RUMPELSTILTSKIN AND GREEK MYTHOLOGY [*]

In a penetrating study of the Rumpelstiltskin story[1], Max Lüthi[2] drew attention to one particular aspect of it which allows for effects of paradox and irony. In several of the tale's figures, but especially in that of Rumpelstiltskin himself, we encounter an unexpected development whereby the helper figure ("Helfer") becomes the opponent ("Gegner")[3]. So Rumpelstiltskin, having helped the heroine to accomplish the seemingly impossible tasks set her, is then transformed into a source of danger and deadly threat by the recompense he demands. The former 'helper' must now himself be overcome.

A similar pattern can be discovered, lurking under no very heavy disguise, beneath the surface of several Greek Myths[4]. The superficial disguise already begins to be stripped away when we recall that Lüthi rightly identified Rumpelstiltskin as a figure from the Other World[5] ("Jenseitiger"), for that

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[*] For an accumulation of references to the relevant story-type see D.L. Ashliman, *A Guide to Folktales in the English Language Based on the Aarne-Thompson Classification System* (London 1987) No. 500 (p. 102f.): "Guessing the helper's name". Cf. H.W. Marshall, *'Tom Tit Tot': a comparative essay on Aarne-Thompson Type 500. The Name of the Helper*, "Folklore" 74, 1973, 51ff.

[1] For more recent studies of this fairy-story see Lutz Röhrich, *Rumpelstilzchen: Vom Methodenpluralismus in der Erzählforschung*, in *Festschrift für Robert Wildhaber* ("SAVK" 68/9, 1972/3) pp. 567ff. = *Sage und Märchen: Erzählforschung heute* (Stuttgart 1976) and the article by Karen Seago s.v. 'Rumpelstiltskin' in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (ed. J. Zipes, Oxford 2000) p. 429f.

[2] In "Antaios" 12, 1971, 419ff. with bibliography in p. 433 n. 1. For general surveys of Max Lüthi's life and works, especially his contributions to the understanding of fairy-stories and folk-tales, see the articles by R. Schendra s.v. in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (hereafter *EM*) 8.1307ff, and by K. Horn in "Fabula" 20, 1979, 277ff. and 33, 1992, 121ff. See also Francis Lee Utley's remarks in the Introduction to *Once upon a time: on the Nature of Fairy Tales* (The English translation (Indiana 1976) of Lüthi's *Es war einmal... vom Wesendes Volksmärchens*) pp. 7ff. and J. Zipes s.v. 'Approaches to the Literary Fairy Tale' (3) in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* p. 18.

[3] Cf. Lüthi's observation s.v. 'Drei und Dreizahl' in *EM* 3.858: "paradoxerweise der ursprüngliche Helfer zum Gegner wird und in einzelnen Var[iatione]n der ursprünglich als Auftraggeber/Antagonist fungierende König unwissentlich zum Helfer". For a general survey of these important but usually antithetical figures see K. Horn's articles s.v. 'Helfer' and 'Gegenspieler' in *EM* (6.772ff. and 5.862ff. respectively).

[4] I have dealt with these (from a slightly different angle to the present) in the following articles: *Stesichorus' Geryoneis and its folk-tale origins*, "CQ" 38, 1988, 277ff.; *Euripides Telephus fr.149 (Austin) and the folk-tale origins of the Teuthranian Expedition*, "ZPE" 133, 2000, 7ff.; and *The folk-tale origins of the Iliad and Odyssey*, "WS" 37, 2003.

[5] Lüthi p. 421. The perception derives from Lüthi's doctoral dissertation *Die Gabe im Märchen und in der Sage: ein Beitrag zur Wesenerfassung und Wesenscheidung der beiden*

locale is ultimately the home of the helper figures from Greek Myth whom I now wish to summon up. They occur at a crucial stage within those stories of the 'quest' type that have proved susceptible to analysis in terms of Vladimir Propp's famous scheme[6]. Let me at once proceed to examples.

When Jason and the Argonauts are sent on their quest for the Golden Fleece in the distant East, they encounter, at an early stage, Phineus, the elderly seer: he gives them essential information about the direction they must take, in gratitude for their ridding him of the Harpies that had been making his life a misery by polluting his food[7]. Likewise, when the Greek expedition charged with recovering Helen from Troy inadvertently blunders into Teuthrania in Asia Minor, mistaking this for Troy, it comes up against Telephus the local king, who is wounded by Achilles in the consequent skirmish. The Greek fleet sails back home to re-equip, while Telephus makes his way to Greece in disguise, having been told by an oracle that only the spear which wounded him in the first place can now cure him. This finally happens; and Telephus, restored to health, guides the Greeks to Troy[8].

