

# TURANDOT'S SISTERS

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*A Study of the  
Folktale AT 851*

Christine Goldberg



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# TURANDOT'S SISTERS

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by Christine Goldberg

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Christine Goldberg

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## Series Editor's Preface

The Garland Folklore Library series consists primarily of meritorious master's theses and deserving doctoral dissertations in the field of folklore which for one reason or another were not published upon their initial completion. In theory, all theses and dissertations are supposed to be contributions to the collective knowledge of a given discipline, but in practice it seems the vast majority are simply filed and forgotten. Sometimes the dissertation is too technical; sometimes it is too long for it to be welcomed for publication by cost-conscious university presses. Sometimes the dissertation is eminently publishable, but its author by the time the dissertation is finished is so heartily sick of the subject that he or she wants to put it aside forever.

In any case, there are a number of outstanding dissertations in folklore which warrant a wider readership and which belong in the library of any educational institution or individual with a serious interest in folklore. A few of these are in fact already well known to professional folklorists who may have bothered to send for them through inter-library loan or in more recent times purchased copies from University Microfilms International in Ann Arbor, Michigan. However, it should be noted that not all dissertations are available through UMI. The appearance for selected folklore dissertations and theses, both old and new, in the Garland Folklore Library series will make it much easier for libraries and individuals to obtain these significant studies.

Among the most important hitherto unpublished folklore dissertations are such works as motif and/or tale type indices, historic-geographic (comparative) in-depth studies of single folktales or ballads, and surveys of specialized folklore scholarship e.g., of a particular country or group. There are in addition valuable filed collections of folklore data to be found in dissertations. Clearly, there is no dearth of dissertations in folklore which could and should be published. Folklore field data, for example, never cease to be of value—even years after collection. It is the intention of the Garland Folklore Library series to make a number of folklore theses and dissertations available to the growing worldwide community of folklorists.

The most basic and fundamental theoretical approach in folkloristics consists of a refined form of the comparative method. This method, known as the historic-geographic or Finnish method, requires consider-



able time, adequate library resources, and polyglot expertise. The first task is to assemble all known versions of an item under investigation whether these texts be in print or housed in manuscript archives. There may be hundreds of such versions, the majority of which will need to be translated into the native language of the folklorist carrying out the study.

Once all available texts have been gathered together, the folklorist may attempt to determine the possible point of origin of the folktale or ballad (or whatever genre is being studied). This hypothetical reconstruction of the so-called "ur-form" of the folklore item is based upon a painstaking analysis, trait by trait, of that item. Even if, as is the case at the end of the twentieth century, the folklorist does not necessarily expect to be able to determine the place of origin or the form of the item which presumably generated every single one of the cognate versions assembled, he or she will in theory at least be able to discern distinctive subtypes of the basic tale or ballad type, such subtypes being identified by the presence or absence of characteristic traits or elements. It is often possible to make an educated guess about the inter-relationships of various subtypes of a given folktale including plausible thoughts about which subtype may have given rise to another and about probable paths of diffusion of one or more subtypes. (For the most extensive review of the results of historic-geographic studies in folklore, see Goldberg 1984. For additional discussions, see Korompay 1978; Honko 1935a and b; and Dundes 1986.)

The present volume is an excellent exemplar of the historic-geographic method. It is, however, somewhat unique insofar as it considers not one genre, but two genres: the folktale and the riddle. The subject of inquiry is a constellation of riddle tales including "The Princess Who Cannot Solve the Riddle" (Aarne-Thompson tale type 851) and Turandot (Aarne-Thompson tale type 851A) in which a princess sets riddles for her suitors to be answered on pain of death.

The author of this important study, Christine Geiger Goldberg, earned her B.A. in psychology from the University of Rochester in 1970. Later she went to Indiana University for her doctorate in folklore, receiving her Ph.D. in 1981. This book is a revised version of her dissertation. From 1987 to 1989, Dr. Goldberg was employed as a bibliographer for the ambitious "Encyclopedia of American Popular Belief and Superstition" project at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since 1989, she has served as Assistant Editor of the project.

