

FOLKTALES AND THE DETECTIVE STORY

Tekla Dönötör/translated by Elizabeth Tucker and Antony Hellenberg

On the subject of Volksmärchen, neither the encyclopedias of literary history and aesthetics nor the writings of folklore scholars are miserly with their praise. They particularly direct their attention to the pure beauty, the innocence, and the capacity for moral expression of the Märchen. The incomparable Grimm brothers, laying the foundations for a new field of scholarship, published their Household Tales in 1819. They wrote in the introduction to their collection: "Through the heart of this poetical work runs that very purity which makes children seem so wondrous and soulful to us: they have almost the same pure, bluish-white, shining eyes."

Later on, scholars of this collection no longer wrote about the Volksmärchen with such romantic enthusiasm, yet they continued to be influenced by a similar attitude.

In contrast, the detective story is a written work which has no place in the discussions of sophisticated literary circles.

First of all I would like to beg the forgiveness of all so-called "literary" writers of detective stories. For these writers choose the form of a detective story only to make a category of serious subject matter more accessible to the reader and to be able to express profoundly psychological characterizations in their valuable creations. Yet the following discussion will not consider them. We are primarily interested in the average detective story, which we can buy in paperback edition at the corner newsstand, and which is among the favorite reading material of people in every profession. (Ask any publisher!)

Certainly no one would presume to maintain that this world of ours is as pure as the eye of a child. It is generally agreed that the average detective story appeals not to the higher but the baser instincts of the reader. The ambitious detective story appeals primarily to the logic of its readership and is perhaps most easily compared to solving a crossword puzzle. The ordinary newsstand detective story ties to titillate the reader with detailed descriptions of murders, tortures, and an exceedingly vivid presentation of alluring female charms, whereby the lovelives of women, who regularly cross the path of the private detective, play an almost enviably significant role.

Now even this kind of detective story, which has less influence on the higher instincts of the reader and much more on his baser ones, is a direct continuation of the Volksmärchen, which expresses the thought and emotional world of the simple children of the folk.

We will consider the distinction between these two types at the end of our discussion. First of all we would like to consider the similarities of style, psychology, and theme, factors which will undoubtedly show that the detective novel is a direct descendent of the Volksmärchen--perhaps not a legitimate one, but a child all the same.

We would like to undertake to prove this assertion by means of systematic inquiry.

Märchen scholarship in Europe and in the United States--which unquestionably was initiated by the collected Household Tales of the Grimm brothers--culminated, as is well known, in the 1928 publication: The Types of the Folktale, F.F.C. 74, referred to as Aarne-Thompson. Since then, folklorists have only to refer to a number in order to immediately understand which type of Märchen is meant.

Indeed, no one has type-categorized detective novels as yet, for their authors (in contrast to the transmitters of Volksmärchen, anonymous in the past and today often still anonymous) are well known to us. They live among us--often quite comfortably--and would certainly object if someone suggested that their stories were cut from the same pattern as Volksmärchen and are easily classifiable into the same tidy type categories. For the detective story that was dictated into a machine and thrown together to meet a contracted deadline is generally as much a treasured creation of the writer as a novel worthy of the highest literary respect.

Nevertheless, all researchers proficient in categorizing Volksmärchen could place most of the favorite detective stories into corresponding tale types, on the basis of plot, chosen motifs, or emerging heroes. Let us first consider the similarities between the hero of the tale and the hero of the detective story.

The positive hero of the tale appears in various forms. There is the strong hero, who conquers his opponent with great physical strength (AaTh 650). Sometimes he is already accompanied by unusual circumstances at birth. His mother or father, for example, may be a bear or a horse. Another type of hero in the tale is the antihero, who finds himself in an apparently hopeless situation: of the three brothers he is the smallest, the dumbest or the laziest, possibly a tiny dwarf or a Cinderella figure. And yet in the end he emerges victorious according to the moral law of the Volksmärchen, which favors the weak who fall into a seemingly hopeless dilemma. I would like to designate the third type as the unjustly accused tale hero. He is often a good-looking, noble, and courageous young man who was led into an unfortunate situation by extreme circumstances and machinations of evil forces. This hero conquers his opponent with the help of faithful servants or grateful animals, with the assistance of a deceased individual, or with the aid of some kind of magic.