The initially hostile helper figure, who must be compelled to yield important information to the questing hero or heroes, is well disguised in the figure of Phineus from the Argonautic legend, since in the story as we now have it, he willingly gives the information, out of a sense of gratitude for being rescued from the attentions of the Harpies who befouled his food. However, traces are detectable of a less benignant and more grudging attitude on his part[9]. The disguise is only partial[10], and by the time we come

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Formen (Zunich 1943). Note especially pp. 119ff. on "Die Welt der Geber" and the relevance of the "Jenseitswelt". Cf. pp. 18ff. on "Dinggeben von Jenseitigen im Märchen". Cf. also W. Wunderlich's article s.v 'Gabe' in *EM* 5.625ff., esp. (1) "Gaben von Jenseitigen an Diesseitige" (630f.), where it is stressed that, on Lüthi's interpretation, the relevant gift can comprise "alles, was der Held im Handlungsverlauf vom aussen empfängt um ihn erst zur Lösung seiner Aufgabe behähigt". Note in particular that the gift can take the form of 'advice'. Also relevant is Wunderlich's further observation that "kein Jenseitiger tritt auf, der nicht auch Helfer oder Schädiger... des Helden ist".

[6] Published in Russian in 1928 and translated into English as *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (second, revised, edition University of Texas Press, 1968). For a general survey of its influence cf. J. Zipes (as cited in n. 2 above) p. 18. Its applicability to the labours of Heracles was seen by, e.g., Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Los Angeles 1979) pp. 86ff. Cf. my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 278f.

[7] See, my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 282 and "WS" 2003.

[8] See my remarks in "ZPE" 2000, 9f.

[9] This was pointed out by Karl Meuli, the Swiss classical scholar, in his influential doctoral dissertation *Odyssee und Argonautika* (Berlin 1921) pp. 100ff. = *Ges. Schr.* 2.662ff. It is Meuli to whom the credit belongs for identifying and isolating the motif which he dubbed "das Vorabenteuer mit dem wissenden Dämon" in quests of the sort we are discussing. Cf. my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 282f. Having drawn attention to traces in Greek Literature, especially

to Telephus, the disguise is much more transparent. It is obvious enough that he is originally hostile to the Greeks who invade his territory and bring about his wounding. But these Greeks are dependent upon him for getting to Troy, so he must be appeased: the spear of Achilles that wounded him must in turn heal him so that the Trojan War may proceed.

Any notion of disguise for the ambivalent helper figure is effectively jettisoned when we come to the third Greek Myth we need to examine. It involves the last but two of Heracles' labours, which sends him to the Island of Erytheia in the remote west, thence to steal and bring back the cattle of Geryon, a three-bodied ogre. At an early stage in the tale, Heracles encounters Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, and, in spite of his characteristic resort to various changes of shape, compels him to supply vital information concerning the quest's route[11]. No hedging here, then: Nereus represents quite straightforwardly the grudging helper from whom the hero must extract information by force. His rôle as Old Man of the Sea is also highly significant,

the Athenian tragedians, of a more hostile relationship between the Argonauts and Phineus, Meuli went on to observe a frequent motif in German folktales involving questing heroes: they encounter at an early stage a demon who attacks their comrades and contaminates their food. The hero overcomes this creature and forcibly extracts information concerning the quest's route. Perhaps, as Meuli suggests, Phineus was originally some such figure himself, requiring a forced extraction of information which he in later accounts willingly supplied. Highly suggestive in this connection is the rôle of the Harpies in Vergil *Aeneid* 3.209ff.: eluding the *attack* of Aeneas and his men, they nevertheless deliver a *prophecy* (extremely malicious in tone) about Aeneas' journey.