*Turandot's Sisters* represents the culmination of more than a century's research on the riddle-tale subgenre by a small but distinguished group of folklorists going back to Theodor Benfey's essay arguing for an Indic origin of the Clever Peasant Girl (Aarne-Thompson tale type 875). This essay was first published in *Das Ausland* in 1859, the same year that Benfey published his famous German translation of the *Panchatantra*. The stream

of scholarship also includes Reinhold Köhler's study of 1870, published in a journal founded by Giuseppe Pitrè, and Jan De Vries' classic *Die Märchen von Klugen Rätsellösern* which appeared as FF Communications No. 73 in 1928. Dr. Christine Goldberg's indisputable mastery of this cluster of tale types fully entitles her to be grouped with these folktale experts of the past. Her vast knowledge of folktale has also been amply demonstrated by her other publications (Goldberg 1986, 1989, 1992).

The monumental advance represented by Goldberg's research can easily be seen by consulting earlier considerations of Turandot, e.g., Meier 1941, Rossi 1956, or Hentze 1959. Even the chapter devoted to "The Riddle Princess" by the late Max Lüthi (generally acknowledged to be one of the twentieth century's greatest folktale scholars), seems painfully inadequate in the light of Goldberg's tour de force. The same holds true for the brief discussions of riddle-tales by Finnish folklorist Martti Haavio (1959) and by Mathilde Hain in her useful survey of the riddle genre (1966:36-42).

As this monograph is as much about riddles as it is about folktales, it is to be hoped that one eventual result of the publication of this volume will be increased interest in the interpretation of riddles, especially the role of riddles in courtship ritual. It is surely no coincidence that many of the riddle tales examined by Goldberg are set in a courtship context. Accordingly, the solving of the riddles leads inexorably to a marriage between the two principal characters. Several Jungian analyses of the Turandot tale, written without any reference whatsoever to the existing scholarship on the subject (Snook 1980; Kast 1992), fail to comment on this traditional juxtaposition. Goldberg's superb assemblage of relevant texts of riddle tales makes it possible for the first time to probe the possible symbolic implications of this consistent riddle function.

Levy contended (1916:258) that the Samson riddle "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (Judges 14:14) was a marriage riddle signifying coitus. The penis is "eaten" with eating serving as a metaphorical expression for the sexual act. Similarly, Géza Róheim interpreted the celebrated riddle of the sphinx in terms of two people lying in one bed: "The observer first sees four legs (i.e., the father on all fours), then the two outstretched legs of the mother, and finally one leg which . . . mysteriously disappears (1974:7). Martha Wolfenstein in her astute analysis of children's riddles echoes Róheim's reading of a child's observation of parental intercourse with the third leg as "the penis which appears and disappears" (1978:97). Goldberg is well aware of this symbolic possibility (p. 106), but she remains cautiously skeptical (p. 167). The critical point is that riddles are reported in the ethnographic literature as being used as "barriers" impeding the progress of the groom which he is obliged to eliminate before claiming his bride

(Cf. Róheim 1954:146–149), again a fact which is discussed by Goldberg (pp. 164–165).

Structurally speaking, riddles, oppositional ones, consist of miniature models of the courtship context in exogamous societies. In those societies, two *unrelated* (by definition) individuals are *related* by a marriage ritual. As a preliminary, the groom (or bride) may be asked to show how two *unrelated* elements (eyes that cannot see) can be related through answering a riddle (a potato) (Dundes 1964:256–258). Moreover, if the riddle involved a body part that was missing (e.g., “a chicken without a bone” or that was dysfunctional “teeth that can’t bite” (a comb), the teasing appropriateness to the wedding context would be even more obvious. Answering the riddle correctly would remove the implied innuendo of a physical lack or a body part that did not function properly.

