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Strategic Silences: Voiceless Heroes in Fairy Tales

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I. Pathfinders: Empowered Women from Romance and Folktale to the Birth of Modern Fantasy

Strategic Silences: Voiceless Heroes in Fairy Tales[1]

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In a number of international fairy tale types, such as ATU 451 ("The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers"), the female protagonist voluntarily stops speaking in order to attain the object of her quest. In ATU 451, found in the collected tales of the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen as well as in oral tradition, the protagonist remains silent while weaving the shirts needed to disenchant her brothers from their birdlike forms. While this silence is undoubtedly disempowering in some ways as she cannot defend herself from persecution and accusations of wickedness, here I argue that the choice to remain silent is a coded form of protest. Drawing on feminist, queer, and folkloristic theories, I demonstrate that the fairy-tale female hero who chooses to remain silent does so strategically in a coded protest against patriarchal norms and constraints.

When studying female heroes in oral tradition, it is important to take into account the values and associations of silence in the cultures that transmit these tales.[2] Ruth Bottigheimer has studied the social context influencing the valuation of silence in the Grimms' fairy tales ("Silenced Women"; *Grimms' Bad Girls*). In her account, the voiceless heroines of the Grimms' tales reflect larger social norms that oppressively pressure women into silence as a matter of decorum. In contrast, Bethany Joy Bear's analysis of traditional versions and modern revisions of ATU 451 concentrates on the agency of the silent sister-saviors. She notes that the multiple versions of the tale in the Grimms' collection "illustrate various ways of empowering the heroine ... in 'The Twelve Brothers' and 'The Six Swans' her success requires redemptive silence" (45). How, then, should scholars read the silence of female heroes in fairy tales—as empowering or disempowering? Or must we move beyond simplistic binaries towards a more complex interpretation of silence? With an eye toward international folkloric

versions, I hope to illuminate how strategic silence and voicelessness create a different type of fairy-tale hero, one whose self-sacrificing nature is both coded protest and invitation to dialogue on the nature of gender, kinship, and life. By surveying scholarly approaches to the female hero, silence in various folktales and fairy tales, and the use of silence as coding specifically in ATU 451 texts, I establish how silent folktale and fairy-tale heroines act as pathfinders for the modern female hero, patterning possibilities of selfhood and heroism.

Folkloristic Approaches to Fairy Tales and the Female Hero

With its inception in the nineteenth century, while the Romantic Movement swept across Europe, the discipline of folkloristics offers a number of models for the study of fairy tales and their heroes, both male and female. The masculinist biases of the discipline, however, have produced a skewed model for understanding the unique circumstances and special contributions of the female hero. In this section, I will discuss key developments in folkloristics in the study of fairy tales, with special attention to how the female hero has been distinguished from the male hero (if at all).

There have always been female folklorists and those interested in women's folklore, though it has only been within the last few decades that feminist questions have come to the forefront of the discipline. The Women's Section of the American Folklore Society has been key in asking questions such as "Why does the expressive behavior of male members of a given 'folk' group receive more attention than that enacted by females in the same group—i.e., why are male performance genres so privileged in our discipline?" (Young and Turner 9). Among other reasons, such as the masculinist bent of university politics and the fact that male folklore collectors had an easier time accessing male informants, Jennifer Fox proposes that Johann Gottfried von Herder's Romantic Nationalist writings "helped form the basis for the study of folklore as a scholarly discipline" (33). In particular, Herder's emphasis on tradition, patriarchalism, and unity "elevates the masculine" (Fox 38) to the detriment of the feminine. These paradigms are built into folkloristics as a discipline, though it claims neutrality. Thus, much feminist folkloristic research has been devoted to exposing the biases at the root of our field, and pursuing more egalitarian models.[3]

Two of the discipline's most widely used tools of narrative study, the motif index and tale type index, also contain gender bias. The study of folklore is inherently comparative, with folklorists seeking to establish how widely an item of folklore, whether a ritual or charm, folktale or house type, is distributed. In narrative folklore—folklore that recounts a story, whether that story is in the form of a myth, legend, folktale, epic, ballad, or any number of minor narrative genres—one tool is Stith Thompson's six-volume *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*

(1955–58). Motifs are narrative building blocks, those "specific recognized characters, themes, concepts, actions" (Conrad 644), which do not necessarily constitute full-fledged narratives in and of themselves, but in combination create a story. Motifs are classified under headings like A (Mythological Motifs), B (Animal Motifs), C (Motifs of Tabu), and D (Magic). A relevant example is motif D758, disenchantment by maintaining silence, which is found in the silent female hero tales under discussion here. Though the person doing the disenchanting is in many cases the tale's hero, and in many cases female, no mention of these facts appears in the index.

