

# THE INNOCENT MALIGNED FEMALE IN TURKISH ORAL NARRATIVE

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Respect for chastity in maidenhood and admiration for maternal self-sacrifice may not be universal, but they are values which have been cherished by a wide range of cultures for millenia. Oral narrative has been among the more influential media that have, overtly or implicitly, reinforced the importance of such female virtues. It is the purpose of this essay to discuss some Turkish variants of two international folktale types in which innocent maidens and mothers are falsely accused of immorality and subsequently persecuted for their alleged sins until justice eventually prevails.

## I

Aarne and Thompson<sup>1</sup> document the presence in twenty-three countries (from India to the Dominican Republic) of Type 883A, "The Innocent Slandered Maiden." They summarize in this way their composite based on almost a hundred variants of this multicultural tale:

In the absence of the father, an attempt is made to seduce the daughter. When this attempt fails, she is slandered. The father commands the son to kill his sister. She becomes the wife of a prince. She is then entrusted to a servant. The latter attempts to seduce her. Girl [escapes and disguises herself] in men's clothes. All ends happily.

Aarne-Thompson 883A is equated with Type 245, "Die schöne Helva-Verkäuferin," in the Eberhard-Boratav<sup>2</sup> type index of exclusively Turkish tales and variants. Comments here about this tale type are based upon the fifteen variants currently in the holdings of the Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative (henceforth referred to in this essay as ATON)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Aarne, Antti, and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, Second Revised Edition. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Eberhard, Wolfram, and Pertev Naili Boratav, *Typen Türkischer Volksmärchen*, Wiesbaden: Steiner 1953.

<sup>3</sup> ATON, located at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, preserves Turkish folktales in two media: tape recording in Turkish and their transcriptions translated into English.

How are these fifteen Turkish variants immediately distinguished from those found in other lands? Whatever may be the various causes for the father's absence in European and other versions, there is only one cause in all fifteen ATON variants: a pilgrimage to Mecca. In most of the shorter variants while the father, mother, and brother take the arduous and time-consuming trip down the Arabian peninsula to the Holy City, they entrust the care of their teenage daughter to a supposedly virtuous and reliable person—occasionally a relative but more often the local *hoca*. Soon after her family has departed, the girl is beset by the sexual approaches of her guardian. In one way or another she fends off his advances, even when that requires self-defensive violence. Outraged by this rebuff, the guardian writes to her father declaring that he daughter had become sexually promiscuous, sometimes to the extent of becoming a prostitute. Trusting the guardian implicitly, the father orders the son to return home, kill his sister, and (as proof of her execution) bring back to Mecca one of her bloodstained garments. Although he usually does not question the girl's guilt, the boy cannot bring himself to kill his sister. Instead, he soaks her shirt in the blood of an animal, abandons her in the wilderness, and, waving the bloody shirt, claims to have fulfilled his father's instructions.

In the meantime, the girl, in order to survive, disguises herself as a man. This she does in a way very common in Turkish folktales, however impracticable it might be in real life. She buys a sheep, slaughters, it, and cleans thoroughly its stomach lining. She then pulls this lining down over her head to conceal completely her long and beautiful hair. In doing so, she assumes the image of a *kelođlan*, one of the most popular folk stereotypes in Turkish folk literature. (Other cultures have baldheaded boys, victims of scalp disease, but only in Turkey is the figure an institution.) She then finds employment (ATON No. 27) in a coffeehouse, to which her beauty and charm—she is thought to be a handsome boy—draw patrons from the whole surrounding area.

When her parents return from their pilgrimage, they too hear about the attractive coffeehouse waiter. One day the father suggests to his son and the *hoca* that they travel to that shop to see its celebrated employee. When they arrive there, the "boy" recognizes them at once and invites them to be his guests that night. After dinner that evening the visitors ask the *kelođlan* to tell them his life story, but the waiter, deferring to the *hoca's* higher social status, asks him to relate an adventure from his own life first. The *hoca* consents and regales the group with the following brief story:

I once had a girl living in my house. She was a very beautiful girl, and I wanted her. She was a very good girl, and she refused me every time that I tried to make love to her. Finally I hired a *Hamam* and I planned to make love to her there before we left, for we were to be the only ones in that *hamam*. But she was smarter than I thought, for when she had my head and face covered with soap, and I could not see her, she beat me with a *nahn* until I was covered with blood from the cuts she made. When the *hamam* keeper came, that girl escaped out the door which he unlocked, and I never was able to make love to her.<sup>4</sup>

After they had all laughed at the *hoca's* escapade, the waiter proceeded to report in third-person narration the unfortunate experiences of a girl he had heard about. (These experiences are, of course, his [her] own tribulations since her family's departure for Mecca). When his [her] account was finished, the *kelođlan* turned to the pilgrim and said, "This is the coffeehouse in which she worked. I am she. You are my father. This is my brother. And that is the immoral *hoca*." She then pulled the lining of the sheep's stomach off her head, allowing her long tresses to fall down to her shoulders. The father and son killed the *hoca* on the spot.

