

Queering Kinship in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers”

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Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.

—Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

The fairy tales in the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, or *Children’s and Household Tales*, compiled by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are among the world’s most popular, yet they have also provoked discussion and debate regarding their authenticity, violent imagery, and restrictive gender roles. In this chapter I interpret the three versions published by the Grimm brothers of ATU 451, “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers,” focusing on constructions of family, femininity, and identity. I utilize the folkloristic methodology of allomotivic analysis, integrating feminist and queer theories of kinship and gender roles. I follow Pauline Greenhill by taking a queer view of fairy tale texts

from the Grimms' collection, for her use of queer implies both "its older meaning as a type of destabilizing redirection, and its more recent sense as a reference to sexualities beyond the heterosexual." This is appropriate for her reading of "Fitcher's Bird" (ATU 311, "Rescue by the Sister") as a story that "subverts patriarchy, heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity alike" (2008, 147). I will similarly demonstrate that "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" only superficially conforms to the Grimms' patriarchal, nationalizing agenda, for the tale rather subversively critiques the nuclear family and heterosexual marriage by revealing ambiguity and ambivalence. The tale also queers biology, illuminating transbiological connections between species and a critique of reproductive futurism. Thus, through the use of fantasy, this tale and fairy tales in general can question the status quo, addressing concepts such as self, other, and home.

The first volume of the first edition of the Grimm brothers' collection appeared in 1812, to be followed by six revisions during the brothers' lifetimes (leading to a total of seven editions of the so-called large edition of their collection, while the so-called small edition was published in ten editions). The Grimm brothers published three versions of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" in the 1812 edition of their collection, but the tales in that volume underwent some changes over time, as did most of the tales. This was partially in an effort to increase sales, and Wilhelm's editorial changes in particular "tended to make the tales more proper and prudent for bourgeois audiences" (Zipes 2002b, xxxi). "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" is one of the few tale types that the Grimms published multiply, each time giving titular focus to the brothers, as the versions are titled "The Twelve Brothers" (KHM 9), "The Seven Ravens" (KHM 25), and "The Six Swans" (KHM 49). However, both Stith Thompson and Hans-Jörg Uther, in their respective 1961 and 2004 revisions of the international tale type index, call the tale type "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers." Indeed, Thompson discusses this tale in *The Folktale* under the category of faithfulness, particularly faithful sisters, noting, "In spite of the minor variations . . . the tale-type is well-defined in all its major incidents" (1946, 110). Thompson also describes how the tale is found "in folktale collections from all parts of Europe" and forms the basis of three of the tales in the Grimm brothers' collection (111).

In his *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, Bengt Holbek classifies ATU 451 as

a “feminine” tale, since its two main characters who wed at the end of the tale are a low-born young female and a high-born young male (the sister, though originally of noble birth in many versions, is cast out and essentially impoverished by the tale’s circumstances). Holbek notes that the role of a low-born young male in feminine tales is often filled by brothers: “The relationship between sister and brothers is characterized by love and helpfulness, even if fear and rivalry may also be an aspect in some tales (in AT 451, the girl is afraid of the twelve ravens; she sews shirts to disenchant them, however, and they save her from being burnt at the stake at the last moment)” (1987, 417). While Holbek conflates tale versions in this description, he is essentially correct about ATU 451; the siblings are devoted to one another, despite fearsome consequences.

The discrepancy between those titles that focus on the brothers and those that focus on the sister deserves further attention. Perhaps the Grimm brothers (and their informants?) were drawn to the more spectacular imagery of enchanted brothers. In Hans Christian Andersen’s well-known version of ATU 451, “The Wild Swans,” he too focuses on the brothers in the title. However, some scholars, including Thompson and myself, are more intrigued by the sister’s actions in the tale. Bethany Joy Bear, for instance, in her analysis of traditional and modern versions of ATU 451, concentrates on the agency of the silent sister-saviors, noting that the three versions in the Grimms’ collection “illustrate various ways of empowering the heroine. In ‘The Seven Ravens’ she saves her brothers through an active and courageous quest, while in ‘The Twelve Brothers’ and ‘The Six Swans’ her success requires redemptive silence” (2009, 45).

The three tales differ by more than just how the sister saves her brothers, though. In “The Twelve Brothers,” a king and queen with twelve boys are about to have another child; the king swears to kill the boys if the newborn is a girl so that she can inherit the kingdom. The queen warns the boys and they run away, and the girl later seeks them. She inadvertently picks flowers that turn her brothers into ravens, and in order to disenchant them she must remain silent; she may not speak or laugh for seven years. During this time, she marries a king, but his mother slanders her, and when the seven years have elapsed, she is about to be burned at the stake. At that moment, her brothers are disenchanting and returned to human form. They redeem their sister, who lives happily with her husband and her brothers.

