



IV. Field Notes and Dialogues

Witches in Fairy Tales and their Use in Therapy. Interview with Gréta Vaskor

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ABSTRACT

Fairy tales (and other narratives) are used as therapeutic tools in therapy. Stories about witches and magic, including spells, mobilize the emotions and the mind of the patient and help them providing patterns and suggesting solutions. This interview is a dialog between an anthropologist specialized in the anthropology of witchcraft and magic and a psychotherapist trained in family and individual therapy using fairy tale therapy in combination with other methods.

Tünde Komáromi (TK): In your work as a therapist, I know you often use fairy tale therapy alongside other techniques. How did you encounter this technique? Have you used fairy tale therapy from the outset, or did you become acquainted with it and captivated by it later? What are its hidden opportunities compared to other techniques?

Gréta Vaskor (GV): Back in 2012, at a conference on family therapy, I attended a workshop presentation given by Ildikó Boldizsár, and then and there it occurred to me that I would like to learn this technique! I was fortunate, because that same year I had the opportunity to participate in a longer encounter group and gained a place on the training programme that was initiated then.

Why do I love it? Because working with fairy tales is very suggestive and active. I love the fact

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that it moves the emotions and the mind at the same time. Stories can always be taken along with us. They can step forward in unexpected places and remind us of a solution or give us food for thought, or help us via providing models. I love the transparent principle of organisation, the inner logic one finds in them. And I love their secrets, the fact that they can always tell us something new about the world and about the workings of the human soul. Fairy tales inspire and entertain. And I noticed that they enchant many people, and that they can open doors and reframe experiences; they help us ask questions and they also help us formulate the answers. I think it is marvellous to work with and listen to, or even narrate, stories that have been told and heard by many others before us. It is like being part of a large community.

TK: You work mainly with folk tales and your handling of these tales is very diverse – you live, work and think with fairy tales, and you invite others to do the same. Could you say a few words about this as well, about the kind of things you do with fairy tales?

GV: I work exclusively with folk tales – I could, and many therapists do, work with fictional tales, or literary texts and works; that too is a valid method, it is just not mine. I narrate *viva voce*, and “learning” a tale helps me a lot with understanding the deeper layers of meaning in it. For one does not learn a fairy tale by heart in the same way as one learns a poem or a literary text. A tale is a constant flow of images, and when I learn a tale, images take shape inside me and I “read” these images. When I narrate *viva voce*, it is as if an inner movie is being shown within me, and the words come into being almost of their own accord.

I narrate in groups, at tale-nights and occasionally in individual therapy as well. I have fairy tale study groups, where we explore a tale or a version of a tale to understand the conflict shown by the story and the paths to finding a solution. This work is an indispensable preparation for any therapy work with fairy tales. I have thematic, shorter and longer, closed and open fairy tale groups: I draw upon the tale for inspiration regarding the topics being covered.

I teach basic knowledge of fairy tales, symbology, and self-knowledge through fairy tale therapy in the Complex Art Therapy major at John Wesley College. I include tales and other techniques in individual therapy.

TK: Let us now turn to the topic of this thematic issue: witches. What kind of witches are there in fairy tales? What kinds of stories include witches? In what roles, in which human relationships do they appear?

GV: Fairy tale witches are hags, crones, devilish women, mothers and wives of dragons – the names are manifold, but their roles, and the way they operate, are similar. They represent the destructive, devouring, binding, dark side of the feminine principle, where enchantment is present; they turn people

into animals; they curse; they petrify; they compel. They have superhuman power and knowledge, and precisely because of this they are scary and dangerous. Because they do not seek to nourish, nurture or defend life, but the opposite: to disrupt life and make it wither away. We encounter them in many, many tales; even though they may have different names, their function is often similar. V.J. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (2005) identifies seven permanent character roles in tales. One of these is the role of the harmer, the enemy, the hinderer – fairy tale witches represent precisely this role. They are the ones who hinder the hero of the tale from fulfilling his tasks, the ones who want to destroy him. This destructive feminine principle is showcased in many different ways in fairy tales. Let us take a look at a few examples of how witches function and of how their way of functioning can be fought, “survived,” and conquered.

Witches can bewitch, they can shape-shift, or they can deprive people of essential parts of their human nature:

Once upon a time there lived a witch who had three sons. They were good brothers, they loved each other and treated their mother well: But she didn’t trust them, fearing they were brewing up something bad against her and were seeking to strip her of her power. So she changed the eldest into an eagle, and the second into a whale. The eagle had to live on the very top of a cliff; sometimes he could be seen sweeping in wide circles in the sky. The second son, whom she turned into a whale, lived in the deep sea; at times he swam to the surface and spouted enormous jets of water high into the air. The third son was afraid that his mother would eventually turn him as well into some kind of animal, perhaps a bear or a wolf, and so one day he ran away from home in secret. (“The Crystal Ball,” in Grimm and Grimm 1989)¹

The message is a terrifying one. The mother does not raise; she does not support or protect; instead, she is someone from whom the children



deserve to be rescued, since she deprives them of fulfilment, of accomplishment, of “being human,” and turns them into wild beasts. After the curse – after the spell – one can only swim around in the depths or lead a lonely life high upon a cliff-top. What kind of a life is that?