The tale type index similarly exists to help scholars search for commonalities in narrative folklore transmission, but at the level of plot rather than motif, and solely focused upon the genre of folktales. Folktales are fictional, formulaic narratives disseminated with variations through both written and oral traditions, and folklorists consider fairy tales to be a subset of the folktale genre (see Bascom for clarification). The first tale type index was written by Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne in 1910 in German, and translated into English in 1928. American folklorist Stith Thompson updated and revised the tale type index in 1960, and German folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther completed yet another revision in 2004 (the most recent to date). The common way of referring to tale types is according to which index one uses; so references to the Aarne-Thompson index of 1960 go by "AT types" (occasionally "AaTh") while references to Uther's updated numbers are known as "ATU types."[4] Thompson, who was an accomplished folk narrative scholar, defines a type as follows: "A type is a traditional tale that has an independent existence. It may be told as a complete narrative and does not depend for its meaning on any other tale. It may indeed happen to be told with another tale, but the fact that it may appear alone attests to its independence. It may consist of only one motif or of many" (415). The purpose of tale types in scholarly usage is to facilitate the comparative study of folklore, especially given that the titles and motifs of tales vary between different linguistic, regional, and ethnic groups (to take one example, "Cinderella" is not known by that title everywhere it is told, so referring to it as type 510A can be useful).[5]

While it is commonly agreed in folkloristics that the motif and type indexes are flawed but indispensable (Propp *The Russian Folktale*; Dundes), scholars interested in the female hero and women characters in folklore more generally will encounter special problems. As Torborg Lundell points out in her critique of gender-related biases in the tale type and motif indexes, neither index is as inclusive as it claims to be. The motif index, specifically, suffers from the following issues as it "(1) overlooks gender identity in its labeling of motifs, thus lumping male or female actions or characters under the same, male-identified heading or (2) disregards female activity or (3) focuses on male activity at the cost of female" (150). The tale type index suffers from many of the same issues,

with passive constructions and selective labeling that obscure the real importance of female heroes and female characters in general (Lundell 152).

Fortunately, Uther's revision of the tale type index remedied many of the inconsistencies; for instance by retitling some of the tales that were mistakenly made out to be androcentric.[6] Neither are scholars to blame for this phenomenon; the folk frequently give male-oriented titles as well. ATU 451, the tale to be discussed in this essay, is a prime example of this phenomenon. While the tale type title ("The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers") reflects the sister's active role in the tale, the Grimms titled their versions "The Twelve Brothers," "The Seven Ravens," and "The Six Swans," while Andersen called his "The Wild Swans," and these iconic titles have endured. As Bethany Bear Joy notes, "Although these titles always focus on a group of brothers, the crucial figure in all literary incarnations of AT 451 is their sister, who redeems the brothers from exile, enchantment, or both" (45). Despite the titular emphasis on the brothers, ATU 451 is a female-centered tale.

Lundell raises another important issue: the question of whether fairy tales have only one hero. Using the example of tale type 313, in the AT index titled "The girl as helper in the hero's flight," Lundell points out, "The Type Index sees the boy of this tale as the hero and he is, in the sense that the tale initially focuses on him. However, the girl may be claimed as heroine considering the fact that she carries most of the action in the major portion of the tale" (153). She goes on to suggest instead titling the tale "Hero frees heroine, enabling them to escape from troll" (Lundell 153), which grants heroic status to both main characters.

In general, though, most fairy tales are classified as gendered: there are masculine tales and feminine tales. For the most part, the main character's gender is taken as the tale's gender, though scholars such as Kathleen Ragan have suggested alternative methods of calculating a tale's gender, such as counting the nominative nouns and pronouns of a given tale (231). The gendering of tales is played out in the tale type index, where we tend to find tales clustered together according to the protagonist's gender, starting with type 300, "The Dragonslayer," which has a male hero, as do many of the tales that immediately follow it in the type index. Bengt Holbek has noted that there are only a few exceptions to the gendering of fairy tales, and they tend to be children's tales (which end with the defeat of a monster rather than marriage).[7] Type 327A, perhaps best known in the form of the Grimms' version "Hansel and Gretel," is a good example of a tale that exhibits variation in terms of the gender of the protagonist. Most tales, however, tend to be more fixed: we see very few male Cinderellas or Sleeping Beauties, and inversely, few female heroes in the roles of traditionally male heroes such as the main characters of "Puss in Boots" or "The Frog King."

The gendering of tales also emerges on a structural level. Vladimir Propp's

landmark structuralist study of fairy tales, *Morphology of the Folktale* (published in Russian in 1928 and translated into English in 1958), assumes that all protagonists of fairy tales are male. In his study he enumerated thirty-one plot points of fairy tales (which he calls "functions") that may be performed by any character who fulfills a given role. Not all thirty-one functions must be present in every fairy tale, and they may be repeated or trebled, in accordance with the stylistic laws of folk narrative. None of this is necessarily gendered, except that Propp's proposed prototype for the structure of all fairy tales follows most closely the plot of ATU 300, "The Dragonslayer," from the kidnapping of the princess (function 8, villainy/lack) to the (male) hero's wedding and ascension to the throne (function 31). Holbek confirms that "Propp's system seems to fit the masculine tale types in particular" (381). As a result, Proppian structural analysis often assumes that the "hero" is male. This leads Propp to distinguish between seeker heroes and victim heroes, the latter frequently being gendered as female:

(1) if a young girl is kidnapped, and disappears from the horizon of her father ... and if Iván goes off in search of her, then the hero of the tale is Iván and not the kidnapped girl. Heroes of this type may be termed *seekers*. (2) If a young girl or boy is seized or driven out, and the thread of the narrative is linked to his or her fate and not to those who remain behind, then the hero of the tale is the seized or banished boy or girl. There are no seekers in such tales. Heroes of this variety may be called *victimized heroes* [*Morphology* 36, emphasis in original].

