what kind of heroic deed should she perform for husbands who are strangers to her? These brothers, on the other hand, become the luminous pivotal point in the plot. Through this manipulation, the matriarchal relationship to the brothers is destroyed and is replaced in all these tales by a patriarchal relationship. Now it is the woman who is rescued, elevated, banished, humiliated, accused, or sentenced to death by her husband according to his arbitrary will, so that in the end, she is belittled into an absolutely passive role and is to be given as an inanimate object by the father to the husband (for example, *The Brave Little Tailor*).

There is also an element of parody in the trivialization of symbols. The princesses who, in the beginning, were magical and powerful, are later portrayed as little more than curious girls (*Sleeping Beauty*), naively and fickle (*Snow White*), or capricious (*Frog King*). The ordinary women are constantly doing housework (for ex. *Cinderella*, and Golden Mary in *Mother Holle*). Erotic acts are reduced to a kiss or a gaze or "playing" in the bedroom. Accordingly, the symbols surrounding these infantilized figures are: a golden ball, and a hoppity, though somewhat slippery little frog (*Frog King*); a sugary, sweet gingerbread house (*Haensel und Gretel*); an enchanted child-brother as a little deer led on a golden leash (*Little Brother and Little Sister*); clever, but helpless and sentimental garden dwarves (*Snow White*).

Here, the Brothers Grimm have diligently lent expression to the patriarchal doll-like version of the woman of their time, while revising and editing the once mythological tales as *Children's and Household Tales*. They did the last step in patriarchalizing these mythological stories by fictionalizing them, which is to say, by presenting their figures

and content as products of mere fantasy. This stripped them of any relation to cultural history and social reality and made them, at last, into 'fairy tales' – a literary genre they never had been before.

About the Author

Heide Goettner-Abendroth has published on philosophy of science and extensively on matriarchal society and culture; she has become the founder of Modern Matriarchal Studies. Her main works are *Matriarchal Societies. Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe* (Lang 2013, New York) and *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Origin of Patriarchy. West Asia and Europe*, (Lang 2022, New York). Visiting professor at the University of Montreal in Canada and the University of Innsbruck in Austria. Founder and director of the International Academy HAGIA for Matriarchal Studies (www.hagia.de). Dr. Goettner-Abendroth can be found at www.goettner-abendroth.de.

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