In “The Seven Ravens,” a father exclaims that his seven negligent sons should turn into ravens for failing to bring water to baptize their newborn sister. It is unclear whether the sister remains unbaptized, thus contributing to her more liminal status. When the sister grows up, she seeks her brothers, shunning the sun and moon but gaining help from the stars, who give her a bone to unlock the glass mountain where her brothers reside. Because she loses the bone, the girl cuts off her small finger, using it to gain access to the mountain. She disenchants her brothers by simply appearing, and they all return home to live together.

In “The Six Swans,” a king is coerced into marrying a witch’s daughter, who finds where the king has stashed his children to keep them safe. The sorceress enchants the boys, turning them into swans, and the girl seeks them. She must not speak or laugh for six years and she must sew shirts from asters for them. She marries a king, but the king’s mother steals each of the three children born to the couple, smearing the wife’s mouth with blood to implicate her as a cannibal. She finishes sewing the shirts just as she’s about to be burned at the stake; then her brothers are disenchanting and come to live with the royal couple and their returned children. However, the sleeve of one shirt remained unfinished, so the littlest brother is stuck with a wing instead of an arm.

The main episodes of the tale type follow Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp’s structural sequence for fairy-tale plots: the tale begins with a villainy, the banishing and enchantment of the brothers, sometimes resulting from an interdiction that has been violated. The sister must perform a task in addition to going on a quest, and the tale ends with the formation of a new family through marriage. As Alan Dundes observes, “If Propp’s formula is valid, then the major task in fairy tales is to replace one’s original family through marriage” (1993, 124; see also Lüthi 1982). This observation holds true for heteronormative structures (such as the nuclear family), which exist in order to replicate themselves. In many fairy tales, the original nuclear family is discarded due to circumstance or choice. However, the sister in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” has not abandoned or been removed from her old family, unlike Cinderella, who ditches her nasty stepmother and stepsisters, or Rapunzel, who is taken from her birth parents, and so on. Although, admittedly, “The Seven Ravens” does not end in marriage, I do not plan to disqualify it from analysis simply because it doesn’t fit the

dominant model, as Bengt Holbek does when comparing Danish versions of “King Wivern” (ATU 433B, “King Lindorm”).¹ The fact that one of the tales does not end in marriage actually supports my interpretation of the tales as transgressive, a point to which I will return later.



Dundes’s (2007) notion of allomotif helps make sense of the kinship dynamics in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers.” In order to decipher the symbolic code of folktales, Dundes proposes that any motif that could fill the same slot in a particular tale’s plot should be designated an allomotif. Further, if motif A and motif B fulfill the same purpose in moving along the tale’s plot, then they are considered mutually substitutable, thus equivalent symbolically. What this assertion means for my analysis is that all the methods by which the brothers are enchanted and subsequently disenchanting can be treated as meaningful in relation to one another. One of the advantages of comparing allomotifs rather than motifs is that we can be assured that we are analyzing not random details but significant plot components. So in “The Six Swans” and “The Seven Ravens,” we see the parental curse causing both the banishment and the enchantment of the brothers, whereas in “The Twelve Brothers,” the brothers are banished and enchanted in separate moves. Even though the brothers’ exile and enchantment happen in a different sequence in the different texts, we must view their causes as functionally parallel. Thus the ire of a father concerned for his newborn daughter, the jealous rage of a stepmother, the homicidal desire of a father to give his daughter everything, and the innocent flower gathering of a sister can all be seen as threatening to the brothers. All of these actions lead to the dispersal and enchantment of the brothers, though not all are malicious, for the sister in “The Twelve Brothers” accidentally turns her brothers into ravens by picking flowers that consequently enchant them.

I interpret this equivalence as a metaphorical statement—threats to a family’s cohesion come in all forms, from well-intentioned actions to openly malevolent curses. The father’s misdirected love for his sole daughter in two versions (“The Twelve Brothers” and “The Seven Ravens”) translates to danger to his sons. This danger is allomotifcally paralleled by how the sister, without even knowing it, causes her brothers to become enchanted, either by picking flowers in “The Twelve Brothers” or through the mere incident of her birth in “The Twelve Brothers” and “The Seven Ravens.” The fact that a father would prioritize his sole daughter over numerous sons is strange and reminiscent of tales in which a father explicitly expresses romantic desire for his daughter, as in “Allerleirauh” (ATU 510B), discussed in [chapter 4](#) by Margaret Yocom. Even in “The Six Swans,” where a stepmother with magical powers enchants the sons, the father is implicated; he did not love his children well enough to protect them from his new spouse, and once the boys had been changed into swans and fled, the father tries to take his daughter with him back to his castle (where the stepmother would likely be waiting to dispose of the daughter as well), not knowing that by asserting control over her, he would be endangering her. The father’s implied ownership of the daughter in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” and the linking of inheritance with danger emphasize the conflicts that threaten the nuclear family. Both material and emotional resources are in limited supply in these tales, with disastrous consequences for the nuclear family, which fragments, as it does in all fairy tales (see Propp 1968).