While there are some female heroes who are seekers—women who marry and must pursue fleeing beastly bridegrooms—the majority fall into Propp's category of victimized heroes, as they face persecution at home before either being ejected or rescued through marriage. Additionally, the sought-after princess often shares a tale role with her father in prompting the seeker hero's quest, further erasing her identity.

Other structural methods of studying the hero in folk narrative exhibit similar biases. Robert Segal's introduction to classical studies of the hero—those of Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, and Alan Dundes—gives an overview of these models, which can be considered structuralist in that they pay special attention to the syntagmatic (or sequential) structure of the hero's life story. Segal also mentions work on the hero by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, and then draws comparisons between the ways these writers all conceptualize the hero. The hero pattern, of course, assumes a male hero as the default.[8] Features such as the hero's relationship to his father and mother, his community, and to divine forces both male and female, are often commented upon. While the hero pattern does not necessarily provide a direct parallel to the plots found in folktales and fairy tales, it is still worth noting that much of the "heroic" behavior discussed by these scholars is framed solely in terms of masculine-gendered activities.

One solution to the gendering of folktales and fairy tales is to recognize

that there are frequently tales that contain an active protagonist of each gender. Lundell's suggestion discussed above to label tales with both active protagonists, hence including both genders, is not entirely unique. Others, like Holbek, have suggested that complete fairy tales have two protagonists, one male and one female, and that only some forms of a given tale show each protagonist in the fullest extent of their roles. Holbek explains, "in a masculine tale, the two main characters are the low-born young male (LYM) and the high-born young female (HYF). Conversely, the two main characters of the feminine tale are the low-born young female (LYF) and the high-born young male (HYM)" (417). In some cases, a high-born character is cast into servitude or poverty, making them functionally low-class for most of the tale (as is the case in versions of ATU 451 where the female hero is a princess, but lives in rags due to disenchanting her brothers). This means of classifying characters according to their role in the tale's plot is a useful way of pinpointing the identity of the female protagonist (if there is one) in male-centered tales.

Given that fantasy literature has roots in fairy tales and narrative folklore in general (ranging from myths to medieval romances), it is my hope as a folklorist that scholars of fantasy literature and seekers of the female hero will look to folklore resources when researching the female hero. The tale type index and the motif index, though flawed, will help establish antecedents in oral (and sometimes written) folkloric traditions that persist in literary creations today, while an understanding of structuralism can similarly aid with evaluating the relationship of characters to plot. The move toward reevaluating sexist scholarly paradigms is an essential first step in these endeavors, from which a fuller comprehension of silent (and silenced) female heroes can emerge.

"The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" (ATU 451)

Scholars have documented at least 600 variants of ATU 451 (Blécourt 283) and Christine Shojaei Kawan differentiates three main subtypes, the first of which

> focuses on the siblings' disenchantment through the sacrifice and cruel sufferings that are imposed on their sister, coinciding with the difficulties of the sister's noble marriage; the second tells of the girl's cohabitation with her brothers in a house in the woods where she is abused by an ogre figure, upon which follows the brothers' revenge and the dead ogre's counter-revenge; the third consists in a cosmic journey in the fairy-tale style, undertaken by a brave young girl who consecutively meets personifications of the sun and the moon, the stars and the winds [300].[9]

Interestingly, not every instance of this subtype contains the silence injunction. In the Basque tale "The Sister and Her Seven Brothers," the brothers choose to

leave home before the sister is born. She finds them and keeps house for them until a witch's spell turns them all into cows. A king encounters the girl, who still has her powers of speech: "He speaks to her, and tells her that he wishes to marry her. The young girl says to him that she is very poor, and that cannot be" (Wentworth 189). The girl marries him on the condition that the cows will be cared for and will never be killed, but then the witch who had placed the spell on the brothers throws the girl over a cliff and orders the cows killed. Luckily the girl is rescued, and the king threatens the witch into removing the curse from the brothers. This version contains no instructions for how the girl can disenchant her brothers, and yet her powerlessness is coextensive with the silence to which protagonists in other forms of the tale are subjected. An Italian version similarly contains little magic, but continues the pattern of disempowering the heroine (Crane).

Holbek has the right idea in looking at the role of silence in fairy tales in terms of where it appears within the tales' structure. In many feminine tales (including versions of ATU 451), the silence occurs after the protagonist has married, but before her position in her new household is secure: "The heroine is usually incapacitated in some way or other: she has lost her hands, or she is mute, or she is under a vow not to speak for seven years while she is sewing the shirts for her enchanted brothers" (Holbek 430). Holbek then equates silence with vulnerability: "It is easy to understand the nature of her misfortune ... if one recalls how women were regarded in traditional rural communities: they were respected for their ability to bear children, primarily sons. By taking the children away, the mother-in-law hits her at her most vulnerable spot" (Holbek 430). The general trend of conflating silence with powerlessness is a persuasive one, and yet I will argue that if we reframe how we view silence, it becomes a powerful metaphor for women's experiences and thus a reflection of the unique sacrifices that are asked of the female hero in fairy tales.

