

GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ'S «ERENDIRA» AND THE BROTHERS GRIMM

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Since the first publication of *Nursery and Household Tales* in 1812, the fairy tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm have endured in popularity. Originating in the oral tradition, the old folk stories--once the main staple of entertainment for adults--are now published in sumptuous volumes with beautiful illustrations and directed to a younger public. The influence of the tradition is significant: numerous variations of the old tales have appeared, and many contemporary writers such as Andersen, Wilde, St. Exupéry, Thurber, Dodgson, Tolkien, and Sendak, to name a few, have each in his own way, expanded the form. The Grimm brothers' influence has long been prominent in other arts also, in such well-known works as the opera and ballet versions of «Cinderella,» «Hansel and Gretel,» «Rumpelstiltskin,» «Sleeping Beauty,» and «The Beauty and the Beast.» Countless more reworkings enrich the theatre, films, and puppetry.(1) Elements from fairy tales can be identified in writings by authors who ostensibly are far removed from the tradition, such as Franz Kafka.(2) The impact has been felt in Latin American literature as well. Jean Franco observed that «the mixture of violence and fairytale is increasingly common in contemporary fiction.»(3) She offers a specific example in her review of Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, claiming that the novel «can be read as a series of entertaining fairy tales which have the undertow of violence found (for instance) in the *Arabian Nights*.»(4) My purpose in this paper will be to elucidate certain elements and narrative structures in a story by Gabriel García Márquez as representative of those morphologies which Vladímir Propp delineates for the genre of the fairy tale.

There is no doubt that García Márquez is keenly interested

in children's literature. During the period between the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and the writing of *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, he composed several short stories, some of which carried the sub-heading «story for children.»(5) In 1978, the tales appeared in English translation in *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories*, a collection of eleven stories and one novella.(6) The volume's featured work is «The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother,» an awesome title which alludes to the cries of hawkers at county fairs.(7) It is a long narrative which has enjoyed more critical attention than its companion pieces and has been diversely labeled as an «historia rosada,» a parody of melodrama, a fanciful boutade, and a work so complex that the question of influences could be discussed indefinitely.(8) Numerous features of the story are illuminated when it is examined in the light of the structures and themes of the fairy tale, and especially in the tradition of the brothers Grimm.(9) Dimensions of special interest are the structural organization of the narrative, the portrayal of characters, and certain motifs, all of which are strongly reminiscent of Grimm's *Fairy Tales*.

Any discussion of the form of a fairy tale would do well to consider the now classical work by Vladímir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*,(10) which is undoubtedly the most thorough and influential examination of the genre. Conceived as a description of fairytales according to the characteristic elements and their relationship to one another, the study upholds as one of its basic premises that «all fairy tales are of one type with regard to their structure» (p. 23): it further offers a classification of what Propp terms «functions of dramatis personae» (pp. 25-65). A close look at the form of «Innocent Eréndira» reveals that many of Propp's «functions» can be discerned, suggesting that it does indeed have the organizational framework of a fairy tale.

Most fairy tales, says Propp, begin with an «initial situation» (p. 25), a statement that introduces the protagonists and suggests what direction the story might take. For example, the Grimm brothers' «Rapunzel» opens: «There were once a man and a woman who had long in vain wished for a child.»(11) In «Innocent Eréndira» the ominous first sentence is likewise in keeping with this pattern: «Eréndira was bathing her grandmother when the wind of her misfortune began to blow» (p. 1). The reader has thus met the two main characters and has been warned that a

catastrophe is imminent. The synoptic opening is then followed, Propp affirms, by an «interdiction» (p. 26) that tends to be a prohibition or a warning: «if by tomorrow morning early you have not spun this straw into gold, you shall die,» in «Rumpelstiltskin»;(12) or Jorinda's advice to Joringel, «take care that you do not go too near the castle»;(13) or the King's prohibitive decrees in «Faithful John,» «the last chamber in the gallery shall you not show.»(14) In «Innocent Eréndira» the interdiction is seen in the grandmother's command, «Before going to bed make sure everything is in perfect order,»(15) to which Eréndira replies, «yes, grandmother» (p. 1). According to Propp, one function results from another, and thus a logical development is a «violation of the interdiction» (p. 27). In Eréndira's case, she does not heed the warning. Fatigued from the abusive burden of her daily chores, Eréndira falls into bed without extinguishing the candles. That night a wind overturns the candelabra and the mansion is burned to the ground, thus fulfilling the presentiment voiced in the initial sentence.