The language of the tale is symbolic: the witch-principle can enchant, it can change. Thus the part of the mother’s self that functions like a witch will also be capable of this.

How does one answer, how does one cope with this? What can be done? Fairy tales always point to a solution, to a way out – this is what makes them tales, because a tale is also a coping programme. The third son ran away from home one night, in secret. The message of the tale is that one ought not to be drawn into a confrontation, one ought not to fight – indeed, that would be impossible with this witch-mother, so great is her power. Instead, one needs to recognise the situation and save one’s life! The general message of fairy tales is that children cannot change the dark / destructive side of parents, they cannot fight it; rather, after they have drawn strength from, let’s say, connecting to a good motherly principle, which is represented by dolls or animal mothers, they go away, they leave the witch-mother. That is, they close that inner spiritual door that must be left behind, that ties and links with the destructive motherly principle often represented in tales by witches or stepmothers.

How does a mother become a witch? This Finnish folktale from Karelia tells us in symbolic images what kind of spell / curse is needed for this: A woman and her husband set out to search for a sheep that has gone missing. They separate; one looks in this direction, the other in that direction. Then a meeting occurs, in which the “good” mother suddenly disappears; she is turned into a black sheep, and her place is taken by the destructive, bad mother:

As the woman continues on her path, suddenly she comes across Syöjätär. The witch speaks to the woman thus:

– Spit, you ugly thing, on the sheath of my knife and go around me three times, and

you’ll find your sheep!

The woman hesitates at first, but eventually she submits to the command. But the sheep is not found: Syöjätär changes the woman into a black sheep; she, in turn, assumes the appearance of the woman. And she immediately shouts to the man:

– Hey, old man, you may as well come, I’ve found the sheep!

The man arrives and they set out for home. They are in good spirits, for their sheep has been found. Back home, they drive it into the pen. The man has no inkling of what has happened, but his daughter immediately sees that this hag is not her mother. There is no denying she looks like her mother, but still, she is not; her glance is different; her gaze is cold and evil. The girl goes out to the pen and takes a closer look at the black sheep. The eyes of that sheep are exactly the same as her mother’s. The girl bursts into tears, flings her arms around the sheep’s neck and hugs her. The sheep speaks with a human voice:

– Oh, my dear daughter, Syöjätär turned me into this black sheep and she is even now usurping my place. Give me clean water to drink, from a clean glass, for I cannot drink from the trough, with the sheep. And bring me some leftover bread as well. (“The Blue Reindeer,” in Ágai 1977)

This tale is a longer version of Cinderella. After the father has killed the black sheep at the witch’s command, the girl collects three drops of its blood and buries them in the ground, and in that place there springs up a birch tree with a large crown of leaves, which helps the girl with advice and gifts to gain strength, defend herself, and formulate her desires and needs. This tale is full to the brim with witchcraft; a bewitching feminine force or quality appears here, specifically a destructive one. The soul understands the language of symbols; it recognises the story and the deep message that unfolds beneath the words: a small, living droplet of life, of blood, is enough to enable the growth of an enormous supportive power, and this, in itself, is wondrous!



TK: What else do witches do in tales?

GV: They strip people of their true selves, they separate them from the source of life and lock them into a world of inner anguish:

the glass king recounted how and by what means he was turned into glass, and how a bumblebee got into his belly. It was like this: An old witch sought to marry off her daughter to him. But when he found himself a wife from the land of the fairies, the witch, in her great wrath, turned her daughter into a bumblebee and him into glass, and sent her inside him to eat away at him and torment him. She, the witch, changed into a spider with two pincers, so that she could wrap the queen's dress of roses in spider's web. And [she turned] the maid into a thorn bird that kept tearing down the spider's web, so she could weave it around again. Yet even this was not enough: she also had to shoot the king's magical steed. ("The Rosemary Spring," in Benedek 2016)

In this tale the witch-function does not appear in a parent / child relationship, for that is not its only area of action; it represents the destructive principle in other areas of life as well. Here we have a king, who is an adult and represents the mature, decisive, acting principle. After healing the horse that had been shot, he fights the spider / witch (this image of the spider, too – how well it evokes the feeling of being bound up, of being entangled in something!), and with the help of his magical horse he kills both her and the eating, tormenting bumblebee-power. Here we encounter the definite elimination and annihilation of this function, which is motivated by rage, envy, and a desire for revenge.

TK: Where do witches live? What do fairy tales know about this?

GV: In Hungarian folktales the world is perceived in three layers. The different places encountered in tales (and the inner, spiritual places in people too) typically belong in the lower, middle, or upper realm. The world of men is in the middle realm, and fairy tale heroes cross into the lower or upper realms only when

their tasks or their fate drives them to do so. The upper realm may be the home of dragons, magical horses, of the Sun and its mother; the lower realm is populated by goblins / dwarves ("Koponyányi Monyók [skull-sized imps]"), dragons, devilish minions and witches, griffins, and kidnapped princesses. However, these wondrous creatures, these archetypes, can be found at all levels of this threefold universe; they can cross between layers. Thus, witches can live in the middle realm, and specifically within the family, secretly bewitching the good mother, or, in their rage, they can wreak havoc between the members of a couple, but they can also reside in the lower realm, the space of hell:

All of a sudden, the twelve warriors disappeared as if the ground had swallowed them up. "Now, where could have they disappeared to?" wondered Mirkó. But as he was musing on this, he spotted something dark. It was an iron trapdoor, that dark thing. All at once he lifted the trapdoor and – goodbye world! He jumped into the opening with great courage. Darkness lay ahead, darkness lay also behind: "Well, this must be the threshold of hell!" he thought to himself. Well spotted, indeed! All of a sudden, poof! He landed in hell. Where lo! the twelve warriors were riding hard, rushing straight for a diamond castle.