The Voiceless Female Hero in Oral and Literary Fairy Tales

Before interpreting the meaning of silent female heroes, it is necessary to establish where and when they appear in folklore, and so in this section, I will discuss silence in both oral and written folktales and fairy tales. One of the main tools for this type of work is, of course, the tale type index, and fortunately Uther's updated 2004 index includes a thorough subject index. As we shall see, silence signals many meanings within European fairy tales, but it is predominantly associated with women and positions of disempowerment.

In many of the tales catalogued in the type index, silence appears as a motif, sometimes as a strategy, and more often as a punishment or limitation. As an example of silence being used strategically, in ATU 442, "The Old

Woman in the Forest," a girl disenchants a prince and his retinue by going inside the house of a witch, taking a plain ring, and not saying anything to the old woman/witch. In the Grimms' version of this tale, the prince (in the form of a dove) instructs the girl thus: "You are to go inside, where you'll find an old woman seated right next to the hearth. She'll say good day to you, but you're not to answer her, no matter what she does" (406). From there, the girl successfully disenchants the prince by finding the correct ring. The girl's voluntary silence—which the witch perceives as rude, but is unable to do anything about—is a key component in breaking the spell. However, this tale type is in the minority as more often than not women who do not speak in folktales are disadvantaged.

Where magic is not involved, however, silence does not seem to confer any advantages. In ATU 533, "The Speaking Horsehead" (better known as "The Goose Girl" from the Grimms' collection), the main character is a princess whose servant girl coerces her into swearing an oath of secrecy, never to reveal to a living soul that they have changed places. The princess does not literally lose her voice, but she is forced into silence on an issue that affects her life. Her secret is not revealed until she is maneuvered into a situation where the king can clandestinely observe her telling her woes to an inanimate object or animal (thereby not breaking her vow). Similarly, in ATU 898, "The Daughter of the Sun," the female character who marries a prince is represented as mute by choice. She will only speak to her new husband after he eavesdrops on a conversation and learns that he must address her properly (as the daughter of the sun, or whatever her title is in that variant). This tale is mentioned in R. Dawkins's early overview of folk narratives featuring silent women characters, fitting into the first category described here: "the three silent women are all silent and all break their silence for humanly comprehensible reasons the first from excessive pride" (Dawkins 138).

There are instances in folktales where a woman's silence is the cause of her misfortunes. Uther summarizes a tale found primarily in Mediterranean regions, ATU 705A*: "A prince grows tired of his wife because she cannot talk any more. He brings a new bride who insults the wife. The first wife starts to speak again. The prince rejects his new bride and lives with his first wife" (*The Types* Vol. 1, 378). ATU 710, "Our Lady's Child," dovetails closely with ATU 451 in that the female protagonist marries a king while mute and cannot speak to defend herself when her infant children are stolen from her. She is also accused of infanticide and condemned to die; however, her silence is the result of stubbornness, her unwillingness to admit that she had violated the interdiction of a supernatural figure, rather than a voluntary vow (Uther 385). Silence is thus equated with misfortune and oppression.

Other folktales touch on the connections between silence, gender, and power. ATU 1375, "Who Can Rule His Wife?" has among its variants a priest

who instructs all the men who consider themselves the masters of their house to sing a song in church. All the men are silent, and only the women sing (Uther, *The Types* Vol. 2 180). Better known, perhaps, is ATU 1351, "The Silence Wager," which Uther summarizes as follows: "A man and his wife make a wager: Whoever speaks first must do certain work (close the door, wash the dishes, feed the animals, etc.). Strangers (robbers) enter their house and take or abuse their belongings (believe the couple are dead and share their estate). A man rapes the woman (a woman tries to rape the man). The husband (wife) protests (becomes jealous), cries out and thus loses the wager" (Uther 152). The ambiguity of the summary's phrasing is due to the fact that the tale is told both ways: either the man or the woman can be the one to lose the bet by speaking first.[10]

In the examples discussed above, silence tends to be imposed on women more than on men, with the exception of the husbands who stay silent because they know they cannot claim to be the masters of their households. When men choose silence, it is not automatically disempowering. For example, in ATU 1948, "Too Much Talk," three men withdraw from the world to pursue a monastic lifestyle. They have one conversation over the span of years, and the punchline is that the last one to chime in says, irritated, that he's leaving this place because there's too much talking. In contrast, tale types like ATU 945, "Luck and Intelligence," feature a mute princess who has been promised to anyone who can make her speak. Related thematically is the princess who is so melancholy that her father has promised her hand to anyone who can make her laugh, which appears as a motif in various tale types. The difference in agency between these situations is stark, setting up an opposition between speech and silence, subject and object.

Coding: Silence as Coded Speech

Female silence is also incorporated in fairy tales implicitly, during all those narrative moments when female characters are silenced while sleeping or dead. Sleeping and dead male heroes are rare in fairy tales, and when a hero dies and must be brought back to life (as in ATU 303, "The Twins or Blood-Brothers"), it is usually the hero's helpers or sibling, not his intended spouse, that resurrect him. Often, a sleeping (hence silenced) female hero is responsible for the social world she inhabits, as Kimberly Lau points out in the case of "Sleeping Beauty" (ATU 410): "So critical is her silence to upholding the social structure that in the Grimms' version the princess's falling asleep brings with it sleep for the entire community" (122). The foregrounding of women's silence in fairy tales is both structurally and socially coded differently than men's silence in fairy tales, and now I turn to the meaning of this silence.