We can also find all three types of tale heroes in detective stories. There are so many examples available that it is difficult to choose among them.

The first group naturally includes the unconquerable James Bond, superagent 007. A number of policemen, agents, and private detectives, such as the heroes of authors Mickey Spillane and John D. MacDonld, are also included in this group. These heroes triumph in incredible circumstances. As a consequence of their physical strength, fantastic athletic achievements, and like activities, they attain unheard-of successes even on the battlefield of live.

We encounter the second type much more frequently than the heroes of the cast of the "Iron Johannes," in the tale as well as in the detective story. At the top

Characters of the third type can likewise be found in numerous detective stories. They are primarily people who are unjustly accused, and imprisoned because of their enemies. They escape and are finally able to prove their innocence. It is worth considering whether or not we should also include Simon Templar, who is continually being sought not only by the murderer, but also by the police. Yet the conclusion is always the same: Templar proves himself to be right in every situation.

We would also like to say a few words about the assistants and helpers of the Märchen (AaTh 500-514). These characters are humans as well as animals: faithful servants, dogs, ants, eagles, but also plants and inanimate objects.

We have already talked about some of the companions of the detective story heroes. Their prototype is, naturally, Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson. With animals there are of course less obvious parallels available: the role of the magic horse is taken over by the wondercar in the detective story.

The magic horse, for example, has a particularly important role in the Hungarian Volksmärchen. It first appears as an insignificant, scrawny nag with protruding bones that can barely stand up on its legs. And yet, because its master feeds it with glowing embers it grows wings and sails away with its rider into the air.

We have already mentioned that in the detective story the car has taken the place of the magic horse. It is indeed a rather worn out vehicle, almost a wreck, but as soon as the owner gets behind the wheel, it becomes capable of extraordinary accomplishments.

Such an automobile appears frequently in the Travis McGee series of John D. MacDonald. The hero calls his car "Miss Agnes." In one of the books we read, "She requires tender care in her advanced years. I discovered her in the back row of an enormous automobile graveyard." But in spite of her age (built in 1936) the hero still drives her at lightning speed. In countless detective stories we discover seemingly old cars, that in spite of everything go much faster than the best new models, and apparently also run noiselessly and without gas.

Let us quote similar instances from a Hungarian Volksmärchen:

"In the hen coop there is a saddle and a bridle, all in muck... I want to have them. And on the dung heap there is lying a poor nag. I saw him there when I was carrying the dung from the stable. He was in poor shape, scarcely able to move his head. He may have given up the ghost since then. But if you give me that horse, I will not bother you with any more requests."

"Oh son, what would you gain by having a soiled saddle and bridle and a decrepit nag which is on its last leg? He would not carry you as far as a mile."

The boy then went to the hen coop and took the mucky saddle and bridle from the perch. Then he went to the dung pit. The horse

of this list I would like to place the delicate, undersized hero, the little dwarf (AsTh 700). As a parallel character to him, I think of my favorite detective hero, the private detective Donald Lam, created by Gardner, who is guided and directed by Bertha, his heavy-set female partner, owner of a private detective service. The individual volumes of this detective story series generally begin with a client who comes into the detective bureau office, and--having just discovered that concealed behind the names "Cool and Lam: Detective Agency" are a heavy-set old woman and a dwarf--almost collapses into unconsciousness.

Bertha characterizes her partner with words similar to those we can read in the German fairy tale "The Dwarf and the Cannibal:" ". . . yet he was a clever and sly urchin, who put his brothers in the sack with adroitness and cunning." About Lam his colleague says, "He is a little runt, but he is brainy," or "He's a smart little runt, he learns fast" (Gold comes in bricks).

The extreme opposite of Lam is Nero Wolfe. Writer Rex Stout presents in him a detective belonging to the most significant category. Yet, as a consequence of his gluttony, Wolfe is hindered from leaving his apartment. His corpulence makes it difficult for him to walk; he can just drag himself along. There is no chair that can support his weight, no automobile in which he fits. He is thus entirely dependent upon his intellect. Reflecting with downcast eyes, he solves the mysteries consigned to him while his well-paid and trusty co-workers make inquiries and carry out the dirty work.