Holbek reaches a similar conclusion in his allomotifc analysis of ATU 451, though he focuses on Danish versions collected by Evald Tang Kristensen in the late nineteenth century. Holbek notes that the heroine is the actual “cause of her brothers’ expulsion in all cases, either—innocently—through being born or—inadvertently—through some act of hers” (1987, 550). The true indication of the heroine’s role in condemning her brothers is her role in saving them, despite the fact that other characters may superficially be blamed: “The heroine’s guilt is nevertheless to be deduced from the fact that only an act of hers can save her brothers.” However, Holbek reads the tale as revolving around the theme of sibling rivalry, which is more relevant to the cultural context in which Danish versions of ATU 451 were set, since the initial family situation in the tale was not always said to be royal or noble, and Holbek views the tales as reflecting the actual concerns and conditions of

their peasant tellers (550; see also 406–9).² Holbek also discusses the lack of resources that might lead to sibling rivalry, identifying physical scarcity and emotional love as two factors that could inspire tension between siblings.

The initial situation in the Grimms' versions of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" is also a comment on the arbitrary power that parents have over their children, the ability to withhold love or resources or both. The helplessness of children before the strong feelings of their parents is corroborated in another Grimms' tale, "The Lazy One and the Industrious One" (Zipes 2002b, 638).³ In this tale, which Jack Zipes translated among the "omitted tales" that did not make it into any of the published editions of the *KHM*, a father curses his sons for insulting him, causing them to turn into ravens until a beautiful maiden kisses them. Essentially, the family is a site of danger, yet it is a structure that will be replicated in the tale's conclusion . . . almost.

But first, the sister seeks her brothers and disenchants them. The symbolic equation links, in each of the three tales, the sister's silence (neither speaking nor laughing) for six years while sewing six shirts from asters, her seven years of silence (neither speaking nor laughing), and her cutting off her finger and using it to gain entry to the glass palace where she disenchants her brothers merely by being present. The theme unifying these allomotifs is sacrifice. The sister's loss of her finger, equivalent to the loss of her voice, is a symbolic disempowerment. One loss is a physical mutilation, which might not impair the heroine terribly much; the choice not to use her voice is arguably more drastic, since her inability to speak for herself nearly causes her death in the tales.⁴ Both losses could be seen as equivalent to castration.⁵ However, losing her ability to speak and her ability to manipulate the world around her while at the same time displaying domestic competence in sewing equates powerlessness with feminine pursuits. Bear notes that versions by both the Grimms and Hans Christian Andersen envision "a distinctly feminine savior whose work is symbolized by her spindle, an ancient emblem of women's work" (2009, 46). Ruth Bottigheimer (1986) points out in her essay "Silenced Women in Grimms' Tales" that the heroines in "The Twelve Brothers" and "The Six Swans" are forced to accept conditions of muteness that disempower them, which is part of a larger silencing that occurs in the tales; women both are explicitly forbidden to speak, and they have fewer declarative and interrogative speech

acts attributed to them within the whole body of the Grimms' texts.

Ironically, in performing subservient femininity, the sister fails to perform adequately as wife or mother, since the children she bears in one version ("The Six Swans") are stolen from her. When the sister is married to the king, she gives birth to three children in succession, but each time, the king's mother takes away the infant and smears the queen's mouth with blood while she sleeps (Zipes 2002b, 170). Finally, the heroine is sentenced to death by a court but is unable to protest her innocence since she must not speak in order to disenchant her brothers. In being a faithful sister, the heroine cannot be a good mother and is condemned to die for it. This aspect of the tale could represent a deeply coded feminist voice.⁶ A tale collected and published by men might contain an implicitly coded feminist message, since the critique of patriarchal institutions such as the family would have to be buried so deeply as to not even be recognizable as a message in order to avoid detection and censorship (Radner and Lanser 1993, 6–9). The sister in "The Six Swans" cannot perform all of the feminine duties required of her, and because she ostensibly allows her children to die, she could be accused of infanticide. Similarly, in the contemporary legend "The Inept Mother," collected and analyzed by Janet Langlois, an overwhelmed mother's incompetence indirectly kills one or all of her children.⁷ Langlois reads this legend as a coded expression of women's frustrations at being isolated at home with too many responsibilities, a coded demand for more support than is usually given to mothers in patriarchal institutions. Essentially, the story is "complex thinking about the thinkable—protecting the child who must leave you—and about the unthinkable—being a woman not defined in relation to motherhood" (Langlois 1993, 93). The heroine in "The Six Swans" also occupies an ambiguous position, navigating different expectations of femininity, forced to choose between giving care and nurturance to some and withholding it from others.

Here, I find it productive to draw a parallel to Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus. Antigone defies the orders of her uncle Creon in order to bury her brother Polyneices and faces a death sentence as a result. Antigone's fidelity to her blood family costs her not only her life but also her future as a productive and reproductive member of society. As Judith Butler (2000) clarifies in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, Antigone transgresses both gender and kinship norms in her actions and her speech acts.