– Sword, out of the sheath! cried Mirkó as the twelve warriors were about to enter the gate of the diamond castle: Slash, slash, all twelve fell dead from their horses.

Mikó paused for a mere moment before the diamond castle, no longer. He said:

– I have one life, one death: I shall find out who lives inside.

But only after he set foot in the diamond castle did his eyes and mouth fall wide open. A devilish old hag sat before a tremendously large loom. And, wonder of wonders! As she threw her shuttle to the right, two hussars sprang out; as she threw it to the left, two foot-soldiers.

"Hey-ho!" thought Mirkó to himself, "but this is too serious by half!"



– Sword, out of the sheath!

Now, the poor soldiers didn't even have a chance to look around; the minute they sprang from under the hands of the devilish mother, their lives were immediately over. But no matter how many the sword cut down, many more sprang from the loom in their place.

"Well, at this rate I shall never prevail against the work of this devilish mother," thought Mirkó. "Instead, I shall cut off her head, and then she won't weave any more soldiers." Hmm, I should like to see that! He may have cut off the head of the devilish mother, but her hands were still working. She kept throwing the shuttle left and right, and within a minute the room was full of soldiers. Hey! Mirkó rose in anger, and cut down all the soldiers in the room. The devilish mother he chopped into tiny pieces. Afterwards he pulled the loom into the courtyard and set it as well as the devilish mother on fire.

– Now we no longer have to fight, either myself, or the old warrior, said Mirkó with great joy.

No longer, indeed? He couldn't have been more wrong, for all of a sudden, a tiny bone slipped from the embers and began to spin like a strong hurricane and – oh, Lord Jesus, don't abandon us! – that tiny piece of bone was transformed into the devilish mother!

– Is that so?! cried out Mirkó. Sword, out of the sheath! ("Prince Mirkó," in Benedek 2016)

The weaver, the loom, keeps working and pouring out soldiers who destroy life; there is no other choice here but to eliminate this witch-power, the devilish mother. We find here hell, re-creation from bones, and enchantment – infinite, unstoppable, magical activity. The power that destroys the world reveals itself in fairy tales in this way, too - through symbols.

TK: What other roles can witches play?

GV: Witches can be mothers of the devil, or mothers or wives of dragons; these are more terrifying and wreak more havoc than the dragon-power itself, which, by contrast, shows itself face-to-face, openly, commits to a fight, and can be defeated by the sword or in a wrestling

match. The witch destroys in a treacherous way, by trickery and poisoning, by taking on a different nature or disguise:

Wing of Beautiful Plain took the horse of the twelve-headed dragon as well, and the three of them mounted the three dragons' horses and thus continued their journey. The three royal horses followed slowly behind them. But the three black ravens began to croak, and Wing of Beautiful Plain halted at once and gave them the royal horses.

They moved on and reached a large forest. There they stopped and tethered their horses. There was a path; Wing of Beautiful Plain set out along it. Soon he reached a castle hewn out of the rock. He went closer, thinking of ways to get inside the castle. He turned a somersault and became a wasp, and he crept through the keyhole. But he was terribly scared, because inside he found the wives of the three dragons and their mother-in-law, sitting together and plotting with the mother of the dragons precisely how to take revenge.

The mother of the dragons sent the wife of her eldest son to bewitch a pear tree right beside the road that Wing of Beautiful Plain would be taking on his way home. Were someone to eat from that pear tree, they would die on the spot. She sent the second son's wife to become a spring, and anyone who drank from that water would die. She told the third son's wife to become a huge fire and consume Wing of Beautiful Plain and his brothers.

Wing of Beautiful Plain heard all this clearly; he turned a somersault, became a man again and returned to his brothers. They set out again, but they had only taken a few steps when they were hit by such hunger that they were nearly starving to death. The brothers spotted a pear tree and rushed to eat from it. But Wing of Beautiful Plain dashed ahead of them and thrust his sword into the tree. The tree collapsed and turned into blood. He asked his brothers if they were still hungry. They answered: No. Then they went on. ("Wing of Beautiful Plain, Kitty Cat," in Boldizsár 2002)



Nothing can help here except vigilance and cunning, if the hero too disguises himself and instead of engaging face-to-face, which would reveal his true identity, discovers the witches' plans by spying on them – by using exactly the same methods that witches commonly use. Here, too, the task is to destroy, to eliminate this agency from the world, since it is dangerous, because it manifests as something other than what it really is: this is not a nourishing fruit, this is not a refreshing spring, and this is not a warming fire, but destruction and death. And indeed many fail to recognise this, seeing only the fruit, the water, and the warmth. We, too, may be familiar with people or agencies that present a different face from what they truly are: they promise to nourish, to keep warm and safe, but deep down and in reality they are poisonous and destructive. Such things are not confined to the realm of the fairy tales; we can also encounter them here, in our middle realm! Tales prompt us, in fact, to recognise them – again with the help of fairy tale images and symbols.

