

“FROM POPE TO POPESS” AS A METAPHOR FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: THE MOTIF OF POPESS JOHANNA IN FAIRY TALES

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Abstract

This study critically examines gender dynamics in fairy tales, with particular attention to the legend of Popess Johanna as a narrative vehicle for interrogating patriarchal structures. Through an analysis of *The Fisherman and His Wife* (KHM 19) from Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Children’s and Household Tales* (1812–1857), this investigation explores the concealment – and subsequent tragic unmasking – of gender identity within hierarchical power systems. The tale’s engagement with authority, identity, and societal expectations provides crucial insights into medieval gender constructs and their resonance in European literary traditions (Grimm & Grimm, 2015; Uther, 2011).

Key words: ATU 514, ATU 884; Popess Johanna; fairy tales; literary analysis; Pope Joan; social change; representation; *The Fisherman and His Wife*.

Representation of Gender in Fairy Tales

Fairy tales frequently serve as discursive sites where gender norms and power relationships are rigorously interrogated. Figures such as Antigone, Popess Johanna, and Joan of Arc (Žižek, 2004) regularly transgress conventional gender boundaries and act as archetypal challengers of patriarchal hegemony. These narratives are classified under ATU 514¹ (“The Shift of Sex”) and ATU 881² (“The Forsaken Fiancée”) in Hans-Jörg Uther’s *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Parts I to III* (2024).

ATU 514 [...] The woman in man’s clothing [...] accomplishes heroic deeds and/or goes into service with a king. The daughter (sister) of the king falls in love with her and wants to marry her. The woman in man’s clothing refuses, or the marriage is

1 <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1-vIqaQlhXrx0WI8yKGETCeqT21UJAqk&usp=sharing>

2 <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1-vIqaQlhXrx0WI8yKGETCeqT21UJAqk&usp=sharing>

unconsummated. In order to get rid of the "servant/husband", impossible tasks are set. The woman is able to accomplish these with the aid of a helper (several helpers, the horse). (p. 319-320)

ATU 884 [...] A woman disguised in man's clothes [K1837], test of a person's gender [...], separation of lovers (couple) [...] (p. 538)

According to Žižek, in such stories woman carry out heroic acts of resistance that frequently culminate in tragedy. As Žižek (2004) asserts,

Is this, however, the ultimate scope of the feminine political intervention? It is here that one should consider the break that separates modernity from antiquity. (p. 56)

Precisely as woman, Joan stands for the political gesture at its purest, for the community (universal nation) as such against the particular interests of the varying factions. (p. 56)

[T]he political significance of Joan of Arc is that she embodies a universal political claim. (p. 56)

This claim parallels the symbolic defiance found in the Popess Johanna figure, whose purported ascent to the papacy challenges longstanding institutional norms. (p. 56)

Methodology: Comparative Literary Analysis

This study employs a dual methodological framework that integrates both literary and cultural criticism. The literary analysis deconstructs the textual construction of gender roles and critically examines the mechanisms by which female marginalisation is depicted. At the same time, the cultural critique interrogates broader sociopolitical narratives surrounding power and gender (Hegel, 1975). In synthesising these approaches, the research elucidates tensions between entrenched patriarchal systems and emerging discourses of reform. As Hegel (1975) aptly notes, "the tension between transcendence and immanence is at the heart of the human condition" (p. 102), a dialectic that mirrors the gendered conflicts which emerge in fairytale narratives.

Findings: Subversion and Symbolic Resistance

The analysis reveals that *The Fisherman and His Wife* subverts traditional gender roles by depicting a scenario in which a woman ascends to the papacy – a role historically reserved for men. This symbolic subversion destabilises both ecclesiastical and societal hierarchies, opening up new discursive spaces for critiquing and reimagining gender inequality (Grimm & Grimm, 2015). The narrative not only critiques historical power dynamics but also reflects an enduring struggle for female

empowerment by envisioning a future where women redefine their institutional roles (Lüthi, 2011).