Customarily, at this point a villain decrees some extreme and cruel punishment. In a Grimm's fairy tale it could be a devil, stepmother, animal, evil queen, or such. In Eréndira's case, the antagonist is the grandmother who announces, «life won't be long enough for you to pay me back for this mishap» (p. 7). She imposes a penalty and begins its execution: Eréndira must dedicate her life to large-scale prostitution and repay all damages. According to Propp, «the harm or injury caused by the villain» (p. 30) is the most important of all functions because it generates the rest of the action. This is certainly true in «Eréndira.» Throughout most of the story the reader finds the young girl in her tent carrying out the terms of her sentence. The grandmother's edict--forcing the child into «filthy business»--is harsh and excessive; it is nonetheless in keeping with the tradition where the villainous deeds are varied and severe: banishment, enslavement, bewitchment, mutilation, and cannibalism, to name a few.

Once the villain has imposed the punishment, the stage is set for the appearance of the hero. In «Eréndira,» the male lead is Ulises, a handsome lad who is on a trip through the desert with his father. Intrigued by the stories of Eréndira's beauty, he visits the tent where she is conducting her business affairs and experiences his sexual initiation in a night of passion. Smitten with love, he later decides to follow Eréndira and elope with her.

Their first attempt fails when the grandmother, assisted by the military, overtakes the couple and retrieves the girl. Eréndira is returned to her degradation, this time chained to the bed. Soon she becomes the most sought-after prostitute in the area and, consequently, hated and humiliated by her sisters-in-trade. The opulence and carnivalesque splendor of Eréndira's surroundings contrast with her desperation. This situation calls forth another series of «functions» peculiar to fairy tales.

According to Propp, «misfortune is made known and the hero is approached with a request» (p. 36). The motif is very common in the Grimm brothers. In «Iron Henry,» a prince-turned-frog comes to the aid of a forlorn princess; a young girl is saved from hard work by three deformed women in «The Three Spinners»; handsome princes rescue the «Goose-Girl,» «Snow White,» and «Sleeping Beauty.» The formula is similarly adhered to in the story by García Márquez. Eréndira beckons Ulises through mental telepathy:

Eréndira looked at her (the grandmother) from the bed with intense eyes that in the shadows resembled those of a cat. Then she went to bed like a person who had drowned, her arms on her breast and her eyes open, and she called with all the strength of her inner voice:

«Ulises!»

Ulises woke up suddenly in the house on the orange plantation. He had heard Eréndira's voice so clearly that he was looking for her in the shadows of the room. After an instant of reflection, he made a bundle of his clothing and shoes and left the bedroom (p. 49).

The communication leads to three other Proppian functions: «the hero decides upon counteraction» (p. 38), «the hero leaves home» (p. 39), and «the hero is led to the whereabouts» (p. 50). Ulises ponders the question for a second, then packs his clothes and informs his father of his departure. Although the trip across the desert is arduous, Ulises arrives safely, as if magically delivered:

On that occasion Ulises didn't have to ask anyone where Eréndira was. He crossed the desert hiding in passing trucks, stealing to eat and sleep, until he found the tent in

another seaside town. Eréndira was asleep chained to the slat and in the same position of a drowned person on the beach from which she had called him (p. 50).

Fairy tales must inevitably conclude with a confrontation in which the hero defeats the villain, thus delivering the victim to safety. Propp assigns three separate functions to these events: «the hero and villain join in combat» (p. 51), «the villain is defeated» (p. 53), and «the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated» (p. 53). Ulises decides to kill the grandmother in order to liberate Eréndira. The task is not easy and requires three attempts. First, Ulises presents the old woman with a cake laced with arsenic which has only a soporific effect. Next, Ulises resorts to dynamite, but the detonation merely inflicts surface burns. In desperation, Ulises turns to a knife and finally accomplishes his task. Free at last, Eréndira picks up the vest containing the profits of the business which the grandmother had converted into gold and flees toward the sea, never to return.

Hence, the happy ending, at least for Eréndira. The closing sentence has the effect of implying that she lived «happily ever after,» a formula ending which typifies most of the Grimm fairy tales:

Without turning her head she ran past the saltpeter pits, the talcum craters, the torpor of the shacks, until the natural science of the sea ended and the desert began, but she still kept on running with the gold vest beyond the arid winds and the never-ending sunsets and she was never heard of again nor was the slightest trace of her misfortune ever found (p. 59).