Coding is a concept developed by feminist folklorists to describe the ways

in which subaltern populations disguise their communicative messages so that dominant populations will not understand those messages (Radner and Lanser). Specifically, "coding may allow women to communicate feminist messages to other women of their community; to refuse, subvert, or transform conventional expectations; and to criticize male dominance in the face of male power" (Radner and Lanser 23). Along with coding, a queer reading of these tales emerges when we consider that the silent heroine must often make choices that negate her ability to live, or to live a whole life. In versions of ATU 451, the heroine seemingly chooses her brothers over her husband and children, and in some cases, over her own life. These tales thus engage questions of what makes a "livable life," to use Judith Butler's phrase referring to how "the very terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those that deprive certain others of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human" (2). The female hero in these tales, by choosing the less-than-human, by choosing silence and an identification with the death drive, presents a very different type of hero than the happy-go-lucky youngest son or the bride who goes on a quest to recover her enchanted husband in other fairy tales. A discussion of coding in folk narrative, followed by an application of queer theory to this group of tales, will help illuminate the image of the female hero and what she can mean to different audiences.

The female hero in ATU 451 ("The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers") is daughter, sister, and finally, wife and mother. She is defined by her relationships to the men in her life—brothers and husband, and occasionally father—though it is often the women in her life who prove the most villainous. Most versions of ATU 451 have the female hero's mother-in-law condemning her to death, though some versions, such as the Grimms' "The Six Swans," begin with a female villain as well. A king who has children from a previous marriage gets lost in a forest, and must agree to marry a witch's daughter in order to find his way out. This maiden, too, is a witch, and, jealous of the attention the king gives his children, she tricks them: "she made small white silk shirts, and she used the witchcraft she had learned from her mother to sew a magic spell into them" (169). These shirts turn the boys into swans, so that their sister must quest after them.

The fact that the female villains in such tales are so loquacious, and that the modest female heroes are so voiceless, points to the social context informing silence as a female virtue. Bottigheimer connects the nineteenth-century German values and the prevalence of silent female heroes in the Grimms' tales: "In a society which prized silent retiring women one would expect female speech—which in conjuring potently bears women's will or intention—to be curtailed or even condemned in that society's literary productions, whether 'folk' or canonical, and that is precisely what happened in Germany" ("Silenced Women" 119). Similarly, Marina Warner demonstrates the suspicion directed at women's

speech in seventeenth-century France, when Perrault and the various *conteuses* were authoring fairy tales. Warner notes, "The seduction of women's talk reflected the seduction of their bodies; it was considered as dangerous to Christian men.... The speaking woman also refuses subjection, and turns herself from a passive object of desire into a conspiring and conscious stimulation" (Warner 11–12). Many versions of ATU 451 reflect these ideas, with the female hero performing subservience and meekness, likely all the more beautiful in the eyes of the king precisely because she is mute. More importantly, however, the tale incorporates the idea of female perfection through silence—and then critiques it.

Viewing the tale with a queer lens helps to uncover this coded critique. As Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill note in their introduction to *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, "queer readings seem absent from feminist fairy-tale criticism" (3), and thus their project draws

> on queer theory to better understand the chaotic, fantastic, manipulated, and highly compressed fairy tale ... to understand further the complexities of that history—its multiple tellings and readings over time—as a source for solving problems pertaining to the individual, the social being in his or her own history [Turner and Greenhill 17].

Queer readings of fairy tales can help uncover coded critiques therein through their careful attention to lacunae, lapses, and excesses, which are often signals that the content under consideration is contested, conflicted, or otherwise ripe for an analysis that is open to non-dominant viewpoints.

Moments of silence in fairy tales are particularly multivalent. In the same collection, Kevin Goldstein writes, "No scholar would claim that silence has a single signification in the Grimms' tales. In fact, many kinds of silence inhabit the collection, with many significations" (61). Goldstein goes on to explore the "woeful quiet" (Goldstein 63) that characterizes "The Goose Girl at the Spring," which is the Grimms' version of ATU 923, "Love Like Salt." Similar to how the female hero of that tale cannot remain in quiet solitude, spinning and yet unmarried, the female hero of ATU 451 can only pass so much time unwed, spinning (or sewing), and silent. It is as though there is a social injunction to wed and be productively folded into a normative family unit in these tales that feature silent, spinning women—an injunction that is queerly resisted at the same time that it is explored.

The female hero of ATU 451 is a good sister, a poor wife, and a worse mother, thereby presenting a coded critique of the roles available to women. In my previous work on ATU 451, I focused on the three versions of ATU 451 in the Grimms' collection and the connections they might have to the brothers' life stories as well as issues of transbiological and non-normative kinship ("Queering Kinship"). However, I also touched on the way in which the tales critique gender roles, theorizing that "the heroine's disproportionate devotion to her brothers kills her chance at marriage and kills her children, which from