Thanks to Goldberg’s magisterial compilation of versions of riddle tales, we are for the first time in a position to see common themes in these tales such as the frequent association with incest. Whether it is mother-son incest as in Oedipus (Aarne-Thompson tale type 931) or father-daughter incest as in Pero and Cimon (Taylor 1948), the undeniable connection between riddles and marriage is the same. Incest represents two *related* individuals wrongly indulging in an act supposedly reserved for *unrelated* ones. At the same time—if one accepts a Freudian rationale for marriage—the groom is looking for a mother surrogate while the bride is looking for a father surrogate. Thus marriage involves a denial or repudiation of incest while at the same time unconsciously indulging in a symbolic substitute for it. This could be one reason why incest riddles are so often found in fairy tales which end in marriage. In any case, regardless of the validity of any of this speculation, there can be no doubt that Goldberg’s landmark study of riddle tales is bound to stimulate new feminist, structural, psychoanalytic, and other interpretations of the fascinating data she so brilliantly discusses. For this, generations of folklorists will remain eternally in her debt.

Alan Dundes

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It is also a pleasure to thank Alan Dundes for his interest in my work and his wish to see a revised and updated version of the dissertation in the present series.



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## Chapter 1

### The Comparative Study of Folktales

The comparative method has been practiced by folklorists for more than a hundred years. First used for folktales by Kaarle Krohn in the 1880s, it is basically a combination of the type of comparative notes made by Svend Grundtvig and Francis James Child, and the nineteenth century's successful method of text criticism (Taylor 1928). A large number of variants are assembled, and the relationships among them are schematized. While the initial purpose of the method was to determine the original form and original home of a tale, its usefulness goes far beyond this even when the original tale cannot be reconstructed or located. It is not a theory which can become outmoded; rather, it is a method which can serve several purposes (Goldberg 1984).

First, a comparative study delimits the tale type. As Archer Taylor put it (1927, 4): "The establishment of the normal form is consequently the process of defining just what we mean by the 'Tale of ---.'" The definition of the tale is based on its many texts (also called variants). The study determines where discontinuities between these texts, and between this tale and other tales, naturally occur. It establishes that certain tales are so similar that they must be genetically related, that is, descended from a common source (always allowing that other material may have been utilized as well). The analyst should be conservative about asserting genetic relationships, but in many cases the variants are so similar that polygenesis is incredible. For the subject of the present study, "The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle," there is very little problem deciding which tales are of the same type and are, without any doubt, genetically related.

Second, a comparative study schematizes the variations of the tale that occur through time and space. These historic and geographic concerns are more important to folklore than they are to most other branches of



philology. In folklore studies, "comparative method" and "historic-geographic method" have come to refer to the same procedure. Such a study reveals regions, which may or may not follow language boundaries. If there are old examples of the tale, its development through centuries can be described. Important, influential forms of the tale are identified. These are variously called "redactions" or "subtypes." Walter Anderson (1923) called the most important ones "normal forms," meaning the derived forms of the tale that have had an appreciable effect on its history. C. W. von Sydow (44-59) called geographic subtypes "oicotypes" (ecotypes) after the analogy from biology of a subspecies that is particularly well adapted to its region. Von Sydow and his students were at least as interested in subtypes as they were in original forms (Holbek 242-258 thus differentiates this "Swedish school" from the older "Finnish school").

Whatever they are called, the identification of subtypes is an important step in the process of describing the variations of the tale. Instead of having to consider hundreds of texts, the researcher groups them into anywhere from a few to perhaps a dozen subtypes—a manageable number. The actual texts—the variants—can then be compared to the abstract forms of the type and its subtypes. How well do the normal forms actually describe each individual variant? We will see that for the tale of *The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle*, the German tales are well described by their subtype, but the Mediterranean tradition is more fluid. How are the subtypes different from each other? Most of the subtypes of *The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle* are governed by a particular theme.

The points of variation in a tale are our clue to its composition, both to its original composition and also to the patterns and the forces that maintain its shape and stability in oral tradition. Motifs or episodes often interchange within simple slots in the tale's framework. Some may be tailor-made for a certain tale, others borrowed from another tale or from a pool of motifs that turn up in several tales. Parts of the tale may be refashioned or simply left out, through accident or design. Sometimes two tales or a tale and an episode are combined, and other changes are made to smooth out the joining. Additions can make the tale unwieldy, so that it decomposes into a more appealing shorter form. Such reworkings, which can affect the spirit, and even the genre, of the tale reveal the aesthetic principles that govern its composition.