Comparative Analysis: Popess Johanna and/or Pope Joan

The motif of Popess Johanna in children's literature is best understood by comparing it with the legend of Pope Joan – a woman who allegedly disguised herself as a man in order to attain the papacy. While the representation of the fisherman's wife in the Grimms' narrative is characterised by greed and hubris, Pope Joan emerges as a transformative figure whose audacity defies conventional gender constraints. As Boccaccio (2011, translated and with notes by Guido A. Guarino) writes in *On Famous Women*:

Although John would seem from the name to be a man, in reality she was a woman whose unheard-of audacity made her known to the whole world and to posterity. (p.231)

Pope Joan, although purely legendary, was traditionally thought to have succeeded Leo IV. (p.232)

Early attestations of the legend can be found in Jean de Mailly's *Chronica Universalis Mettensis* (c. 1250) and Martin of Opava's *Chronicon Pontificum et Imperatorum* (late 13th century). These accounts document the meteoric rise and subsequent catastrophic downfall of this legendary figure upon the revelation of her true gender, and provide critical insights into how the legend has been transmitted and transformed over time.

Visual representations further amplify the motif. For instance, a woodcut by Egidius van der Heerstraten (1487) depicts Pope Joan giving birth while leading a sacred procession and another woodcut portrays her enthroned with unmistakably feminine features. Such images underscore the enduring symbolic potency of female defiance in challenging dominant patriarchal narratives.

The Fisherman and His Wife: A Case Study

In the Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales* (1812–1857), the fairy tale *The Fisherman and His Wife* (ATU³ 555; KHM⁴ 19) tells the story of a poor fisherman who rescues a supernatural being – a magical fish – which subsequently grants the

³ ATU stands for the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index, an international classification system used to categorise folktales based on recurring plots. It is acronym based on the surnames of the three folklorists: Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson and Hans Jorg Uther.

⁴ KHM stands for *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the German title of the Grimms' collection.

fulfilment of his and his wife's wishes. Their first wish is a modest one, simply for a better home, but then the wife's ambition spirals from a desire for nobility through aspirations of royalty, the papacy, and ultimately divinity. In the end, the magical fish revokes its gifts, returning the couple to their original state of poverty (Grimm & Grimm, 2015).

A pivotal passage in the tale describes the wife's ascension to the papacy:

"Oh," the man said, "she wants to be pope."

"Go back home," said the flounder.

"She's already pope."

Then the man went home, and when he arrived, his wife was sitting on a throne two miles high and wearing three large golden crowns. Numerous bishops and priests surrounded her, and two rows of candles flanked her – one row composed of candles as thick and tall as the highest tower, the other of modest church candles.

"Wife," the man said as he observed her, "are you the pope?"

"Yes," she replied, "I'm pope."

"Oh, wife, isn't it wonderful that you're pope? You must be satisfied. Now that you're pope, you cannot become anything greater."

"I'll think about it," she answered. (Grimm & Grimm, 2015, p.60)

This episode recalls the medieval legend of Popess Johanna (Ranke, 2015, p. 539c), in which a woman achieves the papacy through subterfuge. The tale thus reconfigures a centuries-old motif, interrogating the limits of female authority within rigid patriarchal structures.

Ethical Dimensions: Fairy Tale Justice and Gender Symmetry

Max Lüthi's (2011) concept of "fairy tale justice" provides an ethical lens through which to view these narratives, suggesting that narrative reconciliation may serve to redress societal inequities. This framework emphasises the importance of symmetrical gender representation and highlights the persistent challenges in achieving fair and equitable social norms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that fairy tales such as *The Fisherman and His Wife* serve as valuable discursive platforms for challenging and reimagining gender norms. By juxtaposing the Grimms' narrative with the enduring legend of Popess Johanna (and

its relation to the Pope Joan motif), the analysis reveals an ongoing cultural preoccupation with female empowerment and its sociopolitical ramifications. Such narratives invite continued scholarly debate regarding the transformative potential of myth and literature in the struggle against patriarchal hegemony.

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