TK: Are fairy tale witches only capable of destruction? Do they showcase just the dark and consuming side of womanhood, or do they signify other things as well?

GV: It is exciting that witches also have at their disposal enormous wealth and power; they possess a special, wondrous personal power, which they keep hidden: the magical horse. As V.J. Propp (2005) expresses it in *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale*, the horse is a universal helper, since it gives advice, becomes the hero's faithful companion, occasionally fulfils tasks for him, gives him magical objects, and transports him across the realms. The witch never gives away this "power" willingly; she hides it, keeps it captive, or mistreats it, as we learn from the following tale:

"Now then, young nobleman," said the old beggar, "thank God you did not begrudge me the scones. I know what road you are walking. Many princes galloped by on golden-coated stallions; I asked every one of them for help in the name of God, but they wouldn't even listen

to me, they rode on with great pride. Lo! But they came back in shame without the Pelican bird. Well, one good turn deserves another, my lad! Listen up! The Pelican bird is far beyond the Great Sea, and even if you were to put together the lives of three men you couldn't get there on foot or on horseback, no matter what kind of horse you had. You need a horse suckled on dragon's milk. Go through this forest, then keep on going through another, and at the other end of that forest there lives an old witch. Offer to become her servant. The year has three days there, but no son of man has lasted that many days. Because you have to care for two horses, and those two horses are the witch's two daughters. These two horses sometimes hide under the earth, sometimes under the sea, but they hide in the clouds as well, and they will return home only after the three days are over. They may as well return then, for by then the old witch will have your head on a spike. Now don't you worry, my lad! Here, I'll give you a pipe. This pipe has three holes. If you blow through the first, the king of the mosquitoes will appear; if the second, the king of the fish; and if the third, the king of the mice. These will seek out the horses wherever they may be hiding. When the year is over, the old witch will offer you riches and jewels of all kinds – but don't you take any notice of whatever she shows you or tells you, just ask for the foal that is buried twelve feet deep in the manure and is half rotten, too. Just dig this foal out, put it on your shoulders and take it away, and don't dare stop until you reach the bridge of the village. There go under the bridge and wash the foal thoroughly. The rest is up to you. ("The Pelican Bird," in Benedek 2016)

The tasks set by the witch seek to test one's vigilance; they test whether the young man is able to find, with the assistance of his fairy tale animal helpers, the daughters / horses that hide in different places - in the water, in the earth, in the air – that is, in the elements – and whether he can bring them back, that is, whether he is capable of mastering this way of functioning! It



is not an easy task, and it is an enormous test: it reveals how the witch-power operates and how it can nevertheless be kept in check. Upon the young man's successful completion of his service, the witch has no other option but to provide access to the horse, although the lad still has to activate this power – that is, he has to dig it out from deep down, from the depths of pollution, and he has to clean it and wash it. After this, he can continue his journey and his search for the Pelican bird: for happiness, for youth, for fresh strength. The witch stays alive, since she concluded a “business deal” with the young man, and after successfully completing his service, the young man is allowed to have the weak and gaunt magical horse. (In other words, the witch-power is still alive and continues to exist; thus, within this dark, all-enfolding feminine space there are countless other magical horses still buried deep in the ground! The field is open for us to find them!).

TK: Does the hero have to face the witch by himself, or does he have helpers?

GV: The witch's power is shape-shifting, attacking, binding, puts to sleep, and displaces life and fate. This is a massive power; alone, without help or advice, the fairy tale hero is unable to defeat it or trick it. Luckily, there are Fairy Godmothers and powerful creating goddesses to give girls the gift of sevenfold beauty and sevenfold knowledge, with the fifth piece of knowledge being precisely the knowledge of how to dominate the power of a witch. Of course, there is no harm in having a magical horse as a helper in this fight, which is special also because the girl may bewitch a gander in order to create the horse. (In fairy tales, the magical animal-power is not restricted to horses alone; wolves, stags, and cows may also possess this enormous power, but bumblebees and birds too can be turned into magical horses by enchantment).

As they were approaching the flock of geese, the nanny perceived that the prince had set out not to see his kingdom, but to see the goose girl. Then she leapt down from the carriage, took half a handful of dust from the road, held

it to her mouth, said something to the dust and cast it towards the geese. Then the geese flew into the air and made such a racket that the whole field shook with the noise.. Juliska too perceived this, but her magical horse did so sooner. Then the magical horse turned a somersault and became a wasp, and flew straight to the carriage and started to sting the old woman and her daughter all over, so much so that no part of their bodies was left untouched.

The old woman saw that this was the goose girl's doing. She bent to the ground again, took half a handful of dust from the road and made to throw it on the wasp. But then the wasp did another somersault and became an angry lion, and jumped on the old woman. Then the old woman sprinkled dust on the lion, and it became so tame that it couldn't hurt either the old woman or her daughter.