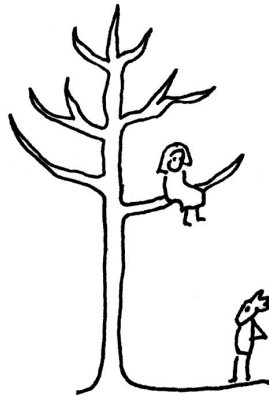
Her love for her brother borders on the incestuous and exposes the incest taboo at the heart of kinship structure. Antigone's perverse death drive for the sake of her brother, Butler asserts, is all the more monstrous because it establishes aberration at the heart of the norm (in this case the incest taboo). I see a similar logic operating in "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers," because according to allomotific equivalences, the heroine is condemned to die only in one version ("The Six Swans") because she allegedly ate her children. In the other version that contains the marriage episode ("The Twelve Brothers"), the king's mother slanders her, calling the maiden "godless," and accuses her of wicked things until the king agrees to sentence her to death (Zipes 2002b, 35). As allomotific analysis reveals, in the three versions, the heroine is punished for being excessively devoted to her brothers, which is functionally the same as cannibalism and as being generally wicked (the accusation of the king's mother in two of the versions).

In a sense, 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. According to Butler, gender performativity demonstrates "that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" ([1990] 1999, xv). This illusion, that gender and sexuality are a "being" rather than a "doing," is constantly at risk of exposure. When sexuality is exposed as constructed rather than natural, thus threatening the whole social-sexual system of identity formation, the threat must be eliminated.

One aspect of this system particularly threatened in "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" is reproductive futurism, one form of compulsory teleological heterosexuality, "the epitome of heteronormativity's desire to reach self-fulfillment by endlessly recycling itself through the figure of the Child" (Giffney 2008, 56; see also Edelman 2004). Reproductive futurism mandates that politics and identities be placed in service of the future and future children, utilizing the rhetoric of an idealized childhood. In his book on reproductive futurism, Lee Edelman links queerness and the death drive, stating, "The death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (2004, 9). According to this logic, to prioritize anything other than one's reproductive future is to refuse social viability and heteronormativity—this

is what the heroine in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” does. Her excessive emotional ties to her brothers disfigure her future, aligning her with the queer, the unlivable, and hence the ungrivable. Refusing the linear narrative of reproductive futurism registers as “unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane” (4), words that could very well be used to describe a mother who is thought to be eating her babies and who cannot or will not speak to defend herself.

The heroine’s marriage to the king in two versions of the tale can also be examined from a queer perspective. Like the tale “Fitcher’s Bird,” which queers marriage by “showing male-female [marital] relationships as clearly fraught with danger and evil *from their onset*,” the Grimms’ two versions of ATU 451 that feature marriage call into question its sanctity and safety (Greenhill 2008, 150, emphasis in original). Marriage, though the ultimate goal of many fairy tales, does not provide the heroine with a supportive or nurturing environment. Bear comments that in versions of “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” wherein a king discovers and marries the heroine, “the king’s discovery brings the sister into a community that both facilitates and threatens her work. The sister’s discovery brings her into a home, foreshadowing the hoped-for happy ending, but it is a false home, determined by the king’s desire rather than by the sister’s creation of a stable and complete community” (2009, 50).



The manner in which the king discovers the heroine is also questionable in ATU 451. In “The Twelve Brothers,” a king comes upon the heroine

while out hunting and fetches her down from the tree in which she sits; in “The Six Swans,” the king’s huntsmen carry her down from a tree after she throws down all of her clothing except for a shift, after which she is taken to the king. The implication that the heroine is actually the king’s quarry subtly exposes the workings of courtship as a hunt or chase with clearly prescribed gender roles. In both cases, the king weds her for her beauty, and the heroine silently acquiesces. The heroine is slandered in her own home, and, tellingly, her marriage is not stable until her brothers are returned to human form. As Holbek notes, “There is an intriguing connection between the brothers and the king: the heroine only wins him for good when she has disenchanted her brothers” (1987, 551). This suggests that issues with the natal family must be worked out before a new family can be successfully formed.

Anthropological methods also help to illuminate the kinship dynamics of this tale. In particular, the culture reflector theory is useful, but only to a degree, as ethnographic information about nineteenth-century German family structure is limited. More generally, European families in the nineteenth century were undergoing changes reflecting larger societal changes, which in turn influenced narrative themes at the time. Marilyn Pemberton writes, “Family structure and its internal functioning were the keys to encouraging the values and behavior needed to support a modern world which was emerging at this time” (2010, 10). The family in nineteenth-century Germany faced upheavals due to industrialization, wars, and politics, as the German states were not yet unified. Jack Zipes situates the Grimms in this historical context: “The Napoleonic Wars and French rule had been upsetting to both Jacob and Wilhelm, who were dedicated to the notion of German unification” (2002b, xxvi). And yet the contributors to a book titled *The German Family* suggest that the socialization of children remained a central function of the family structure (Evans and Lee 1981). The German family was the main site of the education of children, with the exception of noble or bourgeois males who could be sent to school, until the late nineteenth century (Hausen 1981, 66–72). Thus we may expect to see in the tales some reflection of the family as an educational institution, even if the particular kinship dynamics of the Grimms’ historical era are still being illuminated.