As critics of the historic-geographic method were quick to point out, a tale is not simply a string of codable motifs (Löwis of Menar). It is

like an organism, because its parts contribute in different capacities to a whole that is more than the sum of the parts. The normal forms of a tale, its most influential redactions, are aesthetically pleasing. Since they were well-liked they must have been felt to be complete but not cluttered with superfluous material. These are the proper material for a study of the aesthetics of the folktale, since each represents a number of actual tales and is not the idiosyncratic product of a single narrator or editor. Until now, folktale studies have pursued other ends and have not taken advantage of this opportunity to investigate the aesthetics of the tale.

Early historic-geographic studies had a narrow purpose. They were part of a program that would do away with pointless chauvinistic speculation about the origin of folktales. Stith Thompson (1946, 396) explained Krohn's (and presumably his own) viewpoint:

Moreover, his experience with the historical-geographical technique . . . convinced him that there was no short road to the truth about the origin and history of the folktale as a whole. Only by special studies of each story, based always on as large a number of versions as possible, could one hope to approach a real knowledge of the facts.

But generalizations based on a number of careful tale studies have not been very satisfactory. Generic differences between animal tales, magic tales, novelle, and jests often do not correspond with either place or time of origin. Tales that cover much the same area followed different paths to get there. Krohn and Thompson each wrote a book on the results of the historic-geographic studies to date. Krohn's *Übersicht über einige Resultate der Märchenforschung* considers each study separately and sometimes revises the conclusions. (This potential for disagreement belies the accusation that the method is purely mechanical.) He groups the tales by genre and region for his discussion. His final conclusions are on a very general level. Thompson's *The Folktale* includes tale summaries as well, and discusses tales that have not received thorough study among those that have. Although the book is useful for reference to individual tales, it does not analyze the results of the historic-geographic method as a whole. Neither work schematizes the many detailed results of the different studies, and we cannot expect that the jump from single tales to "the truth about the origin and history of the folktale as a whole" will ever be made successfully, much less gracefully. This is why the historic-geographic

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method fell on hard times: the means prescribed were not approaching the ends desired.

The historic-geographic method was born in opposition to the notion that folktales were fluid, that

a tale will start with a certain opening, that, let us say, of the man with three daughters. Then it will glide either into one of the formulae in which an unkind stepmother appears, or into a story of adventures to be achieved by each of the three daughters, in which only the youngest usually succeeds, or into the narrative in which a giant or fiend claims one of the three. Any of these points having been reached, more crossroads branch off in every direction. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of other ways in which any popular tale, starting from whatever formula you please, may journey to any end you like, always by well known paths and through familiar adventures (Swahn 396, quoting Andrew Lang).

Such a conception of the inherent instability of folktales greatly inhibits the development of a systematic approach to oral narrative.

In 1928, however, Vladimir Propp attempted to devise a comprehensive approach that not only did not depend on the idea of tale types, it also denied that they existed:

Clear-cut division into types does not actually exist; very often it is a fiction. . . . The proximity of plots, one to another, and the impossibility of a completely objective delimitation leads to the fact that, when assigning a text to one or another type, one often does not know what number to choose (11).

The holistic attitude in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is a salubrious supplement to Thompson's tale-by-tale approach in *The Folktale*, but the challenge it represents to historic-geographic studies has been overrated. Propp concluded that all fairy tales (Aarne's "Ordinary Tales," AT 300-750) are variants of each other, and that there are one or two basic types, not hundreds. Undoubtedly some tales are in fact this fluid, composed with an episode from here and one from there. Propp (11)