[10] Meuli (as cited in the previous note, p. 100 = p. 663) associated with the story of the fairy-tale 'helper' represented by Phineus, that of the "Bärensohn" (for which see now Donald Ward's article s.v. in *EM* 1.1232ff.), a figure who conquers an Under- or Otherworld demon and sometimes rescues a girl from him. We can now be rather more specific about the link: for the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* is connected with the Bear's Son figure (cf. K. Osterheen s.v. 'Beowulf' in *EM* 2.121; J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Los Angeles 1959) pp. 532ff.; M. Swanton, *Beowulf* (Manchester 1978) pp. 9ff. etc.) and this epic provides a parallel for Meuli's interpretation of Phineus as a kindly helper displaying vestiges of a more hostile attitude: see the independent observations of T.A. Shippey, *The Fairy-Tale Structure of Beowulf*, "Notes & Queries" 214, 1969, 8 and D.R. Barnes, *Folktale Morphology and the Structure of Beowulf* , "Speculum" 45, 1970, 421ff., 432f. with n. 38, on that epic's Unferth, an individual who first unhelpfully insults Beowulf, but then lends him a sword for his combat with Grendel's mother. Shippey and Barnes note (pp. 3ff. and 418ff. respectively) *Beowulf's* susceptibility to Proppian analysis (cf. Osterheen as cited above pp. 123ff.), a susceptibility shared with the Greek myths under consideration. For further relevant studies see now R.E. Bjork and J.D. Niles (edd.), *A Beowulf Handbook* (Nebraska 1997) Index s.vv. 'Bear's Son', 'folktale', 'Hell' etc. and D.D. Short, *Beowulf Scholarship An Annotated Bibliography* (London/New York 1980) and R.J. Hasenfratz's continuation 1979-1990 (London/New York 1993) Subject Index under the same headings.

[11] See in particular my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 277ff.

for such figures often feature as reluctant helpers in quests of various sorts: when Menelaus in the *Odyssey* wishes to learn how to escape from Egypt, where he has been becalmed for a long time; or when Aristeas in Vergil's *Fourth Georgic* wants to learn how to replenish his store of bees[12]; in each case the hero has to ambush the Old Man of the Sea (in these stories called Proteus), master him in spite of his resorts to metamorphosis, and extract the all-important information. Nereus' daughter Thetis was likewise skilled in the powers of shape-changing. A Greek myth popular in both literature and art related how the hero Peleus wrestled with her on the sea-strand and conquered her despite her metamorphoses. In the story as it now stands, the hero's motive is a wish to marry the sea-nymph. But it has been plausibly argued that the original tale featured yet another instance of a hero forcibly extracting information relevant to his quest from an initially resisting helper[13].

So far, then, it would seem that several Greek myths supply a remarkably close analogue to Rumpelstiltskin, the ambivalent[14] helper figure. Admittedly, the match is not exact, for Rumpelstiltskin is a helper who transforms

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[12] *Odyssey* 4.425ff., *Georgic* 4.425ff. It is striking that so many of these ambivalent helper figures should be, like Rumpelstiltskin himself, *old men*. Cf. R. Schenda's article s.v. 'Alte Leute' in *EM* 1.378: "nach anderen didaktischen Vorbildern treten alte Leute häufig als Helfende und Raterteilende auf. Neben dem alten Einsiedler, der den Irrenden den Weg weist, steht die helfende alte Frau, die sich für Aufmerksamkeiten dankbar erweist, Geschenke austeilt oder vor Gefahren warnt. Als übernatürliche Wesen: Waldkönige, Erdgeister, weise Frauen, Frau Holle, greifen alte Leute oftmals positiv in das Geschick der Menschen ein". Elderly females feature less often as helpers in the quests of Greek myth: note, however, the rôle of the Graeae in Perseus' quest for the head of Medusa: these three old women indicate the way and give him the cap of invisibility, but only when he has first compelled their assistance. Cf. "CQ" 1988, p. 283 and n. 32.

[13] Cf. Meuli (as cited in n. 9) p. 103 = p. 665. The original significance of Thetis as 'helper' will then have been disguised by the superimposition of Chiron, the wise old centaur who brought up Peleus (and, interestingly enough, Jason too) in the wild, and became himself a 'helper' of that hero: see Albin Lesky, *R.E.* s.v 'Peleus' (19, 1937) 286.42ff., 289.40ff.

[14] See K. Horn (as cited above n. 3) p. 733 "Gestalten der niederen Mythologie, Tote, helfende Natur... sind ambivalent", that is, they can be "Bedrohliches" or "Hilfe und Schutz". Cf. *ib*. p. 781f.: "Feindliche Helfer und Schenker, Teufel als Helfer... in einem gewissen Sinne sind fast alle Märchenhelfer ambivalent". We shall shortly see (n. 20 below) that the equivalent helper figures of Greek Mythology have associations with Death and the realms of the Dead; and I think one very significant explanation of their similar ambivalence lies in this fact. Karl Meuli, following the perceptions of Freud *et al*., had interesting comments on 'ambivalent' attitudes to the dead (and therefore death) in ancient societies: see his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Basel/ Stuttgart 1975) Index 1 ("Sachen, Begriffe, Methodisches") s.v. 'Tod und Trauer'... 'bös und gut zugleich... wegen Projektion... der eigenen Gefühls-ambivalenz' (2.1241).