a queer stance is a comment on the performativity of sexuality and gender" (Jorgensen 77). By drawing attention to the contradictions of normative femininity, the tale shows how constructed identities are rent with conflicting desires and drives. Further, the hero's silence prevents her from explaining her choices, which are rational to the tale's audience who knows her backstory, and irrational to those who encounter her only after she undertakes the period of silence. I consider her silence to be "the most positively portrayed female agency in this tale ... queer in the sense that it resists and unsettles; it acts while negating action, it endures while refusing to respond to life-threatening conditions" (Jorgensen 84). That statement was originally made about the Grimms' version of ATU 451, "The Six Swans," which contains a scheming witch and a wicked stepmother. An Irish version, "The Twelve Geese," also contains a wicked stepmother who disposes of the female hero's young children, but there is a fairy who helps the girl find out how to break the curse on her brothers. This fairy also appears to the wicked stepmother in the form of a wolf, causing her to throw each baby into the wolf's jaws. The fairy, of course, keeps the children safe until the hero's time of silence and persecution is ended, and may be seen as a coded comment on the resources required to successfully nurture children.

Tales of overextended mothers appear elsewhere in folklore, with coding suggested as one of the interpretive paradigms that can help make sense of them. As Janet Langlois discusses, folk narratives about unsupervised children maiming and killing each other date back at least to the 1812 publication of the Grimms' tales.[11] For all its grisliness, "the tale persists in oral tradition, usually told by mothers.... Its immediate context ... mirrors the tale's content—mothers with babies talking about mothers with babies" (91). The modern form depicts a girl castrating her brother, resulting in both of their deaths and possibly also a third sibling's death, while the distraught mother is helpless to stop any of these horrific events. Langlois views the female character as "an overburdened mother" (Langlois 92) whose ineptitude dramatizes the isolation and lack of support that can make the lives of mothers difficult or even unbearable. Here, then, is the coded protest: this tale can be used to subtly express ambivalence about and even hostility toward motherhood,[12] a role that is depicted as innately feminine and desirable for all women. In ATU 451, too, the inevitability of motherhood is questioned. This is an instance of what Barre Toelken, studying silence in ballads, calls "*metaphorical silence*, in which that which is articulated forces us to register figuratively what isn't being said" (italics in original, 93).[13]

The narrative use of silence can signal a coded message, a discontent that is diverted somewhere less noticeable than an outright protest, which is especially interesting given that fairy tales are a fictional genre that often contains fantastic elements. The very notion of coding contains at least a kernel of intentionality, and attributing intention in folk narrative can be tricky, not least because folklore is communally transmitted and performed. We can further

distinguish between intentionality on the part of the (fictional) characters and the (real-world) narrators. There is also the issue of the fantastic content that specifically appears in folk narrative genres such as fairy tale, folktale more broadly, myth, and legend—how much should we interpret literally or symbolically? And how does this issue change when we are faced with characters and events that cannot exist in our world? Holbek addresses this issue of the marvelous or symbolic elements of fairy tales, from talking horses to enchanted sleep, concluding after a survey of existing interpretive tools: "*The symbolic elements of fairy tales convey emotional impressions of beings, phenomena and events in the real world, organized in the form of fictional narrative sequences which allow the narrator to speak of the problems, hopes and ideals of the community*" (435, emphasis in original). The problem with interpreting fairy-tale silence, however, is that frequently it is mundane and not magical; while it is undertaken in the context of magical elements such as the brothers' transformation into birds, the choice to stay silent is something that exists in the real world.

Further, as seen in the Basque version of ATU 451 discussed above, silence is not always a necessary component of the female hero's oppression in her marital home, though silence suggests an interesting relationship with trauma and oppression. It is with a queer eye toward the gaps and elisions of texts that I suggest that the spot that silence occupies in the structure of ATU 451 is a symptom of the female hero's oppression, and not its cause. Here I agree with Turner and Greenhill that "structural analysis ... still stands up as a way to unloose tales from their superficial, syntagmatic drive" (15). If we think back to Propp's structuralism and focus on the linear fairy-tale plot and where it demands silence from ATU 451's female hero, we see that silence is a means of liberation when paired with an interdiction, and a means of oppression when paired with the guidance of the hero into a new situation where a difficult task must be completed. This model, wherein silence is initially empowering but later disempowering, also corresponds to faith to the natal family in the first instance, and an inability to prioritize the marital family in the second instance. In a curious reversal of traumatized behavior, the female hero is victimized because she is silent, instead of being silent because she is victimized.

There is also a reversal in the meaning of silence that emerges in some versions of ATU 451, wherein the female hero's silence is interpreted as a sign of witchcraft. This happens in Asbjørnsen and Moe's version, "The Twelve Wild Ducks," where the king's mother says of the female hero: "Can't you see now, that this thing whom you have picked up, and whom you are going to marry, is a witch? Why, she can't either talk, or laugh, or weep!" (56). This tale, along with the Irish tale in Kennedy's collection, features a portrayal of women's speech as enchanting that conforms to the negative evaluation of women's speech discussed by Bottigheimer above: the mother of the female hero and her brothers wishes aloud to have a girl child, regardless of the consequences

for her sons. In the Norse tale she says, "If only I had a daughter as white as snow and as red as blood, I shouldn't care what became of all my sons" (Asbjørnsen and Moe 51). A troll hag appears to grant the wish and claim the boys. In the Irish tale she says, "Oh ... if I had only a daughter with her skin as white as that snow, her cheeks as red as that blood, and her hair as black as that raven, I'd give away every one of my twelve sons for her" (Kennedy 14). An old woman chastises her for this wish, and the sons turn into geese when the girl is born. In a German version, the mother of six boys says, "Children, don't make me angry, or you shall become birds!" (Ranke 68). That is exactly what happens, and when the woman gives birth to a girl later on, the girl sets out to find her enchanted brothers. These tales seem to be saying in code: a woman cannot win whether she speaks or is silent; a woman's speech has negative consequences for others, and a woman's silence has negative consequences for herself.

