

monstrous creature. When the heroine, sent by her stepmother to get a light, is approaching the hut, she sees a horseman all in white, on a white horse, galloping past her, and then one all in red. The hut is surrounded by a fence of human bones, with skulls on the spikes with eyes which gleam in the darkness, and mouths with sharp teeth 'in place of a lock'. Then a black horseman gallops in through the door of the house, and a terrible noise is heard as Baba Yaga drives up in her mortar, and confronts Vasilisa. She agrees to give her a light if she will work for her, and the girl accomplishes the heavy tasks set her with the help of her wonderful doll. Mysterious hands come to grind the wheat which she has sorted out, but the girl wisely refrains from asking questions. When the horsemen are asked how she managed to do the blessing, she answers that she has driven them out in fury, giving them a good scare.

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Conclusion

Looking back over the impressive array of helpers, it seems that those who come to assist hero or heroine have two main purposes. One is to act as guide to the Otherworld, providing the means to reach the desired goal, and the other to offer food, magical gifts, practical help and advice. While the first might seem to relate mainly to the hero and the second to the heroine, there are exceptions

to this. The women undertake arduous journeys as well as tasks about the house, climb glass mountains, fall down wells or are lost in the deep forest, while magic tablecloths or food from a horse's ear are often essential for the survival of the hero. The Otherworld may be reached through the air, perhaps on a magic horse or an eagle's back, or by descending into the earth, and the general impression is of a land of richness and beauty, where enormous distances may separate one kingdom or supernatural being from another. Helpers often give the adventurers a ball to roll before them to show the way, or seven-league boots to take them swiftly over the countryside, or a steed of some kind to carry them to the next stopping place.

There is emphasis on the remoteness of the place to be reached and the difficulty of finding the way there, so that the counsel of wise animals or supernatural beings may be necessary. Some helpers however are not encountered in the Otherworld, but may appear in the home, or be helpful relatives, neighbours or passing strangers. Trees may spring up in the familiar world on which helpful birds perch, or the grave of a dead parent may be the place where help is procured. Sometimes after the quest is accomplished the helper entreats the hero to slay him, so that he can resume human form.

When we search for the source of evil in the tales, we find it not so much in the Otherworld as in the human characters in close contact with the hero or heroine. Stepmothers, mothers-in-law, jealous siblings, envious colleagues and greedy servants are the ones who commit ruthless crimes against the innocent, together with tyrannical rulers. There are also women who are 'enchanted', perhaps by a demon lover, and must be rescued and cleansed to recover their full humanity. Human characters can restore and save the apparently doomed, and the water of life bring about the resurrection of hero or heroine. Crimes and deeds of violence can be undone, and just as a prince cut to pieces or thrown into the sea can be brought back to life, so the heroine's hands which have been cut off can be replaced, and her lost eyes restored. In very few of the tales does evil finally triumph, and when this does happen, it is through the intervention of supernatural destroyers (p. 116 above). It is common for the evil-doers unwittingly to pronounce their own death sentence (Lüthi 1984: 131).

Both helpers and adversaries can be supernatural figures, and this is an important point to be recognised. We cannot assume that the fairy tales originated in myths, as was argued by Grimm and others in the nineteenth century, for there is no convincing evidence for this, but it seems possible that the tales contain memories of earlier traditions of journeys to the Otherworld and communication with the dead, as well as those of supernatural powers who may guide or hinder. There appear also to be memories of a female guardian figure protecting women and girls, and of supernatural rulers of the wild creatures. Such helpful yet dangerous figures were known early in northern Eurasia, and this gives a possible explanation of the strong emphasis on animal helpers in the tales. While not found in the northern myths or in tales of gods and heroes, they are encountered in earlier shamanistic tradition, since the shaman depended on such helpers for his journeys to the Otherworld, and his spirit guides were in the form of birds or animals (Eliade 1960: 94ff.). The strong emphasis on long and perilous journeys in the tales is characteristic of

shamanistic tradition, as are the episodes in which the journeying figure is maimed or killed and then restored to life and health. In the initiatory dreams of a shaman he may be cut to pieces, cooked and eaten or swallowed by a monster, and such dreams are accepted as evidence that he is destined to be a shaman (Krippner 1989: 382). It is generally agreed that shamanism formed part of the hunting culture in northern Europe and Asia, as Hultkrantz (1961: 47) and others have shown, and it seems possible that earlier accounts of shamans' journeys have influenced the patterns of the tales.

At the same time many helpers and adversaries could represent familiar human figures in the world of the storytellers and their audiences. The wicked king or ogre could be equated with the heroine's father showing hostility to the suitor, as has been convincingly argued by Holbek (1987: 426-7), while the unkindness of stepmother and mother-in-law was notorious in a world where frequent deaths in childbirth led many fathers to remarry, and young wives often entered unfriendly households (Davidson 1998: 127ff.) However the supernatural elements in the tales should not be neglected. They are particularly powerful in the Russian tales, where Baba Yaga plays a frequent part, together with the dragon figures who fluctuate between monsters and rulers of Other-world kingdoms. Baba Yaga seems sometimes to be related to the mistress of the animals, while showing characteristics of the goddess of the hearth and of the dead (Davidson 1998: 181). However, the purpose of the fairy tales is not to present these supernatural figures as central characters in the plot, since they are only important for the part they play in the destiny of hero or heroine. They are not seen as invariably good or evil, as are the human characters. Figures like stepmothers, vicious servants or jealous brothers may turn to destructive supernatural beings to assist them in their malicious intent, but it is they who commit the crimes and are incapable of remorse.

As opposed to this impression of evil close at hand, the positive side of human relationship comes out strongly in pictures of heroic loyalty. The possibility of willing self-sacrifice, as in the tales of sisters determined to disenchant their brothers almost to the point of their own destruction, is an important element in the tales. So too is the motif of the necessary killing of the faithful helper, and the readiness to sacrifice wives or children to save the hero's deliverer. Lack of morality in the tales has often been stressed, and the hero may cheat, steal or use cunning to succeed, or the heroine seek to destroy her suitors. Nevertheless there is a firm sense of responsibility for others, and of the necessity to face up to the issues of life and death when the crisis comes. The tales are more than entertaining accounts of successful wooings transformed into a magical framework. It has been claimed with some justification that they give a picture of youth attaining maturity, learning to make lasting relationships and to become independent and responsible (Brewer 1980: 7ff.). Yet they are by no means tedious moralising tales, even if there have been attempts to turn them in this direction, particularly when adapting them for children in the nineteenth century. Much of the vitality which saves them and has assured their survival over the centuries comes, surely, from the rich tapestry of helpers and destroyers which extends the action into the realms of the Otherworld.

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