Two Grimm-specific studies support this. August Nitschke (1988) uses

historical documents such as autobiographies and novels to demonstrate that nineteenth-century German mothers utilized folk narratives from oral tradition to interact with their children, both as play and instruction. Ruth Bottigheimer's (1986) historical research on the social contexts of the Grimms' tales shows how by the nineteenth century, women's silence had come to be a prized trait, praised in various media from children's manuals to marriage advice. This message was in turn echoed in the Grimms' tales, with their predominantly speechless heroines, a stark example of a social value reflected in the tales. Additionally, Bottigheimer notes that it "was generally held in Wilhelm's time that social stability rested on a stable family structure, which the various censorship offices of the German states wished to be presented respectfully, as examples put before impressionable minds might be perceived as exerting a formative influence" (1987, 20). Thus, rigid gender roles and stable families came to be foregrounded in the Grimms' tales.

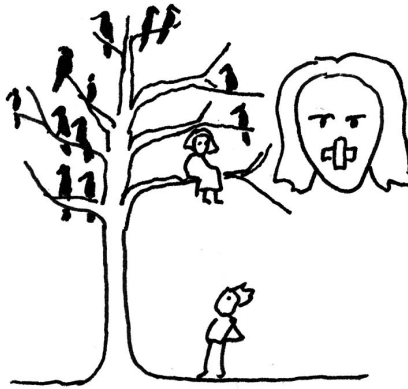
Moving from the general reflection of social values to kinship structures in folktales, I would like to draw a parallel between German culture and Arab cultures based on how many of the tales in the Grimms' collection feature a close brother-sister bond. The folktales Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana collected from Palestinian Arab women almost all feature close and loving brother-sister relationships. Muhawi and Kanaana read these relationships in light of their hypothesis that the tales present a portrait of the Arab culture, sometimes artistically distorted, but still related. Based on anthropological research, they note that the relationship between the brother and the sister is warm and harmonious in life, and it is one of the most idealized relationships in the folktale. Clearly I am not trying to imply in a reductionist fashion that German and Palestinian Arab cultures are the same, though a number of their folktale plots overlap; rather, I am stating that if we have evidence that the tales reflect kinship arrangements in one culture, then perhaps something similar is true in a culture with similar tales. Perhaps the Grimms' tales, collected and revised in a society where families still provided an educational and nurturing setting permeated by storytelling traditions and values, contain information about how families can and should work. Sisters and brothers may have needed to cooperate to survive childhood and the natal home, and behavior that the narrative initially constructs as self-destructive might guarantee survival later on.

Hasan El-Shamy's work on the brother-sister syndrome in Arab culture provides a second perspective on siblings in Arab folktales. In his monograph on a related tale type, ATU 872* ("Brother and Sister"), El-Shamy summarizes a number of texts and analyzes them in the context of an Arab worldview.⁸ What these texts have in common with "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" is that the sister-brother dyadic relationship is idealized and provides the motivation for the plot.⁹ However, since the brother-sister relationship is so strong emotionally as to border on the potentially incestuous, the desire of the brother and sister to be together must be worked out narratively through a plot that makes sense to its tellers and the audience so that "the tale reaches a conclusion which is emotionally comfortable for both the narrator and the listener" (1979, 76). Thus in Arab cultures, this tale type makes meaningful statements about the proper relationships between brothers and sisters, both reflecting and enforcing the cultural mandate that brothers and sisters care for one another.

The brother-sister relationship in the same tale or related tales in different cultures can take on various meanings according to context; as discussed previously, Holbek interprets ATU 451 as a tale motivated by sibling rivalry, while El-Shamy interprets related tales as expressing a deep sibling love. Both scholars interpret the tales drawing on information from their respective cultures and yet reach different conclusions about the psychology underlying the tales. The importance of cultural context is thus paramount, and in the case of the Grimms' inclusion of three versions of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" in their collection, the life contexts of the collectors also feature prominently.

The life histories of the Grimm brothers themselves influenced the shaping of this tale in very specific ways. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm came from a family that was once affluent but become impoverished when their father died, and for much of their lives, Jacob and Wilhelm struggled to provide an adequate income on which to support their aging mother, their sister, and their four surviving brothers. Jacob never married but rather lived with Wilhelm and his wife and children (Zipes 2002b, xxiii–xxviii; see also Tatar 1987).¹⁰ The correspondence between Jacob and Wilhelm "reflects their great concern for the welfare of their family," as did their choices in obtaining work that would allow them to care for family members who were unable to work (Zipes 2002b, xxv). Hence one reason "The Brothers Who Were

“Turned into Birds” appears in their collection three times could be that its message, the importance of sibling fidelity, appealed to the Grimms. Zipes comments on the brothers’ revisions of the text of “The Twelve Brothers” in particular, noting that they emphasize two factors: “the dedication of the sister and brothers to one another, and the establishment of a common, orderly household . . . where they lived together” (1988b, 216). Overall, the numerous sibling tales that the Grimms collected and revised stressed ideals “based on a sense of loss and what they felt should be retained if their own family and Germany were to be united” (218).