cited a Russian collection in which twenty per cent of the tales cannot be assigned to Aarne's tale types.<sup>1</sup> This proportion is substantial but not overwhelming. Propp did not suggest that monographs should be abandoned, nor that further structural studies like his should take their place. He said that monographs should concentrate on individual examples of *dramatis personae* (e.g. magical steed, wise woman, grateful animals) and their functions (e.g. interdictions, rewarding with magical agents, flight and pursuit). Then there should be a study, building on all of the monographs, of how the basic structure common to all the tales was formed. "Only after this can one proceed to the study of the question of how separate themes [i.e. tale types] were formed, and what they represent" (115). This is exactly what comparative tale studies were already doing. Aarne's study of *The Magic Flight* and Liljeblad's of *The Grateful Dead* approximate the monographs that Propp recommended first. Propp's objections to studies based on tale types improperly identified is thoroughly reasonable, but most studies have little or no such problem. Propp recognized that not all tales described as possible by his model actually exist:

Tales could be arranged so that a picture of the gradual transition from one theme [i.e. tale type] to another would turn out to be quite clear. Of course, certain jumps and gaps would result here and there (114).

Between the gaps, though, are the clusters, which Propp makes light of but does not deny. These clusters are the tale types, and they represent a substantial proportion of folktales.

Propp's *Morphology* was virtually unknown in the West until 1958, when it was translated into English. Coming as it did when historic-geographic folktale studies had lost their earlier intense appeal, this structuralist approach was an instant success. Since it avoided having to deal with thousands of separate motifs and hundreds of separate tales, it seemed economical and comparatively scientific. Since the translator

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<sup>1</sup>The Aarne-Thompson tale types were modeled on tales from northern Europe. They fit tales from other regions (for example, from the Middle East) much less well (Jason 1972).

omitted the quotes that revealed Propp's intellectual debt to Goethe,<sup>2</sup> it appeared to be untainted with Romanticism. The scheme that it presented was a flexible one: applied as directed, it seemed to fit not only fairy tales but many other tales as well. Unlike historic-geographic studies, which require extensive research, it was easy to use: with it one could analyse even a single variant. Thirty-five years later, however, we can only conclude that it has not fulfilled the expectations of its enthusiasts. Not only has it not revolutionized folktale studies, it has not even kept them viable. Even worse, it now seems that it does not fit all fairy tales. It privileges masculine adventure tales and distorts tales of disenchantment and of difficult tasks (Pentikainen and Apo, Brémond and Verrier). The valuable legacy of Propp's *Morphology* is our increased sensitivity to the structure of folktales, and a vocabulary with which tale structure can be described.

If Thompson and Krohn erred on the side of crediting tales with too much stability, Propp erred on the side of too much variation. Intensive studies show that different tales behave differently: some are rigid and others are fluid. So the unit appropriate for a tale study is not the same for all. Krohn and Thompson advocated studying a single tale type. In practice Krohn, and Aarne after him, studied groups of tales to determine which were in fact related, and what the relationship was. A successful tale study must choose its subject with care, having it broad enough to include all relevant material, but still keeping it down to a manageable size. Many tale studies have succeeded in this. In some cases, however, the material does not lend itself to a convenient package. Rooth ended her Cinderella study before treating the European subtype in depth. Liljeblad ended his study to The Grateful Dead after showing that a number of tales share the Grateful Dead frame, but without investigating these tales separately. Jones' study of Snow White (1990) did not attempt to identify the subtypes of the tale and explain the relationships among them. Type A in Swahn's *Cupid and Psyche* is too varied to be entirely convincing. Aarne's study of The Magic Flight was unable to reach a conclusion in favor of monogenesis; this tale will have to be approached from another perspective, with more attention to its subtypes.

In spite of the limited intent of the early investigators, historic-geographic studies have shown us much about the nature of European and

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<sup>2</sup>Propp's monolithic *Urmärchen* was modeled on Goethe's pre-Darwin *Urpflanze* (Toporov 253-256).