ATON 724 provides a good example of longer variants which approximate more closely the description of the Aarne-Thompson type quoted above. Several of the plot elements are the same as or similar to those of the shorter ATON No. 27: absence of parents on pilgrimage, sexual harassment of girl by false guardian, exile of victim in wild countryside, return to society in disguise, and the terminal exposé of villainy at a gathering of all the principal characters. But No. 724 is more complex in that the falsely accused female suffers exile twice. Her parents, brought back from Mecca by the *hoca's* slander—no brother is involved here—abandon her in the mountains. She is found there by the son of a wealthy *bey*, who takes her home and soon marries her. After she has borne two children, she is permitted by her husband to take the children on a visit to her parents' home, and he assigns an Arab servant to protect them on their journey. Trying to seduce the girl, the Arab holds her children hostage. As she continues to deny his wishes, he kills the children, one by one, and then threatens her own life. She flees into the uninhabited area they have by then reached but returns to society in disguise and is employed, unrecognized, as a gooseherd by her own parents. When circumstances bring the husband, his Arab servant, and the *hoca* together at her parents'

<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from ATON No. 27.

home, the girl identifies herself and recounts her undeserved suffering. The *hoca* and the Arab are captured, presumably to be punished, and the supposedly dead children are resuscitated.

## II

A second kind of outrage inflicted upon female protagonists employs even more poignantly cruel abuse than that endured by the innocent maiden. It develops from a syndrome of persecution against a young mother, a woman who is often a queen. This is epitomized by Aarne-Thompson Type 707, "The Three Golden Sons", which is equated with the Eberhard-Boratav Type 239, "Die Schöne". Its primitive origins are suggested by its frequent reliance on preternatural factors: magic effects, alleged birth of an animal or monster to a woman, and intervention by otherworldly beings.

Not only is this story very widely distributed internationally, but it is also especially well known throughout Turkey. Eberhard and Boratav cite fifty-five variants in books and collections in Turkey, and ATON alone presently contains ten variants. Besides its popularity in the oral tradition, beginning in the very early Middle Ages the type became the basis of literary romance. Poets throughout Europe adapted it to their own purposes, and Asian versions of the romance were known from the Middle East to Nepal.<sup>5</sup> By far the most famous of all literary renditions was undoubtedly that done by Geoffrey Chaucer for "The Man of Law's Tale" in his *Canterbury Tales* (1387-). The moving melodrama of Chaucer's long-suffering Constance has been a favorite of readers and scholars alike, and a considerable body of studies has been devoted to "The Man of Law's Tale," its sources, and its analogues.<sup>6</sup> However, little attention has hitherto been given to its Turkish analogues.

Aarne and Thompson outline their Type 707 in a very summary fashion:

<sup>5</sup> An interesting Middle Eastern text can be found in *The Arabian Nights*. See "The Two Sisters Who Envied Their Cadette", in Richard Burton's *Supplemental Nights to the "Thousand Nights and a Night"*; (London: Burton Club, [19-?] IV, pp. 491-549.

<sup>6</sup> Anyone interested in reviewing the extensive scholarship on the subject would do well to begin with Margaret Schlauch's monumental work published early in this century: *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*, New York: New York University Press, 1927. Besides her own original research and critical insights, Schlauch includes analyses of most of the important studies that had preceded her own.

“The Golden Sons”—The queen bears marvelous children. They are stolen away. The queen is banished. The quests for the speaking bird, the singing tree, and the water of life [or other seemingly inaccessible creatures or objects].

Despite the brevity of its description, the type is long and complex, with thirty-three motifs that can be found listed in the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*<sup>7</sup>— all circumstances encouraging the development of variants.

The type begins with wish-fulfillment fantasies voiced by three poor sisters while they work late into the evening as seamstresses. Each of the two older girls brags that if the *padişah* [in some cases his son] were to marry her, she would make him some large and impressive gift: a carpet so broad, for example, that his whole army could sit upon it comfortably, or a meal so enormous that it would feed the entire population of the city. The youngest sister, on the other hand, says that if she were married into royalty, she would bear her husband two [sometimes three] children with golden hair, with silver hair, or with other unusually beautiful features. In the Turkish variants the ruler [or prince] is made to overhear these claims through the means of a narrative device common to many different Turkish folktales. To assess living conditions and behavior in their capital cities, fictional *padişahs* well disguised, occasionally made tours of inspection by night. To insure their anonymity even further, for security reasons, they ordered ahead of time that all lights in the city be extinguished. It is for this reason that when the *padişah* of a Turkish variant of Type 707 sets out into the dark streets, his attention is immediately drawn to the only lighted building, the home of the three sisters. Angry that his prohibition of lights has been ignored, the royal person goes at once to the residence in violation and eavesdrops on the conversation of its inhabitants.

After hearing their boastful claims, he decides to marry these girls, sometimes one at a time, sometimes all three together. The two older sisters cannot fulfill their promises, admitting that they were made in jest, and as punishment are put to work in the palace kitchen as scullery maids. The youngest sister does bear the promised number of unusually attractive children only to lose them immediately. The two jealous older sisters steal them, set them adrift in a chest, and in their stead palace puppies or kittens in their cradle. Mortified by and angry at his wife's production of such offspring, the royal husband punishes her. In the Aarne-Thompson type and in most of the romances the penalty is exile, but not so in the

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, Stith, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-1957.