Now Juliska, too, saw what had happened to her horse. She quickly took out the copper serpent stick and swung it toward the carriage. Then the lion was freed from the enchantment of the old woman and ran back to Juliska. It did a somersault and turned back into the seven-legged horse that it was. Then Juliska again took out the copper serpent stick and swung it towards the prince, for he was heading for her on his horse. Then the prince, too, was released from the enchantment of the old woman. He galloped up to Juliska. They embraced each other and started kissing each another. (“The Magical Mare and the Goose Girl,” in Ortutay 1960)

We have here a stupendous “witch fight” that is almost like a scene from an action movie. Juliska, who has received the seven gifts from her fairy godmother, takes on the fight against the witch's power that has bound the man-power (the prince). This is not an easy task but one which demands enormous knowledge and power – this is what the tale teaches us. In this context, I am reminded of how many times I have encountered, both in family and in individual therapy sessions, stories and life-courses in which the mother tied, even chained the son to





herself, be it literally or figuratively, consciously or unconsciously; she was “present” as the third person in the couple’s relationship, whether as a value judgment, an opinion, or a standard of comparison. One needs sevenfold knowledge and sevenfold beauty to fight this power. It is worth recognising and preparing for it! (In this tale the prince, too, actively opposes the witch at certain points, and this also helps in the fight. At the end of the tale, it is the magical horses of the prince which annihilate this power.)

The picture is not complete – it cannot be – but it shows well the power and function of fairy tale witches: they enchant, bind, hide an enormous life power so that no one can avail themselves of it (this is the magical horse), and they destroy. They do everything possible to prevent life from being present in its full power, its entirety.

The task of the fairy tale hero is to recognise witches and fight them. In most cases this cannot be done alone; there are helpers and contributors as well on this path. The message is clear: one must eliminate this way of functioning from the world, since as long as this power exists we are not safe; we are, in fact, in life-threatening danger. We stumble, we wither, and we are locked away.

TK: Are there “good” witches in fairy tales?

GV: Of course. Let us not forget the wise women, the little grannies, and the women who are skilled in enchanting. All of these help the hero of the tale and give him magical objects, enabling him to advance on his fairy tale journey and fulfil his best possible destiny:

The boy was very sad because he had not heard news of his elder sisters here either. He thanked the old woman for her hospitality and returned to his journey hoping for better things.

He went on, passing by a lake filled with brimstone and, beyond that, a mountain that was always burning. On and on he went. And on the very top of a great rocky mountain he saw once again a lonely house. He redoubled his pace to be able to reach it by sunset and managed to do so. He entered. Well, he found

there an even more ancient woman than the previous two.

– May the Lord grant you a blessed good evening, dear mother! he greeted her, but this time with more courage than when addressing the previous two.

– Lucky for you that you called me mother, said the old woman, for otherwise I would have fed you to the eagles. What is your quest in this place, where no human soul has trod apart from you?

The boy told her what his quest was.

– Fear not, my son, said the old woman, I have high hopes that tomorrow we shall hear something of your sisters.

The old woman prepared a hearty dinner for the boy, made him up a soft bed, and she herself retired for the night.

(...)

They all scattered to the places they had come from. The old woman gave two tiny pieces of bone to the boy and said:

– Well, my boy, up to now you have only wasted effort, but your efforts will no longer be in vain, for you will see your sisters in a short while. When you reach that red tower, place these two pieces of bone against the side of the tower and think of me. You will see: a ladder will spring up right away from those two pieces of bone, of such tremendous height that you will climb with courage to the very place where the twelve jackdaws live. (“The Jackdaw Girls,” in Kriza 1982)

These women of great knowledge and enchanting power re-create and transform the “self” and make it stronger, thus shaping destinies. How interesting it is! Here, too, the magical object is a small bone. Whereas in an earlier tale the witch was re-created from this bone, now it serves to build a bridge, a connection – a ladder. The object remains the same, but the difference is in the intention: who wants to use it for what, and what kind of enchanting power is accordingly breathed into it!

However, the way these enchantresses re-create the self is at times terrifying. Only a

woman of great power who knows and can form every aspect of life is able to do this, just as Fairy Elisabeth, the godmother in the next tale, does:

... They sent for the priest at once, and had the boy christened. They gave him the name Carnation-Haired John. His godmother visited him frequently, each time bringing one gift or another. On the day the boy turned six, his godmother visited them again and said: "Dear lady, the time has come for me to take my godson with me." The poor woman wept bitterly, since, of all her children, she loved the youngest boy the most. But nothing could be done - she had to keep her promise. So she gave Carnation-Haired John to his godmother. The godmother took him to the place where, six years before, his mother had been weeping. And then she struck the sea with a stick, and the sea parted. A magnificent staircase led to the abyss. There they entered a marvellous castle, where everything was made of pure gold. Then the godmother took Carnation-Haired John and, cutting him up into tiny pieces, placed him in a tub and coated him with salt. She didn't spare him one glance for seven nights and seven days. On the seventh day, she took him out of the tub. She put him back together nicely, and Carnation-Haired John returned to life, but he was seven times as handsome as before. "Upon my soul, dear godmother, what lovely dreams I had! What a beautiful place I was in!" The godmother said: "I can see that you have learned something. Now go and play!" ("Carnation-Haired John," in Benedek 2016)

This cutting up happens several more times in the story. Interestingly, the woman who initiates the hero does this at times of transition in life. Her goal, as formulated in the language of the tale, is to render the young man seven times more handsome and to give him seven times more knowledge – and she does not achieve this by teaching or transmitting "worldly" knowledge, but by magic. What we see here is, in fact, an initiation process, which has interesting parallels with the initiation of shamans:

However, the most unusual thing happens to the shaman-to-be after he has returned from the shaman-school of the spirits. This "illness" is the last, concluding, step.