The number of criminal pseudo-detectives is so great that it is hardly possible to give precedence to any one of them. In the books of Agatha Christie, we make the acquaintance of two internationally known detective heroes: Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Poirot is an idiot in the eyes of the English, for he speaks with a somewhat awkward foreign accent. His clothing is rather unusual, and he always drinks hot chocolate or camomile tea. In contrast, Miss Marple is a simple, elderly provincial spinster who looks as if she couldn't count to three. In her rural isolation, however, she alone comes upon the tract of the clever murderer.

Another member of this group is Lord Peter Whinsey, created by Dorothy Sayers. Lord Whinsey is an eccentrically affected English aristocrat, with a monocle and an expensive, tailored suit of clothes. Naturally we also find at his service the faithful servant of the Volksmärchen: Bunter, his lordship's valet. Incidentally, the English particularly relish the pseudo-idiotic hero of the stupid, lazy, gluttonous, and crude officer of the law, who nevertheless always manages to find the trail of the murderer.

Among the luckless heroes we must include the detectives and police officers of the despised and oppressed social strata or races. Consider, for example, the native Australian policeman Bony, created by Arthur W. Upfield, the American Negro policeman Virgil Tibbs, brought into detective story literature by John Ball, and the little Jewish Rabbi created by Kemelman. In the end, however, these outsiders of society succeed just as well as the Cinderella figure of the Märchen. The more hopeless the beginning, the greater the success.

was lying there, quite near the pit. It called for some effort to get the bridle on its neck. But as soon as it was there, the nag shook itself and got up on its feet.

And when there was a good distance between them and the cottage, the horse shook itself: "Now, my dear master, get into the saddle and off we go."

The boy got on its back and the horse asked him: "Shall I go like the wind or as quick as thought?"

Then they went flying with the wind." (The Tree That Reached Up to the Sky)

"There was a terribly emaciated foal in a corner. It was so thin that its legs stood criss-cross. It was so weak that it couldn't even decide on which legs it should support itself. Because it was just skin and bones, you could only see the large protruding eyes. Then the foal began to speak: "I advise you to light a pile of wood and let it burn down. Then bring me some of its embers."

So it happened. The foal had hardly devoured the glowing meal when it stretched its limbs and changed itself into a proud steed with a golden hide." (Nemtudomka)

Not only men and animals give support to the unlikely Märchen heroes, the dwarfs, the lazy and the stupid. Magic objects also give assistance: weapons that never miss their objectives, the "Tischlein-deck-dich" (little-table-set-yourself), the stick in the sack, and the ship that floats on land as well as on water. The people around the security officer James Bond, for example, utilize such objects. A good example of this can be found in the novel The Man With the Golden Gun. In this story the evil enemy owns a gold-plated Colt, its bullets cast in 24-carat gold and plated with silver. Whoever is hit by one of these dies immediately. Every better-class detective hero has such a weapon at his disposal or has at least a spyglass, a motor boat and other things with which he is able to carry out marvelous deeds.

The most amazing of all magically powerful instruments is the telephone that always rings at the correct moment. And of course the person called is always there; help is promptly on the scene.

In the Volksmärchen the telephone corresponds to the bird feather which the hero receives as a gift. If worse comes to worse, he can call for help with the feather. Usually the one appears who gave the feather to our hero. Or what about Aladdin's wonderful lamp, which can magically produce the helpful genie for its possessor at any time? (AaTh 561).

Expensive jewels also play as important a role in detective stories as they do in tales. Hero and opponent strive with equal ferocity for the possession of immeasurable treasures.

A great deal can also be found in detective stories about fantastic inventions for which spies and anti-spies vie against each other. It is not very difficult in fairy tales, for even the son of the kind infrequently beats his enemies with the help of magical objects and thus assumes the throne. The stick in the sack--the magic weapon that overcomes every enemy (AaTh 563)--is equally on hand in both genres.