Versions of ATU 451 that contain the silence motif provide a critique of the double standards applied to women's speech in society, and they also demonstrate a queer heroism. Her heroism is queer because it is perverse, contrary to social expectations, simultaneously excessive and self-negating. The sister is undoubtedly the hero of the tale, as she is the only one who can disenchant her brothers, and she bravely takes on this task. Her work is dangerous to her, even though it occurs in a domestic setting rather than as part of a quest that takes her elsewhere. To return briefly to a structural lens, a Scottish version of ATU 451 curiously combines both the disenchantment-through-silence form of the tale with the cosmic-journey form of the tale (found in the Grimms' "The Seven Ravens"). The female hero of the Scottish version, "The King's Children Under Enchantments," must first complete a quest with a repetitive structure in order to learn how to disenchant her brothers. Taking the advice of a seer, "her nurse bound the King's Daughter with crosses and with spells that she should neither marry nor flirt with any man until she had restored her brothers to their own proper forms" (Campbell 271). She encounters three giants, each of which helps her along the way to finding her brothers, who have been transformed into deer. They tell her to make shirts for them of bog-cotton down, and it is the seer who adds the injunction to not speak or laugh. A hunting king encounters the maiden, and, of course, falls in love and marries her. The result of the cosmic quest and the silent sewing events are the same: both are steps in the process of disenchanting the brothers. This tale contains both events, while most other versions of ATU 451 utilize just one. Structurally speaking, they are equivalent, thus proving that a female hero who chooses silence is performing the same kind of heroic action as a female hero who goes on a journey and encounters frightening, supernatural beings and manages to win them over to her side.[14] The benefit of this kind of structural analysis is that the symbolic equation of the two events is contained within the tales themselves, rather than being imposed by the interpreter.

As Warner suggests regarding ATU 451 in social contexts where it is told, "Women's capacity for love and action tragically exceeded the permitted boundaries of their lives—this self-immolatory heroism was one of the few chivalrous enterprises open to them" (*From the Beast*, 393). The female heroes in ATU 451 experience love on multiple fronts, as wives, mothers, and sisters, in what from a queer perspective resembles the excess seen in camp and drag performances. While some excessive women tend toward the grotesque (and thus villainous), our excessively-loving hero is fortunately redeemed and rescued before she can be punished for her monstrosity. Substituting silence for speech, her story is a coded protest of the social conditions that condemn her to illegibility.

Conclusion

Acting heroically though silently, the female protagonists of ATU 451 from oral and written traditions defy some gender norms (conflating femininity with motherhood) even as they conform to others (the image of the self-sacrificing "good" woman). Reading this tale with queer, feminist, folkloristic, and structural lenses helps to make sense of these contradictions, and also to illuminate the complex relationship between folk narrative and society. Even a psychoanalytic reading, attuned to unconscious drives, could help make sense of this tale. To Freudian scholar Otto Rank, "hero myths originate in and fulfill ... socially and personally unacceptable impulses. The fulfillment that myth provides is compensatory: it is a disguised, unconscious ... fantasized venting of impulses that cannot be vented directly" (Segal, "Introduction" xxvii). Ironically, Rank's statement—made originally about hero myths solely with male heroes—applies quite well to ATU 451, as it is socially unacceptable for women to criticize the chiasmic nature of femininity and motherhood, socially constructed though they both are. Coding allows for expression of this criticism, while the female hero's silence parallels the silencing effects of culture on various aspects of women's life experiences.

The question of how much and whether the female heroes in fairy tales should function as role models for girls and women in our era is relevant as well. Kay Stone conducted fieldwork in the 1980s with men and women of various ages, interested in how they conceive of gender roles in fairy tales. She found that both men and women "clearly view fairy tale heroines and heroes as providing different kinds of idealized behavior, and both males and females react to these differences in different ways" (143). Recognizing that the hero of ATU 451 only partially conforms to gendered expectations, and that her failure to conform is a coded protest against patriarchal constraints, heightens the relevance and impact of this tale.

Stone elaborates that for women, "the problem-creating aspect of the tales

is the attempted identification with the ideal woman, or the guilt if one fails to identify with her, and the expectation that one's life will be transformed dramatically and all one's problems will be solved with the arrival of a man" (Stone 143). As noted above, in ATU 451, the arrival of men is often what causes more problems for the female protagonist; thus it is unlike the many canonical fairy tales (like "Cinderella," "Snow White," or "Sleeping Beauty") that Stone found to be important and relevant to her informants. The female hero of ATU 451 fulfills one male ideal, in that she is silent rather than loquacious, and her silence almost gets her killed. This is a poignant lesson for women who read and hear this tale, whether or not they are aware that there is a deeper critique of gendered expectations of women.