The Yakut shaman candidate "dies" at the end of this illness. For three-four days, he is simply lying completely unconscious on the bed to the right side of the yurt. He does not eat; he does not drink. Nobody is permitted to be at his side except an adolescent boy who knows no "uncleanness" whatsoever. And he, in turn, cannot do anything except give the candidate "black water" from time to time to. For now, the final act takes place: the candidate is "cut to pieces" by the spirits!

They first cut off his head, then chop his entire body into tiny pieces and distribute them among the evil spirits. It is unfortunate if, by chance, a given spirit does not partake of the candidate's body: throughout his career as a shaman, he will be powerless against illnesses caused by such spirits, since he can heal only the illnesses brought about by spirits that have tasted a piece of his body.

After the tasting, the spirits reassemble the cut-up body, thrust new meat upon the bones and bring the shaman back to life. It is said that at these times the candidate's bed is drenched in blood. Lesser shamans are cut up only once; the more famous, up to three times.

The shamans themselves recount this fantastic adventure. The Nenets shaman simply states that he was cut up. The Nganasan shaman, by contrast, relates a whole story about a naked man who cut off his head, then cut his body into pieces and cooked it in a cauldron for three days. This naked man was a blacksmith. He said: "All your bones were turned into river." "And I truly saw a river, in which my bones were floating." The smith was fishing out the bones with his tongs... The Teleuts, who live in the Altai Mountains, also believe that the spirits cut up the shaman-to-be and cook him in a cauldron, and count each of his bones with great care.

The aim of this cutting up is to find the surplus bone. This extra bone is the final proof of



authenticity. A Sagay shaman personally told me the following concerning this:

“When I was ill, I had dreams. In my dream, I was taken away and cut into pieces on a black table. After I was cut into pieces, I was placed in a cauldron and cooked. I saw all this. When I had been cut into pieces and was being cooked, a bone with a hole through the middle was found near my ribs. This was the extra bone. People can turn into shamans only if such an extra bone is found on them.” (Diószegi 2004)

“This idea can be traced across the whole of Siberia. And depictions of it can be found on shamanistic objects as well.” (Diószegi 2004, fragment on cutting up, ch. 5, section 4).

In the fairy tale, Carnation-Haired John accomplishes great deeds, using his knowledge to do good, acquiring – more accurately, saving – a magical horse from the witch, rescuing an enchanted princess, and, finally, finding his beloved. He couldn't have accomplished any of this if it hadn't been for the magical abilities his godmother endowed him with. Older-than-old women give a small bone (ancient knowledge), from which a high ladder is built; it grows by magic, so that the sisters who have been locked up and cursed with becoming jackdaws can be saved; Sun mothers and Moon ladies help establish contact with the great powers of nature, the Sun, the Wind; they give golden pears, golden apples, spindles and looms, and they offer good advice, so that the hero can find and bring back souls exiled to the end of the world and lost parts of the self. These women also possess the power of the witch: it is just that their function in fairy tales is that of the helper, the giver. Without them, the hero would fail, he would be unable to reach his goal. These women, as well as people like Frau Holle in the Grimm brothers' tale and godmothers, bless, support, give strength and protect life – with the power of enchantment and knowledge, the knowledge of the world “beyond”. They too are witches, but they represent the “light, white” side of this knowledge and power. With this power one can destroy, but one can also

build and strengthen. Who uses it, and for what, matters a great deal!

TK: What is it that makes a witch a helper or a hinderer?

GV: At times, it is the traveller's manner of address, whether he approaches her with due respect:

Now an old woman lived there, older than anyone he had ever seen in his life. He greeted her thus:

– May God give you good evening, dear mother!

The woman accepted the greeting and said:

– Be thankful, my son, that you called me your mother, for otherwise believe me when I say I would have swallowed you right up this instant. What are you doing in these parts, to which no human creature ever ventures? (“The Jackdaw Girls,” in Kriza 1982)

The witch may help, or give something, because the fairy tale hero accomplishes the tasks she prescribes:

Vasilisa, frightened to death, took a step closer to the old woman, bowed to the ground before her and spoke thus: “It is I, mother! The daughters of my stepmother have sent me to you to fetch fire.” “Very well,” said Baba Yaga, “I know them. Now you'll stay with me, and if you work for the fire you'll get it; if not, I'll eat you!” (“Vasilisa the Fair,” in Rab 1982)

In Russian fairy tales, Baba Yaga is a character who embodies enormous creative and destructive power. She is the mistress of fire, and the riders of dawn, daylight, and dark night are her servants; more than that, skulls are strung out along her fence, and she travels in a flying mortar, propelling herself with a broom. At times she gifts and helps, at times she destroys - she is indeed difficult to fathom!

TK: This is a very important thought, that this force, power, or witchcraft can be used for good or for evil. One may use it to help as well as to harm. And – if I have understood correctly – who uses this power, and how, is not clearly differentiated in tales either. An old mother may



help and not harm because she was addressed correctly. Or she may bring about justice in some way, as with Baba Yaga, since in that tale the girl respects certain boundaries. She gives fire to the girl in a way that changes her life completely.