But let us also take a closer look at the antagonists of the Volksmärchen hero. In the folktale it is the dragon, the giant, the witch, or some other monster. Its castle, in which the fairy tale princess is held prisoner, is surrounded by cliffs. The monster is extraordinarily large, disgusting, bloodthirsty, etc. etc., for otherwise the hero's feat of conquest would not be great enough.

The natural antagonist of the detective story hero is the murderer, whom he follows and who follows him. And with him are the hired accomplices, bought and paid for by the murderer. The image of the dragon in the Märchen is most appropriately the gangster who lives in a magnificent castle or in a penthouse of an expensive New York hotel, surrounded by his staff of servants and a sizable number of magical devices for his protection (alarms and so forth).

The second unfathomably evil opponent of the hero of the detective story is the spy of a foreign power. The adversaries of James Bond are guarded by secret agents in sea fortresses or in other safe places, just as the dragon of the Märchen is protected by a band of smaller creatures or devils.

A third kind of monster is the mentally deranged murderer, who carries out his misdeed with the help of black magic. This figure is already somewhat unfashionable. At the turn of the century he had a significantly more important role. The inner and external characteristics of this type conform for the most part to those of the witch in the Volksmärchen. This kind of detective story is directed mainly toward those readers with weak nerves. In view of its psychological effect, we can best compare it to the Märchen "The Children and the Ogre" (AaTh 327).

We shouldn't neglect to characterize the women of the detective stories. They remind one in part of the fairy tale princess who got into difficulties. The criminal pursues, kidnaps, and tortures her. Of course, the chase is also directed against her male protectors and lovers. This heroine is so incomparably beautiful that it would be easier to look at the sun and not be blinded than to look at her. In the Edgar Wallace novels she also has blond hair and blue eyes, but this ideal image can also change with the style.

Another feminine character is the similarly beautiful but ethically evil woman, the frigid, depraved beauty, who tries to separate the hero from the real daughter of the king. Here we find a distinction between the Volksmärchen and the detective story. The Märchen tends to leave it to the imagination of the reader. It doesn't waste much time with the detailed description of feminine

charms, although we may assume that the listener of the Märchen imagines the evil beauties to be just as sexy as those he encounters in the shameless descriptions of the detective stories. In both genres the final minutes reveal that the beautiful woman is actually a wolf in sheep's clothing. In a specific group of Märchen types this kind of woman is a very obvious character ("The black and the white bride," AaTh 403).

Now let us take a quick look at the type categories of the Aarne-Thompson Märchen index. The numbers from 300-400 include Märchen under the heading "Supernatural Adversaries." They correspond to detective stories in which the adversary of the hero, the enemy spy or the murderer plays the chief role.

In those Märchen of the index numbered from 400-459, we frequently find a man looking for his wife or vice-versa, the woman for her husband. These types, preferred in American detective stories, are somewhat less frequent in Europe, for here kidnapping is less profitable. Yet in the European detective stories marital partners are also snatched away when someone can thereby gain access to a worthwhile inheritance or even sizable wealth.

Beginning with the number 460 we find a series of Märchen in which the heroes must survive superhuman trials. The parallel cases to the group are the spy novels and detective stories with heroes like Sherlock Holmes, Perry Mason, Maigret, and others. Following these--from number 500 on--are the Volksmärchen in which the faithful assistants take on a significant role. We have already mentioned a few such examples. It would be unthinkable for us to overlook Gardner's literary character, the beautiful secretary Della Street, who in the course of the 40 years of the novel's existence has unalterably remained about 26 years old and consistently fresh and beautiful. We must also not forget Nero Wolfe's assistant Archie and the two ugly detectives.

Between numbers 560 and 649 is a group of Märchen which are characterized by the use of magical objects. We have already talked about this group but have not mentioned the magic power of the breath of wind, with whose help the hero is transported into a deep sleep. In the detective story, in place of that we have sleep-inducing drugs and knock-out drops which the murderer administers to the hero at the proper moment. In a statistical comparison, the incidence of the dream wind of the Märchen and the sleeping potion of the detective story would balance out to be almost the same. If the Märchen hero has almost reached the enchanted daughter of the king, then a dream wind is released upon him by means of a curse and it takes some time until he can escape this ban. A similar situation occurs in the detective story by means of the sleeping potion. The potion is employed when the action needs to be delayed or extended. The private detective, having finally tracked down and apprehended the nasty murderer, suddenly notices that his eyelids are becoming very heavy. When he comes to, he is lying tied up in a cellar without a window or a door.