to a hostile opponent, whereas the equivalent figure in Greek myth traces the reverse pattern, with initial hostility converting to helpfulness. One might wish to explain this difference by recourse to another: the contrast between the Rumpelstiltskin story's initially helpless and passive heroine[15] and the more active questing hero of Greek myth. But before we can even contemplate any such explanation we must remind ourselves of something else: the relationship between helper and opponent figure in the tale of Rumpelstiltskin is actually much more fluid and complex than I have hitherto been suggesting. Even were we to confine our attention to Rumpelstiltskin himself, we must soon recall that Lüthi has shown[16] how the helper/opponent sequence is actually followed by its reversal: for Rumpelstiltskin later reverts to his role as helper (albeit inadvertently) by himself revealing his name (in secret, as he supposes) and thus allowing the heroine to triumph. And Lüthi has similarly shown[17] how other characters in the tale display a comparable flexible ambivalence in moving between the apparently polar extremes of helper and opponent. Thus the king or prince, whose arrival on the scene

[15] But cf. Röhrich (above n. l) pp. 578 and 588 for the possibility that the heroine was originally presented as more active and helpful. See Lüthi p. 421f. (as cited above n. 2).

[16] Lüthi p. 426. For 'inadvertent' aid given by a 'helper' to a hero cf. Propp. p. 48. The irony whereby Rumpelstiltskin contributes to his own downfall (and, ultimately, destruction) has an equivalent in *Beowulf* (whose relevance in other areas we have already noted: see n. 10 above). Barnes (as cited above n. 10) p. 426 observes that in that epic "Grendel's dam functions, ironically enough, as a helper-contributing to her own destruction. 'Guidance', Propp tells us" [see n. 6 above, pp. 80ff.] "is a function of the helper, and, therefore, [the monster who leaves footprints] plays the role of an unwilling and even unwilling helper. She begins as an antagonistic donor and then becomes an involuntary helper. Beowulf is thus led to another kingdom by following the villain's tracks". (The reference is to Beowulf's pursuit of Grendel's mother at vv. 1400ff.). One may detect a vestige (if I may resort to that pun) of this motif in the story whereby Cacus pilfers some of the cattle Heracles himself had stolen from Geryon: see Vergil *Aeneid* 8. 200ff. and my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 288ff. Cacus is a "Doppelgänger" of Nereus and Geryon (for the tripartite pattern cf. nn. 29-30 below) and seeks to elude Heracles' pursuit by dragging the stolen cattle backwards, so that their tracks appear to lead in the opposite direction (vv. 209-12) to that of his hellish den, where he has stowed them.

[17] Lüthi p. 421. Uvo Hölscher, *Die Odyssee: Epos zwischen Märchen und Roman* (Munich 1988) p. 115 likewise talks of "die Doppeldeutigkeit des Jenseitsvolkes, zugleich Helfer und Teufel, gastlich und tödlich". The context of this generalisation is a discussion of Odysseus' reception by the Phaeacians (for whose ambiguity see, e.g., *Od*. 7.30ff., 13.209ff), an Otherworldly people who ensure the hero's sage return home. For other examples of the paradox that a death-demon encountered by the hero in the Otherworld is responsible for that hero's speedy return to the real world, Hölscher cites the sixth journey of Sinbad the Sailor, where the hero is returned home by a winged man identified by Sinbad's wife as one of the "brothers of the Devil". Also a Swabian folk-tale (Ernst Meier, *Deutsche Volksmärchen aus Schwaben* (1971²) No. 61) from the Middle Ages.

seems to mark him out as a helper, converts to opponent when he sets, with death as the punishment for failure, a seemingly impossible task for the princess (returning to his more positive rôle at the end, when he becomes her husband). And the parent, action from whom regularly sets the story in motion, should be in a state of friendly disposition to the heroine. But on the contrary, the father or mother regularly embroil her in problems in a manner the very opposite of helpful[18].

One way of summing up, then, would be to say that Rumpelstiltskin in particular, and several other figures in the story more generally, embody in themselves two antithetical extremes. The helper and the opponent are one and the same being. And this is also true of the helper figures we have cited from the world of Greek myth, true on a level more significant than we have yet seen. Nereus, for instance, is Heracles' opponent and helper, helper and opponent, and not merely because the information required has to be forced from him against his will. For Nereus, paradoxically enough, is also the "Doppelgänger" of Heracles' climactic opponent in the story, Geryon.