GV: This is very exciting – Baba Yaga is perhaps the most controversial figure. On rare occasions, this ambivalence appears even within a single tale.

TK: How and why are fairy tales with witches in them useful in psychotherapy? How does the client or patient “work” with the image of the witches? Could you please, if possible, give us some examples?

GV: Why is it good to connect, through tales and stories, with the dark, negative, destructive forms of existence? Because destructive powers do exist, they have existed since the world has been a world, and every nation and culture has given them a shape and a personification. In fairy tales, one of the ways this quality is represented is by witches. (It can also be shown by devils, sorcerers, wizards, dragons, evil dwarves (“Koponyányi Monyók [skull-sized imps]”), giants, or serpents). The witches are representatives of one of the destructive qualities or functions of the feminine (mother) principle.

And it is precisely this that give us the opportunity to address, through fairy tale characters, the dark mothers and women who live inside the client. It is a safe course, one in which the connection can be checked and one can distance oneself. The client is able to reflect on the *Syöjätär* in the tale and to activate the fairy tale helpers against it. In this way, the feelings evoked by this work with fairy tales become less overwhelming and disturbing, since one is not dealing (apparently) with one’s own mother, but with an evil witch. And yet, feelings and emotions do surface, and the tale offers both a solution and absolution. It calls for action by setting a test, as Peseschkian (2016) explains in *The Scholar and the Camel Driver*: stories provide a test situation, where we can try out unusual answers in our thoughts and feelings and then apply them to our conflicts in an experimental way. At the same time, these

stories also function as models that point to ways and methods of resolving a conflict.

Mothers who curse, and destructive, jealous feminine agency, appear and disappear in real life too. As I frequently say, everyday curses do exist, and they take effect without being noticed, but all the more forcefully for that reason: “*You’re so helpless, just like your father!*” “*You won’t make it, anyway!*” “*You’re so clumsy!*” – Of course, I have heard even more forceful and more painful statements (curses) than this: “*Why did I even give birth to you... You’re just a burden I have to carry. I almost died giving birth to you.*” These are harsh words that can shape the course of a person’s life, but a well-chosen fairy tale mirror image can help them recognise these words for what they are, that is, curses; this helps us to understand all the effects such words produce. And the fairy tale is not just a mirror; it not only helps a person become aware of this, but always provides a solution as well, a way of coping with these life-situations. This model, this plan of action, does not address the part that was hurt, but instead activates the mature self who is capable of action and to whom it points out ways of finding a solution and of coping with the problem in question.

It is not only mothers but other female family members too, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and of course mothers-in-law, who can function like witches in a person’s family history. According to one tale, where the devil cannot reach, there he sends an old woman; and, indeed, through the stories of mothers-in-law and of possessive mothers who cannot let go of their sons, I have encountered a good many devilish women who have ruined many relationships, as I hinted in a fairy tale fragment presented earlier.

I was working with a fairy tale I mentioned earlier, the *Crystal Ball*, and a young man recognised himself in the image (feeling) of the whale that swims around in speechless, lonely waters. Because these symbolic fairy tale images open up feelings and sensations, and this is how they connect body, soul and mind to the fairy tale. During our work with this tale, he acknowledged that he had not received the



care, attention, support and love he needed as a child. Instead he received from his mother only blame and criticism, so he retreated into a world he had created for himself, and now, as an adult, he finds it very difficult to connect with other people: *“I have been cursed, I didn’t do this to myself; I wasn’t old enough or mature enough to defend myself... Now I see what was really going on. But I couldn’t run away from my mother – how could I? At the age of six or ten I wouldn’t have been capable of leaving.”* The story became a mirror for him, and not just a mirror but also a plan of action: to find within himself and activate the third son in the tale, who leaves this “mother” space and house and sets out to fulfil his own destiny. This path is not an easy one, because the hope and the longing for his mother to eventually give him everything she has withheld from him for his whole life pulls him back... The longing is ever present, and with it the disappointment, too, for this never happens. By relating to the fairy tale (by listening to it and connecting to it, that is, by making emotional contact with it), he is able to sense and understand that if he keeps hanging on to this hope he will be cursed time and again, and this will keep happening until one night he will leave home in secret. In other words, he is able to work toward detaching himself, and he no longer expects his mother to accept him or express the things that are important to him. Even more – he must also draw a line to prevent further situations of hurt. All this requires him to find his inner grown-up self who is capable of doing all this.

We can both understand and interpret fairy tales at the level of relationality. That is, a person can recognise in their own mother the function of the witch-mother, or associate an aggressive father or partner with a fairy tale character, etc., but these characters can also reside within the soul’s inner space: the voice has been internalised, but initially it came from the outside, for it was born in the field of relationships!