In 2009, Jonathan Gottschall wrote in response to Ragan's paper on heroines in folktales that there might be more male heroes than female heroes in folktales because the lives of men are simply more interesting than the lives of women: "The lives of a traditional culture's males—of its warriors, chieftains, big men, thugs, murderers, political usurpers, wooers, and hunters—may simply possess more dramatic wallop, *on average*, than can typically be generated from the more domestic activities of that culture's females" (441, emphasis in original). The silencing tactics of male-biased scholarship are unfortunately alive and well in the twenty-first century. Thus, it is all the more important to consider the female hero in folk narrative, what her contributions are, and what she might be saying to us even through her silence.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Linda Lee for her helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

2. Silence occurs prominently in literary fairy tales, perhaps the most famous example of which is Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." In exchange for giving the little mermaid legs, the sea witch demands her voice: "You have the most beautiful voice of all those who live in the ocean. I suppose you have thought of using that to charm your prince; but that voice you will have to give to me. I want the most precious thing you have to pay for my potion" (69). When the little mermaid assents to this trade, the sea witch cuts out her tongue, highlighting the permanence of her voiceless state (in contrast to the Disney adaptation of the film, in which the voice-taking is neither graphic nor permanent). The witch's statement implies that the little mermaid's voice is precious because it is beautiful, and that its lack will be harmful. As we shall see, being voiceless presents unique challenges to the female hero in fairy tales.

3. See Jorgensen, "Political and Theoretical Feminisms in American Folkloristics: Definition Debates, Publication Histories, and the *Folklore Feminists Communication*." *The Folklore Historian* 27 (2010): 43–73.

4. Most tale types retain the same numbers between the revisions, but it is common practice to use the most recent version of the tale type index where possible.

5. Uther describes the aim of tale type systems as "to ascertain the extent to which the sources and stylistic traits were connected as well as the degree of interdependency

between oral and literary traditions. In addition, the classifications served as scientific tools to promote access to certain folktales or collections" ("Tale Type," 939). There are both practical and scholarly applications of the system.

6. As in ATU 707, "The Three Golden Children," which had been previously titled "The Three Golden Sons" despite the fact that one of the children is usually a girl, and an active one in the tale at that. This tale also features, in some versions, a silence injunction in order to win an enchanted bird.

7. Examples include giant- and witch-killing tales, as Holbek demonstrates: "Thus, there are masculine as well as feminine versions of AT 328 (*The Boy Steals the Giant's Treasure* according to Aarne-Thompson—it might just as well have been a girl)" (*Interpretation* 422).

8. Segal notes, however: "Campbell later allows for female heroes, but in *Hero* he, like Rank, limits himself to male ones. More accurately, he presupposes male heroes even though some of his examples are female!" ("Introduction" xvii).

9. In *The Types of International Folktales*, Uther summarizes the tale's first form (with references to various motifs):

"A stepmother transforms her stepsons into swans [D161.1] (ravens [D151.5]). The sister looks for her brothers and finds out how to release them: She has to be silent for some years [D758] and has to make shirts out of cotton-grass for the brothers [D753.1].

"A king finds the young woman in the forest and marries her [N711]. In his absence she bears a child, but her mother-in-law takes it away and accuses her of eating the child [K2116.1.1] (having borne an animal). The young queen remains silent because of her brothers, even though she is to be executed. On her way to the funeral pyre her period of silence ends and her brothers are disenchanted. Everything is explained and the mother-in-law is punished." (Vol 1, 267)

10. Other folktales, classified as anecdotes and jokes, deal with silence in household disputes, adultery, and attempts to get food. These include ATU 1355A, 1355B, 1358C, 1360B, 1567E; see Uther, *The Types* Vol. 3, subject index under "Silence."

11. The tale was omitted from the text's second edition, as it was deemed too gruesome; the title, "How Children Played Butcher with Each Other," gives us some clue as to why.

12. While discussing unconscious motivations, it is worth mentioning that in certain psychological readings of ATU 451, the sister's silence symbolizes her transitional status as she matures. Marie-Louise von Franz lists the following associations: "During the time the heroine of the fairy tale is up the tree, she must not speak or laugh, which is often the rule during a state of incubation.... The words *mysticism* and *mystic* come from *myo*, keeping one's mouth shut.... So mystical silence is the conscious variation of something that is less positive when it happens to one unconsciously" (*The Feminine* 151). Von Franz's far-reaching associations are an example of how psychological interpretations of fairy tales often stray far from the text under consideration. Holbek on has this to say of psychological approaches to fairy tales: "What we must object to is that those notions do not result from studies of the *texts*. They are derived from different hypotheses about the unconscious processes of the *mind*, which are believed to be reflected in the tales" (*Interpretation* 1998, 316, italics in original). This does not invalidate them, but rather reminds us to be cautious of uncritically accepting psychological interpretations of folklore.

13. Many of Toelken's categories of silence in ballads apply in fairy tales as well (such as narrative ellipsis, where plot elements are omitted in a given performance, and grammatical silence, where the audience is forced to glean information from an incomplete or

ambiguous phrase or sentence). Toelken also eloquently explains how things that are unsaid can be understood to indicate meaning.

14. Within folkloristics, this type of analysis is commonly called allomotific analysis. Alan Dundes is credited with its invention. I utilize and explain it in greater depth in Jorgensen 2012.

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