To investigate this claim, it will be relevant to begin the next part of our investigation with a reminder of Lüthi's perception that Rumpelstiltskin is a "Jenseitsfigur", a being from the Other- or Under-World. The same can be said of Nereus, and the remaining helper figures from Greek myth whom we identified above. Thus Nereus and Old Men of the Sea in general, with their herds of seals and their association with expanses of water, closely resemble Geryon, who, with his cattle, represents that primeval figure the Herdsman of the Dead[19]. Phineus and Telephus also, to move on to helpers other than Old Men of the Sea, have associations with the Other- or Under-world[20]; and the climaxes of the Argonautic and Trojan expeditions, to which those helpers have sped their questing heroes, can be shown to represent journeys to the Otherworld or Underworld, culminating in a heroic conquest of Death[21]. The same is true of Heracles' rustling of the cattle of Geryon[22].

This is one way in which helper figures can be shown to be anticipatory

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[18] Lüthi p. 419: "Schon in der Einleitung also wird der Betreuer zum Gegner": that is, a mother's boasting or a father's brutality lands the daughter, within tales of this type, in the initial difficulty from which the prince's arrival seems to extricate her (until he sets the seemingly impossible task). There may be an unexpected link, here too, with Greek myths of the quest variety. See Appendix below.

[19] See my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 284.

[20] For links between Phineus (and the Harpies) and the Underworld see Jessen in Roscher's *Lexicon der gr. und röm. Myth*. 3.2 (1902/9) 2373.65ff. For Telephus and the underworld see my remarks in "ZPE" 2000, p. 9 n. 16.

[21] See my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 288ff and "WS" 2003.

[22] See "CQ" 1988, 289f.

doublets of the climactic opponent, symbolising Death, in their respective Greek Myths. Another way of making the same point involves considering story-patterns within these myths. What is meant by this will become clearer if I observe that we have here to do with a common "pattern of climax, the second encounter being more formidable" and involving "the creature's own ground"[23]. Thus Jason and the Argonauts encounter first Phineus, and then Aietes king of Colchis in his own kingdom. Achilles and the Greeks encounter first Telephus, and then Hector and the Trojans in their own country. Heracles encounters first Nereus, and then the three-bodied ogre Geryon on his own western island. This pattern is replicated in stories beyond Greek myth. One thinks of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf,* for instance: another tale representing a hero's triumph over death, in which Beowulf encounters and conquers first Grendel in the upper world and then Grendel's more formidable mother in her underground (and underwater) cave[24]. Also the Old Norse poem known as *Grettis Saga*, whose hero Grettir "first... defeats and slays a male troll haunting a lonely farmstead by night", and later a second, female, troll "haunting a different farmstead. On this occasion the fight goes harder, the she-troll dragging him towards her lair behind a waterfall", until he despatches her[25].

In all these cases we see what has been termed[9] a 'preliminary adventure' ("Vorabenteuer") followed by a climactic encounter with a being literally other than the first, but, on a profounder level, virtually identical. This identicality is brought out even more closely in the story of the Norse god Thor's visit to the Giants' citadel of Utgard as recounted in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and by Saxo Grammaticus[26]. The self-same scholar who coined

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[23] See "CQ" 1988, 284 and n. 39. For other folk-tale instances of a hero's encounters with a monster first in the upper- and then in the Otherworld see R.M. Scowcroft, *The Irish Analogues to Beowulf* , "Speculum" 74, 1999, 31.

[24] For the story of Beowulf as depicting a conquest of Death see, e.g., Shippey as cited above (n. 10) p. 11, Ostheeren as cited there pp. 123ff., Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook* (as cited above n. 10) Index s.v. 'Hell' etc. The tale has shamanistic associations: cf., for instance, Shippey p. 11 and F. Karlinger, *Jenseitswanderungen in den Volkserzählung*, in H. Gerts and G. Lademann (edd.), *Schamentum und Zaubermärchen* (Kassel 1986) pp. 176ff.

[25] My summary of the Norse poem's contents is cited from Michael Swanton (quoted above n. 10) p. 11, who points out (p. 10) that its protagonist's "chief actions and functions are in principle identical with those of Beowulf".