Fairy tales also serve as mirrors in a more general way, reflecting, indeed revealing and asserting – through symbols, and compressed

into signs – all that exists. The enormous power of symbols lies in the fact that they do not invoke merely conscious understanding, but also carry unconscious information and stimulate the senses: a close, dark forest, skulls strung out along a fence... Just imagine how Baba Yaga flies in a mortar... Fairy tales are stories, and the stories create inner images, which, in turn, evoke feelings and bodily sensations. These feelings and sensations are “crossings,” bridges to our own stories that we have experienced ourselves. The person can also succeed in formulating stories that were previously hidden, or covered up, or that have been viewed against a different interpretive framework. One can walk to and fro in this process. The tale awakens a personal understanding; once that has happened, armed with this new understanding and awareness, the person can step back into the tale, and then back out again, with a flux being generated between the stories in the tale and of the self. There is another ruling, helping instrument in this process: fairy tales have their inner order, their inner structure, and this can also be of help. For example, some harm is wrought against the fairy tale hero or an obstacle thrust into his path. On such occasions the hero can rarely continue his journey by relying only on his own strength and knowledge; more often, he is assisted by helpers and people who give him things he needs. In these cases, the “when” and the “where” help us by unveiling the question and the point of focus.

In fairy tales there are good / bad, helping and harming characters, just like there are in our lives and in our inner worlds. The dark, harming characters can even help us identify the destructive function that resides within ourselves – as Peseschkian expresses it, they serve as counter-models.

Someone once stated: “I recognised myself in the jealous and destructive girl. I was just like her. I was envious; I wanted things to be bad for them, even if not exactly how it was in the fairy tale... This recognition both terrified me and enabled me to feel compassion towards myself.” This was said by an adult woman who until then had seen herself only as a victim. In



the fairy tale she recognised herself in another capacity, which at first frightened her, but later she was able to treat this reaction of hers with understanding. She shaped it into words, linked it with feelings, and this became the foundation of a processing strategy. In these situations, it is important that the person be made aware of this state by an observant self, and this, too, has to be strengthened. For instance, the client is instructed to talk about the fairy tale character concerned and allow it to gradually enter their inner content. A series of questions are asked here, and the test actions I mentioned earlier also help the person understand and process this.

Jealousy, rivalry; hindering, spreading false information: we encounter all of this in real life. And these tropes appear in fairy tales too. Of course, it is not in every case that this role is played by a witch. The destroyer need not operate supernatural witchcraft: he can be a brother or friend who betrays, or a “black” servant. Dark fathers, dark men and masters also appear in stories. They are not witches, but devils. They destroy, lure with promises, and deceive in the same way, except that they are not called witches or witch husbands but Bluebeard, Devil-Lover, Devil-Teacher.

TK: Some final questions. If something like this crops up in a life story, how can fairy tales help the client? How do you choose the fairy tale? Do you narrate it, or recommend it for reading? Do you talk about it with the client or leave the experience to do its work? Do you bring up and employ only one tale, or several? How do you decide what kind of tale to work with? Do you sense on the spot what the client needs, or do you think it through very carefully, given the tremendous number of fairy tales that you know and use in your work?

GV: How do I choose a particular fairy tale? First, I need to become acquainted with the client’s life story, which does not happen in just one or two sessions, and during this time therapy work will have started and will be progressing. In this life story there will be easily recognisable and even repetitive tropes and prominent accents; there will be

interruptions and fragmented stories. These are all important signs. As I listen to these life stories, one or another fairy tale image, or even a concrete story or tale, will occur to me as well. I let these move and work inside me, too. Of course, one needs to know large numbers of fairy tales for this to happen, and if nothing suitable can be found in the collection in one’s memory, then it has to be searched for and researched. When all this is brought together, I either tell the tale aloud, from memory, or I send the client the text of the tale with a few focus questions. At times I do not give the entire tale but narrate one or two fairy tale tropes, and we work with a given fairy tale image: setting out on a journey; refusing something or recognising a refusal; when and how we can be deceived by the hope of an easier course or solution.

How we work with the fairy tale can also take many forms. In our fairy tale study groups – which are not self-knowledge groups – or in methodological groups, we talk about fairy tales, we open up the tale based on a given method of interpreting fairy tales, and we ask questions, for example: who is the harmer in this fairy tale? How and in what sense do they cause harm? What kind of coping mechanisms cancel out the harm? Who are the helpers of the main hero? And what does he learn from all this, how does he develop?

In individual therapy we look at where the fairy tale produced the greatest effect, that is, at which point in the story, and we analyse what is happening there and what kind of fairy tale characters are present. We then explore this further and search for the connection with the client’s own life, and we look at how this frames the client’s own story and what new methods of coping the fairy tale shows him.

TK: Thank you very much for this conversation!

NOTE

1. The quotes from fairytales referred to in this interview are reproduced from the speaker’s memory during the interview, without a precise reference to the pages of the quoted works.



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Did White Swallowwort (*Vincetoxicum hircundinaria*) Exist or Did It not During the Organic Regulations Regime? Notes on some Previously Unknown Documents from Wallachia²

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ABSTRACT

The present text is a small commentary on a classic case of cultural conflict that occurred in Wallachia in 1835 under the Organic Regulations regime. Starting from the discovery of some unknown documents in the archives of Romanați county, relating to the public proclamation of the non-existence of the plant *iarba fiarelor* (white swallowwort), which was made use of by treasure hunters at the time, we have tried to establish what was at stake in this conflict. Popular culture suddenly became a threat to the authorities of a modern state that was operating a real process of socio-cultural *dressage* in that period, a move that inevitably brought it into a precisely datable conflict with those who still remained faithful to a folklore culture. One of those happy cases in which history comes to the aid of ethnology.

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KEYWORDS

iarba fiarelor (white swallowwort); Wallachia; Organic Regulations regime; cultural conflict; previously unknown documents.