Just as the structure of García Márquez's story adheres to that of a fairy tale, so do the descriptions and development of the major characters. It is interesting to observe that the dominant figures in the story--Eréndira and her grandmother--are female. Such is the case also for the majority of tales from the Grimm brothers' collection, according to the well-known Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi who cites *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Rapunzel*, *The Princess in Disguise*, and *Goldmarie* as the most celebrated fairy tale figures.(16)

Eréndira shares common ground with the personages listed

above. When the story opens, she is barely fourteen years old, «and was languid, soft-boned, and too meek for her age» (p. 1). An orphan of illegitimate birth, Eréndira lives as a servant with her grandmother, accepting orders with stoic passivity. She is Cinderella, inhumanly abused as she performs her household chores of bathing and dressing the grandmother, sweeping and mopping floors, washing rugs, cooking meals, polishing crystal, caring for plants and pets, ironing clothes, and winding clocks--this last endeavor taking six hours of her time. Her exploitation reaches its peak when she is forced into prostitution, servicing large hordes of men each day. With the growth of Eréndira's clientele, the fame of her beauty spreads throughout the land. There is not doubt that she is miserable under her grandmother's tutelage: the only happy moments of her life being those during a brief period of captivity in a convent.

With Eréndira the Cinderella figure, her grandmother is squarely within the tradition of the cruel stepmothers so prevalent in fairy tales. Physically, she is a grotesque figure, a tattooed woman of elephantine proportions whose make-up and apparel complete the caricature of her appearance. Her enslavement and treatment of Eréndira is brutal, and her dealings with customers and business associates is equally cold-blooded. At the height of success in what has become a thriving capitalistic venture, the woman and her domain are engulfed in an atmosphere of revelry. Side-shows and concessions surround the central circus tent. But, as in all Grimm fairy tales, the wicked witch must come to her end, and she does in an appropriately gory fashion. The grandmother's death follows the formula of violent demise met by the stepmothers in «The Twelve Brothers» and «The Juniper Tree,» or the queen in «Snow White.»

More difficult to accommodate to the scheme is the male protagonist. Ulises' handsome appearance qualifies him as a hero--«a gilded adolescent with lonely maritime eyes and with the appearance of a furtive angel» (p. 16)--but his actions and the outcome deviate from the expected pattern.⁽¹⁷⁾ In a review which appeared shortly after the story was published, Carlos Meneses portrays Ulises as a kind of anti-Prince Charming.⁽¹⁸⁾ The critic indicates that Ulises is the son of a Dutch smuggler, which is far from royalty; he steals from his father to pay for Eréndira's pleasure; he is inexperienced in love; and he becomes an assassin. These objections may apply to a traditional fairy

tale, but not necessarily to a contemporary one. A white horse could not survive the Colombian desert, and certainly a Prince Charming is obligated to destroy the villain. Ulises is in fact somewhat unaggressive and innocent, and in this regard is closer to the Dumplings or simpletons seen in Grimm brothers' fairy tales. Lüthi calls the type the negative or passive hero: «The preference of modern literature for the passive hero.... is not without parallel in the fairy tale.... (which also) has a partiality for the negative hero; the insignificant, the neglected, the helpless.(19) Nonetheless, one must agree that Ulises fails when it comes to Propp's final and perhaps most important function: «the hero is married and ascends the throne» (p. 63). Eréndira does not share her final bliss; Ulises is left «lying face down on the beach, weeping from solitude and fear» (p. 59).(20)

A motif commonly found in fairy tales is the notion of successive ordeals. In the stories compiled by the Grimm brothers, the characters often participate in a series of labors or trials. Heroes must prove their valor by performing courageous deeds. They are compelled to unravel a sequence or riddles, or be subjected to what Propp terms «tests, interrogations, or attacks» (p. 39). An instance of this is seen in Ulises' efforts to kill the grandmother, successful only after the third attempt. Eréndira's introduction to sex also illustrates the theme. Three men--a widower, a trucker, and a mailman--are forced on her in rapid succession.

Cruelty, violence, scabrous sex, and gore are common-place items in the story by García Márquez. The description of the grandmother's death is a prime example:

Ulises managed to free the knife and stab her a second time in the side. The grandmother let out a hidden moan and hugged her attacker with more strength. Ulises gave her a third stab, without pity, and a spurt of blood, released by high pressure, sprinkled his face: it was oily blood, shiny and green, just like mint honey.... Huge, monolithic, roaring with pain and rage, the grandmother grasped Ulises' body. Her arms, her legs, even her hairless skull were green with blood. Her enormous bellows-breathing, upset by the first rattles of death, filled the whole area. Ulises managed to free his arms with the weapon once more, opened a cut in her belly, and an explosion of blood soaked him in green from

head to toe. The grandmother tried to reach the open air which she needed in order to live now and fell face down. Ulises got away from the lifeless arms and without pausing a moment gave the vast fallen body a final thrust (pp. 57-58).