[26] For an up-to-date edition of the former see *Snorri Sturluson Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning,* ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford 1982), pp. 36ff. (For English translation, see Faulkes in the Everyman Classics Series (1987), pp. 37ff.). Cf. "CQ" 1988, 284 n. 41. For a general study of the tale see now A. Liberman, *Snorri and Saxo on Utgardloki*, in C. Santini (ed.), *Saxo Grammaticus tra Storiografia e letteratura* (Rome 1992) pp. 91ff. Cf. R. Power,

the phrase and notion of a 'preliminary adventure' of the sort we have been considering, also recognised in this narrative a parodic presentation of the themes and motifs associated with a visit to the Other- or Underworld[27]. I have discussed these issues elsewhere[28], so may be brief here. Thor, Loki and his companions travelling to Utgard, encounter the giant Skrymir who has been waiting to escort them thither. In the evening the giant falls asleep, and Thor is unable to wake him, even when he brings his hammer crashing down upon the giant's skull on three successive occasions. Arrived at Utgard, the companions meet its king, Utgardloki, who invites them to display their prowess in various contests: but they are all beaten, Loki, for instance, failing to win an eating contest, and Thor failing to drain a drinking horn and to lift the King's cat from, or wrestle the king's old nurse to, the floor. The reason for these humiliations is revealed the next day by Utgardloki as he escorts his guests from the castle. He himself was the escorting giant Skrymir who ingeniously evaded Thor's hammer strokes, while his cat and old nurse were, respectively, the world-encircling Mitgard Sepent and Old Age itself. These last two motifs obviously represent burlesque distortions of an original heroic conquest of death. But what most directly concerns us here is that Skrymir is clearly the 'helper' who guides, like Phineus, Telephus or Nereus, the hero or heroes on their way (perhaps in the original conception the usual element of compulsion was supplied by Thor's hammer). Then he becomes, on his own ground – the citadel of Utgard – the hero's 'opponent' in the context of the struggle against Death. More transparently here than elsewhere, we discern "the continuity between the two stages of the story... for *it is the same figure in both*". What is, in other related tales, at the very least a matter of close resemblance, here becomes "a matter of equivalence and identicality"[29].

In the same way, Rumpelstiltskin represents, within one and the same

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Journeys to the Otherworld in the Icelandic Fornaldarsögur, "Folklore" 96, 1985, 164ff.

[27] Meuli (as cited above n. 9) pp. 106ff. = pp. 668ff.

[28] "CQ" 1988, 284ff.

[29] Quotations from "CQ" 1988, 286. Michael Swanton (cited above n. 10) p. 13f. had already observed, writing of *Beowulf's* successive combats with Grendal, Grendal's mother, and the Dragon, that "what was in origin a threefold repetition – three encounters with *monsters that are essentially the same* [my italics], each of which is successfully dealt with by the hero – has been turned into something not only more artistically contrived but more momentous in its significance". Cf. J. A. Nist, *The Structure and Texture* of Beowulf (Sao Paolo 1959) pp.20ff. on the epic's three combats as representing a 'triad of variation' and 'a cumulative enrichment of themes'. Similarly, the three Graeae (see n. 12 above) who act as helper figures in Perseus' quest for Medusa's head were originally identical with the three Gorgons: see J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Los Angeles 1959) p. 285f.

character but in two successive stages of the story, both 'helper' and 'opponent'. In this story too we are confronted with what Lüthi has called the "Personalunion von Gegner und Helfer". A masterly economy of content allows, in each case, a repeated use of the same element, without the slightest impression of strain or excessive artifice[30].

It would be foolish to overlook the *differences* between the Rumpelstiltskin story and the Greek myths we have been comparing it with. For instance, as Lüthi observes, it is an important, if paradoxical, feature of the former that the very helplessness of the heroine seems to draw the 'helper' to her: as soon as she sits down to cry, Rumpelstiltskin appears. This direct reflection of a child's situation, the wish-fulfilment fantasy whereby one has merely to burst into tears for help to arrive, is not only totally absent from those Greek myths wherein hero encounters helper, but utterly alien to Greek literature's employment of mythology and folk-tale in general[31]. Nevertheless, the similarities we have examined are surely very significant. And the Rumpelstiltskin story is by no means only about wish-fulfilment. Its demonstration of the paradox that, in Luthi's words, "in every helper a harmful person lies hidden", might be thought a handy introduction for a child to the complexities and perplexities of adult life[32]. Let me end with another paradox shared by the fairy story and the relevant Greek myths which has wider ramifications.

[30] A similar process of what Lüthi (p.421) calls "künstlerische Ökonomie" may be observed in several of the Greek myths under consideration here. In the story of Heracles' abduction of Geryon's cattle, for instance, one can observe the same plurality in the use of a single element: at an *early* stage of the quest, Heracles masters Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, and extracts crucial information about the direction he must take. Then, *climactically,* he conquers Geryon, who, like Nereus, represents a herdsman of the dead (see n. 16 above). Finally, at a *late* point in the story, when Heracles is bringing back to Greece the cattle of Geryon which were the object of his quest, he in turn has them stolen from him by Cacus, and must take them back again. Cacus is another "Doppelgänger" of Geryon, the death-demon (see my remarks in "CQ" 1988, 286f), so that here, for a third time, in the same story, the hero can be seen conquering Death.