Though the love between (opposite-gendered) siblings is emphasized in the Grimms’ collection as a whole, as well as in their three versions of “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers,” there is also ambivalence. As fundamentally human emotions, love and hate are sometimes transformations of each other, as misplaced projection or intensified identification.¹¹ Thus Holbek’s and El-Shamy’s seemingly opposing interpretations of brother-sister tales can be reconciled, since each set of tales, in their cultural context, grapples with the question of how brother-sister relations should be. The Grimms’ tales veer more toward sibling fidelity, but there is a marked ambivalence in “The Twelve Brothers” in particular. When the sister sets out to find her twelve brothers, she encounters the youngest one first, who is overjoyed to see her. However, he tells her that the brothers vowed “that any maiden who came our way would have to die, for we had to leave our kingdom on account of a girl!” (Zipes 2002b, 33). The youngest brother tricks the older

brothers into agreeing not to kill the next girl they meet, after which the older brothers warmly welcome their sister into their midst. The initial hostility of the brothers toward their sister, though narratively constructed and transformed, could also represent the Grimms' ambivalent feelings about their family: as a family that frequently suffered hardship and poverty, there must have been some strain in supporting all of their siblings. As eldest, Jacob in particular bore many of the responsibilities. Zipes notes, "It was never easy for Jacob to be both brother and father to his siblings—especially after the death of their mother, when they barely had enough money to clothe and feed themselves" (9). Including and revising brother-sister tales may thus have been a way for the Grimms to navigate their own complicated feelings toward their many siblings by achieving a narrative resolution for an initial situation fraught with resentment.

The message of sibling fidelity also upholds social norms in a patriarchal, patrilocal society, for brothers and sisters would not be competing for the same resources. In contrast, many of the Grimms' tales (and fairy tales in general) feature competition between women for resources, a struggle that ultimately disempowers women. Maria Tatar comments on the heroines in the Grimms' collection who, lowly by day, beautify themselves at night in dresses "that arouse the admiration of a prince and that drive rival princesses into jealous rages" (1987, 118). Classical texts of ATU 510A ("Cinderella") in particular tend to present women competing for eligible men, portrayals that have drawn attention from feminist critics (Haase 2004a, 16, 20). Kay Stone's reception-based research on gender roles in fairy tales reveals that readers are aware of the competition between women featured in the tales, "a competition our society seems to accept as natural" (1986, 137).

Inasmuch as "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" depicts a woman leaving her birthplace and getting married, it upholds the patriarchal mandate that anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975) identified as "the traffic in women." According to Rubin's theory, men cement their homosocial bonds by exchanging women as wives, essentially as commodities. Yet in each of the versions of this tale type in the Grimms, the sister continues to live with her brothers at the tale's conclusion. The brothers do not necessarily take wives of their own, which in two versions leads to an odd arrangement where the brothers live with their sister and her husband. The nuclear family is replicated, but with the addition of the bachelor brothers, thus altering

the original family that was present at the opening of the tale. This familial constellation, which may have been recognizable to the extended family structures of nineteenth-century Germany, nonetheless does not conform to heteronormative ideas of the ideal nuclear family.¹² Instead, it parallels the extraordinary image of the littlest brother in the third tale left with a wing instead of an arm because his disenchantment was incomplete—a compelling icon of fantasy penetrating reality, demanding to be made livable. The brothers form a queer appendage when added to the family unit of the heterosexual couple plus their children, and the visibly liminal status of the winged littlest brother highlights the oddness of the brothers' inclusion.

This third tale, "The Six Swans," is more specifically woman centered and queer than the other two, as it begins with female desire (the witch ensnaring the father/king to be her daughter's husband) and female inventiveness (the father/king's new wife sewing and then enchanting shirts to turn the king's sons into swans).¹³ The sister then defies the father/king's authority by refusing to come with him, where the new wife is ostensibly waiting to dispose of the remainder of the unwelcome offspring. The sister wanders until she finds her brothers and undertakes to free them by remaining silent for six years while sewing them six shirts from asters. Her efforts are nearly thwarted by her new husband's mother, who steals her children and attempts to frame her for murder. It is notable that the women in this tale who are the most active—the witch, the witch's daughter who becomes stepmother to the siblings, and the old woman who is mother to the sister's husband—are the most villainous. The sister, in contrast, turns her agency inward, acting on herself in order to remain silent and productive. Her agency, the most positively portrayed female agency in this tale, is thus queer in the sense that it resists and unsettles; it acts while negating action, it endures while refusing to respond to life-threatening conditions. That agency should be complex and contradictory makes sense, for, according to Butler, "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (2004, 3). The sister's agency, so quiet as to be almost unnoticeable, is nevertheless not congruent with being silenced.