Old World folktales. These results have been incidental to the purpose of the studies, and some have been discovered unawares. The most important discovery refutes the idea of the method's originators that the *Urform* or prototype is the most important form of the tale. While Aarne for the most part avoided discussing later subtypes of his tales, in the 1920's, beginning with Anderson's study of *The King and the Abbot* (1923) and de Vries' of *The Clever Peasant Girl* (1928), it was found that some of the most attractive forms of its tale were not original but were later developments (see also von Sydow 189-219). This trend continued through studies of *Cinderella*, *The Search for the Lost Husband* (where Swahn reversed Thompson's subtypes A and B, insisting that the popular episode that distinguished Thompson's A subtype was a later addition) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (Brunvand). These achieved forms are more often subtypes than oicotypes. Max Lüthi (1967), himself a literary rather than a historic-geographic scholar, coined the term *Zielform* 'end form', but used it to mean a form toward which the narrative reaches, not a form that it has already reached. In spite of predictions about the demise of folktale tradition, some of these tales may go on in the future to develop new, as yet unheard of, subtypes.

One important observation in Krohn's *Übersicht* was that European tales often tend to be more rigid and more complex than their Asiatic counterparts. Examples of this are AT 930 + AT 461, AT 516, and AT 875. Other tales are reworked in Europe so that they are tighter knit, for example AT 130 and AT 210, AT 510, AT 563-5, AT 922, AT 1540. The formation of the complex tale can happen in the Near East, in which case complex and simple variants exist there side by side, and only the complex variants go to Europe, for example 433B and AT 510-511 (see Aarne and Thompson 1961 for the individual studies). This increased rigidity may have resulted from a tendency to conform to a pattern like the one which Propp believed was common to all magic tales.

In spite of the fact that it has been overrated, Propp's observation about the origin of an axis or structure that supposedly underlies all magic tales is an important one. Historic-geographic studies had already thrown some light on it. Both de Vries' study of *The Clever Peasant Girl* (AT 875) and Rooth's of *Cinderella* show that the marriage of the heroine, Propp's W\* and XXXI, is a European development that is younger than certain other parts of the tales. Historic-geographic studies often show how a tale developed through centuries and when it acquired some of its motifs or, in Proppian terminology, its functions. A synthesis of the

functions represented in early folktales would be of value in determining the origin of whatever structure or structures support the tales. Rather than being antithetical approaches for the study of folktales, structural analysis and the historic-geographic method can complement one another.

Although, according to Propp's scheme, many tales share the same structure, it is also true that each tale type has its own unique structure. In the case of AT 709, Snow White, the basic tale has two parts, each of which consists of a threat, an act of hostility, and an escape. When this tale has a sequel, a third episode, that one shares the same tripartite structure as the two that precede it (Jones 1983). The Clever Peasant Girl is also composed of episodes with repeated, similar structures. The Princess Who Can Not Solve the Riddle also has two episodes that share the same structure, and, interestingly, this has been the case throughout the tale's entire history.

For many tales (indeed, necessarily for stable tales), new combinations of episodes are much less common than reproduction of a prototype. Anderson's "Law of Self-Correction" (1923, 397-403), which said that each teller had heard his tale from several sources, was intended to explain this but did not: a good narrator can hear a tale once and reproduce it as it was or alter it to suit his or her own taste. The source of a folktale's stability actually comes from *within the tale itself*; the folklorist's task is to identify and explain these forces. Even without having articulated such a position, the authors of historic-geographic studies had begun to work on this problem. Most studies show how many variants are unusual and how many others are incomplete. The conditions under which new subtypes are formed can sometimes be determined. These result both from the internal forces of the tale and from the interests of the cultures that support it. Rooth's Cinderella type AB was caused by the addition of an episode that reoriented the theme of the tale. Episodes from other tales can intrude; for instance the Grateful Dead Man episodes appear in Denmark in other tale types. When a tale whose main character is female is transformed into a tale about a male, changes are made throughout, some borrowed from other tales (Rooth's AT 511A, Swahn's subtype O). Changes in the questions in The King and the Abbot reflect the interests of their time and place. We will see that in the case of AT 851, its riddles have been revised as the tale crossed regional boundaries, and the two-part structure of the tale has broken down only in AT 851C.

A historic-geographic study identifies the component elements of its tale. For example, in the first episode of AT 875 the clever girl advises