I have not yet talked about transformations. The Märchen hero, as versatile as his opponent, can take on various forms: he changes himself into an animal or a plant, into an old woman, into grain kernels--and then again into a human being, until everything starts all over from the beginning. Who is not familiar with the story about the little brother who became a stag (AaTh 450) or of the

brother who became a bird (AaTh 451)? Now the heroes of the detective stories are capable of far more wonderful accomplishments: the ghosts of the Volksmärchen that peep through the keyhole would be ashamed if they were aware of the kind of metamorphoses that members of spy organizations can carry out.

With this remark, our overview and comparison is concluded. The question indeed remains, if the Volksmärchen and the detective story are very similar with regard to plot, heroes, and pattern, why do we consider one to be beautiful and innocent and the other by contrast to be stupid and perhaps even harmful?

Seriously though, we can even find an explanation for this. The Märchen expresses a naive moral. The world of the Märchen is the kind of world that the real world should be: a world in which the poor and the weak are victorious, which is not dominated by force and evil, by corrupt judges, bloodthirsty cannibals, or the ghost that arose from the grave. The Märchen was told by poor people to other poor people so that they could encourage one another in a world in which truth did not win and the weak individual had little opportunity to succeed. Such a naive moral, and such a happy ending, is also evident in most detective stories. (With the exception of literary detective novels, like those of Chandler, which end just as oppressively as numerous other pretentious novels; in these the identity of the murderer is indeed established, but the moral order of the world is not victorious and the reader lays down the book in a state of depression.)

The true detective story therefore does not end any differently from the Volksmärchen. On the other hand, our attention is drawn from the purpose of comparison to such newspaper announcements in which the person making the announcement adds merely for the sake of decency that he is looking for acquaintanceship with the opposite sex "with the intention of marriage." Author and reader know equally well that the detective story was not written to strengthen the moral stature of the common man. The author and the reader are not interested in the victorious deeds of the innocent hero, but rather in the vivid descriptions of the brawls and murders (the Volksmärchen never details the condition of the corpse, the broken bones, the tracks of spilled blood, and the lovemaking with women, which are generally described in the detective stories with shameless exactness. In the Volksmärchen we learn little about the exterior and dress of the female characters. Yet, in deference to the exceptions, the better detective novels attempt to avoid this last mentioned theme.)

The detective story is, after all, written for money and purchased for money. The Volksmärchen belongs to everyone. The detective novel belongs to the one who buys it. In my opinion the commercial viewpoint determines and decides the difference between the two genres, and would dull the sparkle in those pure, blue eyes of children mentioned by the Grimm brothers. Along the path that leads from the Märchen to the detective story there are a host of transitional literary genres: the chapbook, the ballad, the Western and similar forms. These forms are located between the two extreme examples, between the two poles, and play an important role in the history of the development of the detective story. Yet the specific effect which the two extreme poles--the Volksmärchen and the

detective story--have, these forms will never achieve. These are, to use Andre Jolles' expression, "einfache Formen" and they satisfy fundamental human needs.

It is the duty of the folklorist to note in which direction the detective story is developing. He should also continue to express the naive morality of the common man and not stimulate and affirm such evil instincts as sadism.

The era of the Volksmärchen has indeed come to an end--there is nothing that can change that. We live in an age of thrillers, and it is certainly not a matter of indifference in what direction the chief reading material of the great masses will go.

NOTES

This paper was originally written for West German broadcasting.

The Aarne-Thompson numbers refer to the first edition of the catalogue (Helsinki, 1928).

The quotation from Grimm to found in: Kinder und Hausmärchen, gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm. Vorrede.

The book by Jolles is: Jolles, André: Einfache Formen, 1965 (2nd edition).

About the role of metals in folktales, see: Lüthi, Max, Märchen. Stittgart, 1974 (5th edition)

The quotation from the Hungarian folktale is taken from: Folktales of Hungary, ed. by Linda Dégh, 1965.