The graphic account of this murder has antecedents in Grimm brothers' fairy tales such as «The Juniper Tree» which combines murder, decapitation, mutilation, and cannibalism;(20) or the original «Cinderella,» where the two stepsisters are punished for their wickedness when birds peck out their eyes.

Alternating with these incidents of blood and brutality are García Márquez's characteristic incursions into the world of fantasy, the so-called «magical realism.» When Ulises touches glass, for example, it turns blue because he is in love. Similarly, when the grandmother is deep in slumber, she lucidly describes luminous manta rays floating in the air and live sponges causing children to cry so they can soak up the tears. These events have clear parallels in fairy tales. In fact, Marthe Robert identifies the combination of reality and imagination as an essential element in Grimm's fairy tales: «To be sure, the fairy tale abolishes natural laws just as it pleases; but it remains well in contact with flesh and blood.(22) This definition is clearly applicable to «Innocent Eréndira» where the alliance of fantasy and objectivity serves to enhance the implicit observations, satire, even criticisms of society.

As I have tried to show, elements of the fairy tale are conspicuous throughout «The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother»: the frame of the story; the description and development of the characters; the role of ingredients such as cruelty and bloodshed; the mixing of reality and fantasy, and the other features here identified as properties of the fairy tale. García Márquez tells his story with the charm and simplicity peculiar to the popular narratives. With his unique and idiosyncratic style he has earned his entry into the company of the great line of anonymous tellers of the fairy tale and of fellow authors mentioned earlier: Wilde, St. Exupéry, Thurber, Tolkien, Sendak.

NOTES

1. Fairy tales as subjects for creations in the other arts is discussed by Julius E. Heuscher, *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1974), pp. 75-77.
2. The «anti-fairy tales» of Kafka and their similarities with fairy tales are treated by Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 145-46.
3. Jean Franco, «Rumour at the Top,» *Times Literary Supplement*, October 10, 1975, p. 1172.
4. *Ibid.*
5. This information is provided by Mario Vargas Llosa, *Historia de un deicidio* (Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1971), p. 617.
6. Gabriel García Márquez, *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper Row, 1978). Hereafter, references to this work will be cited in the text.
7. Vargas Llosa, p. 628.
8. These four opinions are mentioned respectively by: Carlos Meneses, «La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada,» *Sin Nombre*, IV, 1 (julio-septiembre 1973), pp. 81-84; William L. Siemens, «Gabriel García Márquez and the Tainted Hero,» *Philological Papers* (West Virginia University Bulletin), vol. 21 (December 1974), p. 95; Ricardo Cano Gaviria, «La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada,» *Libre*, 4 (1972), pp. 118-19; and Roger M. Peel, «Gabriel García Márquez y La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada,» *Estudios de Literatura Hispanoamericana en Honor a José J. Arrom*, Andrew P. Debicki and Enrique Pupo-Walker, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Studies in Languages in Literatures, 1974), p. 287.
9. A brief, anonymous review, «The Marvellous and the Monetary,» *Times Literary Supplement*, September 29, 1972, p. 1140, suggests that the story has the apparatus of a fairy tale.
10. Vladímir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). Hereafter, references to this work will be cited in the text.
11. «Rapunzel,» *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 73.
12. «Rumpelstiltskin,» *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, p. 265.
13. «Jorinda and Joringel,» *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, p. 339.
14. «Faithful John,» *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, p. 43.
15. This sentence is omitted in the English version. The translation from the original is mine.
16. Lüthi, pp. 135-36.
17. Allusions to the protagonist of the Homeric epic are clearly evident. Ulises and the classical prototypical hero show similarities in name and physical description. Both men also travel extensively, confront obstacles and undertake specific labors imposed on them. Parallelism between this story and the epic tradition could be examined in another study.

18. Meneses, pp. 81-84.

19. Lüthi, p. 145.

20. Since there are no other characters of real substance, it would be difficult to analyze them in terms of types found in fairy tales. There is one other, perhaps remote, point of contact: most of the minor figures are identified in terms of their occupation or conditions, which reminds us of the widowers, millers, fishermen, and tailors who abound in the Grimm's stories. In the García Márquez text we have the example of Eréndira's first series of sexual encounters with a widower, a trucker, and a mailman.

21. Heuscher, p. 148, discusses in his chapter on «The Juniper Tree» the appropriateness of some fairy tales for young people: «Many fairy tales are only sadistic fare for children and must, therefore, be withheld or be carefully expurgated.»

22. Marthe Robert, «The Grimm Brothers,» *Yale French Studies*, 43 (1969), p. 55.