[31] See Lüthi p. 422. To stress the difference between this type of wish-fulfillment and the sterner world of Greek myth one might observe that our first sight of Odysseus in his epic is of him seated on the sea-shore weeping ceaselessly *but in vain* for his return home (*Od.* 5.82ff). On the other hand, it must be confessed that at the start of the *Iliad,* after the quarrel with Agamemmon which sets the epic in motion, Achilles withdraws to the sea shore and prays, in tears, to his mother Thetis, the sea-goddess - who appears at once, and agrees to help him by arranging for the discomforting of the Greeks (*Il.* 1.357ff).

[32] Lüthi p. 422f. On the other hand, the ambivalence has been interpreted as part of the positive simplicities of the fairy tale. See K. Horn as cited above (n. 3) p. 782: "in der optimistischen Weltanschauung des Märchens kann der potentielle Gegner oft als Helfer gewonnen werden".

Lüthi[33] has pointed out that if Rumpelstiltskin is depicted realistically, the tale's irony, with the villain destroyed at his very moment of – seeming – triumph, becomes tragic. But the story's more central paradox, the equivalence and identity of helper and opponent, also opens a window onto the world of tragic irony. In Greek tragedy, for instance, we frequently encounter the motifs of the hunter hunted or the sacrificer who becomes the sacrificial victim[34]. This idea receives what is perhaps its most metaphysical and profound encapsulation in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus,* where the hero who would punish the wretch guilty of polluting the city discovers at the climax that he himself is that wretch. The cleanser and the polluter, the avenger and the criminal are identical, one and the same, just as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "the hero who is both punisher and punished finally kills the king only on receiving... his own death wound"[35].

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APPENDIX: THE AMBIVALENT PARENT IN RUMPELSTILTSKIN

As we have seen (above p. 6), Max Lüthi showed how ambivalence in the story of Rumpelstiltskin apparently extends even to the mother or father of the heroine. The narrative, indeed, gets going properly when, by a sort of betrayal of the trust normally placed in a parent, that figure bullies or beats

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[33] Lüthi, p. 423, comparing, for instance, Schiller's *Wallenstein*. For the tragic villain destroyed at his moment of triumph, apart from Iago in *Othello,* one thinks of Aman in Racine's *Esther* and the central heroine of the same author's *Athalie*. Also, in a more complex way (see nn. 34-5 below) of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Lüthi p. 423f. advances the interesting proposition that Rumpelstiltskin represents something in the heroine's own soul which requires mastering before she can advance. Similarly, J.D. Niles in *A Beowulf Handbook* (cited above n. 10) suggests (p. 223) that Grendel is "Beowulf's shadow self".

[34] See my remarks in "Antike und Abendland" 45, 1999, p. 51 and n. 38. Near the start of his article (p. 420) Lüthi observes a surprising point of resemblance between Rumpelstiltskin and the princess: each teases and toys with the other in a cat-and-mouse manner over the key issue of Rumpelstiltskin's name. Even this paradoxical similarity between helper/opponent and heroine may find its parallel is the relevant Greek myths. Thus Cacus, who shares some qualities with Nereus and with Geryon, steals from Heracles some of the cattle the hero himself had pilfered in the first place. And Telephus, by virture of being another ambivalent helper/opponent, thus resembles his opponent Achilles, possessor of the spear that has *wounded*, but will *heal* him. He also resembles his other opponent on the Greek side, Odysseus, in his resort to beggar's disguise.

[35] Harold Jenkins in his Introduction to the Arden *Hamlet* (1982) p. 144, on the paradox, "the dual role", whereby "the hero charged with a deed of vengeance also... incurs vengeance. The situation of revenge is revealed as one in which the same man may act both parts". Cf. *ib*. n. l: "the duality of the revenger, agent and victim, is the essential foundation on which the play is built". The same could be said of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

the daughter for laziness or the like; and then lies to the intervening prince (or equivalent character) with a misleading boast about the offspring's ability to spin flax into gold. This, of course, embroils the poor girl in far worse trouble, from which Rumpelstiltskin initially seems to extricate her.

The situation, however, is more complex. Lutz Röhrich, by citing Joseph Lefftz's publication of the original source behind the Grimm Brother's version of *Rumpelstiltskin*[36], reminds us that, in this earlier form of the tale, *there was no parent figure*. The heroine's initial perplexity was that, in reality, she could only spin gold, and the rôle of her 'helper' (here called "Rumpenstünzchen") was to foretell her prince's arrival and their consequent marriage.