**Turkish variants.** In these latter the woman is buried in sand to her waist or to her neck at the edge of the city, where passersby revile and spit upon her day after day, year after year.

From such depths of disaster it is a long and tortuous route that leads to the eventual restoration of justice and happiness. It is the beautiful children who bring about this reversal. They are rescued from the waves and reared by a childless miller and his wife, but when they come of age, they leave these foster parents and return to the city in search of their blood parents. There the golden-haired boy works for a living while the golden-haired girl keeps house for the two of them. So great is their beauty, however, that they soon attract the attention of many, including their-jealous, ill-intentioned aunts. The two older sisters are alarmed at the survival and reappearance of the children who could be the means of exposing their own villainy. They decide to have the children killed, the boy first and later then the defenseless girl. To carry out their foul purpose, they hire the services of a witch<sup>8</sup> in ATON No. 949 and most other Turkish variants. Pretending pity for the girl's loneliness during the day while her brother works, the witch persuades her to request from him various unique and engaging items that will keep her entertained. All of these items—whether the singing tree (ATON No. 1181), laughing roses (ATON No. 949), or something equally unusual—are located in such remote areas and guarded so closely that the boy's efforts to acquire them will probably cost him his life.

Difficult tasks and quests whose goals seem impossible of attainment are universal, but the details of such labors are usually keyed to the culture in which the narrative is told. Thus the missions undertaken by the golden haired boy are less Turkish than are the ways in which they are carried out. Two examples of this Turkification of Type 707 will serve to demonstrate that point. Questing heroes are often given valuable advice by supernatural helpers. That other worldly adviser of the hero in Turkish variants of Type 707 is often as not Hızır.<sup>9</sup> Besides being the beneficiary

<sup>8</sup> The word *witch* has different connotations in Turkish folklore. It may refer to a woman with supernatural qualities: the ability to fly, to work magic, to enchant people and animals. It may refer to ghouls who frequent cemeteries and devour newly buried corpses. It may indicate one who consorts with demons and is part of the cosmic community of evil. Or it may, as in the present case, refer simply to an unscrupulous elderly woman paid to further the nefarious schemes and crimes of malevolent people.

<sup>9</sup> To most modern Turks Hızır is viewed as one who serves three functions. He is a saint who grants wishes, a last-minute rescuer from danger, and a special agent of Allah. In ancient times he was a fertility god and a water deity, and among some communities in southern Turkey he still plays those roles.

of such sage counsel, the quester may also be the recipient of physical assistance from one or more extraordinary companions. In ATON No. 949 the boy needs the cooperation of a certain giantess, but even to approach this monstrous creature and her seven huge sons is extremely dangerous. To win her support and neutralize the potential hostility of her sons, the hero frees her from a trap and then establishes a special kind of kinship with the giant family which preempts any violence it might otherwise perpetrate against him. The concept of "milk relationship" is not limited to Turkey but it is more often valued both in Turkish folklore and real life than it is in most other cultures. The golden-haired boy sneaks up alongside the giantess and quickly sucks on her breast, thereby making her his "milk mother" and her sons his "milk brothers."<sup>10</sup>

The jealous older sisters, acting through their witch agent, finally outsmart themselves. They prompt the golden-haired girl to have her brother bring back a world beauty of great renown who is protected by both natural and supernatural means, for she is a fairy, often daughter of the king of fairies. The hero's ultimate triumph in capturing this fay yields two rewards: she becomes his wife, and her occult insight enables her to perceive at once the cause of the protracted domestic trauma. After unearthing the grievously persecuted mother, she invents an occasion to assemble all of the members of the family plus the witch. She then confronts the *padişah* [or prince] with some impossible or highly unlikely situation: a roasted goose that supposedly speaks, or commonplace lentils instead of jewels forming a design on a lavish golden tray. When the royal husband objects that such a thing is unnatural, the fairy girl asks, "Is it any more unnatural than a human being giving birth to animals?" (All Turkish variants in ATON use this climax or some equally dramatic denouement). The tale then concludes quickly with the reunion of the children and their true parents and the punishment of the three culprits.

Like many other folktales, the Turkish narratives subsumed under Aarne-Thompson Types 883A and 707 recount action-packed and suspenseful adventures. They are not lectures or sermons of religious tracts, but they are informed throughout by unmistakably moral values. They enunciate justice not through the intuitive righteousness of the collective human heart.

<sup>10</sup> For the use of this motif in quite different tale types, see the following: Walker, Barbara K., *The Art of the Turkish Tale*, illustrated by Helen Siegl, 2 vols. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990-1993), I, pp. 15, 223-238; II, pp. 22-30, 75; and Walker, Warren S., and Ahmet E. Uysal, *Tales Alive in Turkey* (1966; Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990), pp. 92, 272.