The queerness of this tale also manifests in transbiology. Judith Halberstam discusses the transbiological as manifesting in "hybrid entities

or in-between states of being that represent subtle or even glaring shifts in our understandings of the body and of bodily transformation” (2008, 266). More specifically, transbiological connections “question and shift the location, the terms and the meaning of the artificial boundaries between humans, animals, machines, states of life and death, animation and reanimation, living, evolving, becoming and transforming” (266). The transitions and affinities between humans and animals in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” interrogate the very notion of humanity as a discrete state. If the heroine’s brothers are birds, how can they still be her brothers? The tale seems to affirm a kinship between humans and animals, allowing for the possibility that family bonds transcend species divisions. The heroine herself is close to an animal state, especially during her silent time sewing in the forest. Viewing the heroine’s state from a transbiological perspective helps illuminate Bottigheimer’s statement linking muteness and sexual vulnerability, when she describes how, in “The Six Swans,” “against all contemporary logic the treed girl tries to drive off the king’s hunters by throwing her clothes down at them, piece by piece, until only her shift is left” (1987, 77). This scene does in fact make sense if the heroine is read to be in a semi-animalistic state, having renounced some of her humanity. Shedding human garments is akin to shedding social skins, layers of human identity, though her morphological stability betrays her when the king perceives her as a beautiful human female and decides to wed her.

However, the fact that this remains a human-centered tale renders its subversiveness incomplete. We never learn what the brothers think and feel while they are enchanted; do they keep their sister company as she silently sews shirts for them? Do they retain any fragments of their human identities or memories while in swan or raven form? The fact that the brothers fly to where their sister is bound to a pyre, about to be immolated, suggests that they acknowledge some kind of tie to her. The brothers’ inability to use their bird beaks to form human speech parallels the sister’s silence, rendering both brothers and sister unintelligible in human terms. For the brothers to become human again, they must be framed as legibly human. Bear notes the importance of “publicly dressing the swans as human beings” in order to disenchant them in certain versions of “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” (2009, 55). In “The Six Swans,” the heroine tosses the shirts she had sewn onto the swans as they fly near the pyre to which she

is bound. In “The Twelve Brothers,” the brothers as ravens swoop into the yard where the sister is about to be burned at the stake, at which point the seven years of the sister’s silence elapse. Exactly at that moment, “just as they touched the ground, they turned into her twelve brothers whom she had saved” (Zipes 2002b, 35–36). In “The Seven Ravens,” the brothers assume human form after flying into their home as ravens, and when they go to their table to eat and drink, they notice signs of the sister’s presence and exclaim, “Who’s been eating from my plate? Who’s been drinking from my cup? It was a human mouth” (92). The sister’s presence is enough to disenchant the brothers, but it is significant that her humanness causes them to comment and initiates the transformation. Thus, in each of these three tales, the brothers must reengage with human activities—wearing clothing, acknowledging their relationship with gravity and the ground, and eating in human fashion—in order to become human once again.



To explore the issues presented by these tales further, I return to the comparative method, asking why three versions of this tale type really needed to be published in one collection, and what the differences between the versions can tell us. Queer and anthropological perspectives on the brother-sister relationship each illuminate the meanings of tales where brothers and sisters love each other excessively—both as taboo and survival strategy. Parental love is almost always destructive, whether it is excessive fatherly love or a stepmother’s desire to be the sole loved object. We learn from the anomalous ending of the text “The Seven Ravens” that neither silence nor heterosexual marriage is required for this tale type to work as a story, to make sense narratively. In that tale, the sister disenchants her brothers when she arrives at their domicile and drops a ring into one of their cups as a recognition token, at which point the seventh brother says, “God grant us that our little sister may be here. Then we’d be saved!” (Zipes 2002b, 92). After the brothers are transformed back into humans, they “hugged

and kissed each other and went happily home” (93). Here, enfolding back into the nuclear family is the happily ever after—the only price was the sister’s little finger and her sacrifice to seek her brothers. In the texts where marriage does occur, it is queered by danger and ambivalence. According to my allomotific analysis, silence is but one method of disenchantment. A sacrifice of another sort will do: the sacrifice of a “normal” marriage, the sacrifice of a reproductive future. Yet these things seem a small price to pay for the reward of a family structure, however unconventional, bonded by love and loyalty.