Whether this was the original version of the story one may doubt[37], on grounds quite independent of the comparative material advanced in this article. And it is at least worth observing that ambivalent parent figures happen to be present in those tales (examined above) of a heroic quest which also feature an ambivalent helper figure, and that these figures, by their initial action in embroiling the hero in trouble (i.e. sending him on a quest), are remarkably similar to the equivalent figure in *Rumpelstiltskin*.

To begin with Heracles' adventure to rustle the cattle of Geryon: this belongs to his twelve 'quests' or labours, and these, though directly enjoined by his cousin, overlord and enemy, King Eurystheus of Tiryns, were ultimately brought about by the goddess Hera: she drove Heracles mad, so that he murdered both his wife and his children, and the labours were imposed upon him as penalty. Hera, the jealous stepmother, is, of course, the ambivalent parent 'par excellence'. Similarly with the story of Jason and the Argonauts: the quest for the Golden Fleece is imposed by King Pelias, Jason's wicked uncle, who has usurped the throne from his brother, Jason's father. He thus fulfils a quite separate function from Aietes, owner of the fleece, who sets the hero three seemingly impossible tasks (which he is helped to accomplish by Aietes' daughter Medea, whom he then abducts and marries). Likewise in the Rumpelstiltskin tale, the parent fulfils a quite separate function from the prince who sets the task and marries the girl when it is carried out. As with Hera in the first example given, Pelias represents another vindictive parent-substitute. And again, in the quest for Medusa's head, Perseus

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[36] *Märchen der Brüder Grimm. Urfassung nach der Originalhandschrift der Abtei Ölenberg im Elsass* (Heidelberg 1927), p. 59f., quoted by Lutz Röhrich (above n. 1) p. 578.

[37] Not least because the role of the helper seems so inconsequent in this version. "Ich will dich helfen aus all deiner Not", he tells the heroine, "dein junger Prinz wird vorbeikommen, der wird dich heiraten und dich wegführen, aber du musst mir versprechen, dass dein erstes Kind mein sein soll". But how does he help her in this version? Where is the aid that will justify the sacrifice of the first child?

has been despatched by Polydectes, King of Seriphos, who hopes to marry the hero's mother, and thus become his 'father' at the same time as he secures his death.

Another ambivalent (and embroiling) parent figure, this time a genuine, not a substitute, mother[38], is to be found in a 'quest' tale within one of the Norse poems that comprise the *Poetic Edda*. At the start of the ninth century A.D. composition entitled *Hamdismál,* queen Gudrún incites her two sons to avenge their murdered sister Svanhildr. By despatching them thus to the court of the man responsible for their sister's killing, she ensures their death too. Assurance is made double sure by the brothers' treatment (at stanzas 12 onwards in the poem) of a youth they meet early in the course of their journey. He is Erpr their brother – though by a different mother – a subtle and cunning individual who offers them his help. Instead they reject his offer, and, when he upbraids them for cowardice, kill him, thus rendering their own later destruction inevitable.

Ursula Dronke, in her edition of and commentary upon this poem[39], ingeniously and convincingly identifies Erpr as yet another instance of the folk-tale helper figure. I would add (and emphasise) that he again belongs to the ambivalent variety, since he insults the brothers, when they reject his help, with the observation (stanza 14, lines 5-6) "No good comes/of showing a coward the way". That he is, in Dronke's words[40], "an illegitimate son, vulnerable and highly sensitive because of his birth", may also contribute to the ambivalence.

But the apogee of ambivalence – and of a truly tragic ambivalence – is reached as we realise that this helper figure indirectly brings about the deaths of those he would help, when he taunts them and provokes his own killing. The extraordinary flexibility of the helper figure from folk-tales was already apparent in this episode from *Hamdismál,* for here the would-be helper of the heroes is (at least potentially) one of the heroes himself. But the paradox of the hurt done by the helper should not surprise us, once we have pondered again the implications of this figure in Greek mythology and in the story of Rumpelstiltskin[41].

M. D.

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[38] Through, as we shall shortly see, Gudrún could perhaps be regarded as stepmother of the third, illegitimate son whom the other two meet on the way. Since they kill him, Gudrún is ultimately responsible for his death too.

[39] *The Poetic Edda.* Vol. I, *Heroic Poems* (Oxford 1969) pp. 196ff. (cf. pp. 169ff.).

[40] P. 196.

[41] I am grateful to Dr. Dronke for very helpful comments on the significance of Erpr in the *Poetic Edda.* As she points out, he is best regarded as a 'frustrated' helper rather than a "Gegner" as such.