As I’ve shown, the Grimms’ versions of “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” affirm some family values on the surface, but the texts are also radical in their suggestions for alternate ways of being. The nuclear family is critiqued as dangerous, and the formation of a new marital family does not guarantee the heroine any more safety. Greenhill describes a parallel phenomenon in the tales she analyzes in her essay: “‘Bluebeard’ and ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ queer kinship by exposing the sine qua non of heterosexual relationships—between bride and groom, husband and wife—as explicitly adversarial, dangerous, even murderous” (2008, 150). The husband in “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” (when he appears) is not dangerous through action so much as inaction, by allowing his mother to slander and threaten his wife. Both men and women are alternately active and passive in this tale type, making it difficult to state to what degree this tale type exhibits female agency, a task made even more difficult when the heroine voluntarily gives up her voice. The sister’s agency lies partially in negation and endurance, which is one way that the tale queers the notion of agency, despite the fact that in each of the three tales the sister takes the initiative and sets out on a quest to find her brothers. By simultaneously questioning the family and making it the sought-after object, the Grimms’ three versions of “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” complicate the notion of kinship, presenting myriad possibilities for how humans and non-humans can relate to and live with one another. As a story that explores and opposes lethal and idealized families, this tale investigates themes of attachment, ambivalence, and ambiguity that were central to the Grimms’ cultural context and life histories and remain relevant today.

NOTES

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1. Holbek actually dismissed the majority of the Danish versions available to him as defective or garbled versions, deteriorations from some ideal norm (Vaz da Silva 2002, 144–45).

2. Holbek's thesis specifically accounts for the marvelous elements of fairy tales by placing them in a symbolic context that is meaningful to the community of tellers: "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 narrators to speak of the problems, hopes, and ideals of the community" (1987, 435).

3. "The Lazy One and the Industrious One" was not published in any of the original editions of the *KHM*, hence it does not have a *KHM* number, though Zipes (2002b) includes it as tale 233 in his third edition of *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*.

4. Similarly, Fortuné in Madame d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Belle ou le Chevalier Fortuné" chooses not to tell those who would execute him that he is really the woman Belle-Belle and instead waits till his body reveals his sex (see Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire, forthcoming). The protagonist who is reticent to speak and defend herself offers an interesting middle ground between fairy tales that feature a persecuted female protagonist and a protagonist who is more outgoing.

5. While Freud viewed castration as a necessary stage in the Oedipus complex, hence in gender differentiation and heterosexual desire, recent queer theorists have come to question the inevitability of these processes. Butler writes that in the process of Oedipalization, "the child presumably will become gendered on the occasion that the child takes up a position in relation to parental positions that are prohibited as overt sex objects for the child" (2004, 120). Butler then continues on to ask, "But if Oedipus is interpreted broadly, as a name for the triangularity of desire, then the salient questions become: What form does that triangularity take? Must it presume heterosexuality?" (128). Thus, in a queer reading of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers," the heroine's castration through voicelessness need not be viewed as a precursor to her passage into a static heteronormativity.

6. Joan Radner and Susan Lanser's definition of coding is useful here: it refers to "the expression or transmission of messages potentially accessible to a (bicultural)

community under the very eyes of a dominant community for whom these same messages are either inaccessible or inadmissible" (1993, 3). An element of risk is also important as it creates the conditions that make coding necessary.

7. Langlois (1993, 90–91) compares the contemporary legend to a tale published in early versions of the *KHM* and then deleted, due to its gory ending, wherein children play butcher; perhaps this is another instance of coding (and subsequent censoring) in the Grimms' fairy tales.

8. Type 872* has some motifs in common with 451, such as the slander of the sister and her expulsion, and in some cases texts of 872* open with episodes from 451 (El-Shamy 1979, 33).

9. In many of the tales of this type, the brother takes a wife (often against his sister's counsel) who falsely accuses the sister of bad behavior or magically induces pregnancy to shame her. The sister is expelled, sometimes killed and resurrected, sometimes wed; in all events, though, she is reunited with her brother and the evil wife is punished (frequently gruesomely killed).

10. The fact that the brothers continued to live together even after Wilhelm married and had children may provide another imaginative link to the denouement of the two versions of "The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers" wherein the disenchanting brothers live with the sister and her husband.

11. Holbek defines projection as "feelings and reactions in the protagonist's mind [that] are presented as phenomena in the surrounding world" (1987, 440). Dundes (1993) discusses projection at great length. The related concept of identification is a more general psychological process whereby people see themselves as like or want to become like others, possibly in greater amounts than is considered healthy.

12. As Butler notes about how kinship is discussed in the political sphere (e.g., in the debates surrounding gay marriage or adoption), "Variations on kinship that depart from normative, dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured not only as dangerous for the child but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility" (2004, 104).

13. Here I disagree with Bottigheimer's (1987, 37–39) statement that the progression of motifs and events from "The Twelve Brothers" to "The Six Swans" strips the heroine of agency and power. Assigning agency is always a tricky matter, but the heroine in "The Six Swans" does have a number of direct speech acts, and she is the only heroine in the three texts to speak after the brothers are disenchanting and thus be able to explain herself, which I view as significant evidence for her agency in "The Six Swans."

