

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most” *King Lear* and the necessity of salt

Imke Pannen

is a lecturer of English Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bonn. Her main research interest centres on the Renaissance period and she has published a monograph on mantic elements in revenge tragedy.

The motifs of parents' love for their children and children's love for their parents are common themes in various narratives of all mankind. The idea of a parent demanding a declaration of his or her child's love is a less recurrent topic in literature, but it does figure in myths and fairy tales; the most famous example is to be found in Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, where a father requests his daughters to profess their love for him in a ritual:

Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state –
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.

(I.i.49-53)¹

The love test, as it is commonly coined, seems arbitrary in this play (Greenblatt, 1997, p.2310); Lear roots it in his willingness to abdicate but continues to act like a dominating father towards his children once he leaves them his kingdom. As contrary to a loving parent's question as this demand may seem, it is accepted as an apparent courtly ritual by the two elder daughters of the king who meet his challenge with words of praise. Like in other “ritualized

spectacles of sovereignty” (ibid, p.2307), the daughters of the king pledge allegiance to the patriarchal ruler and meet his expectations. Goneril and Regan profess their love to Lear as “[d]earer than eyesight, space and liberty” (I.i.56), material wealth and “beyond all manner” (l. 61).

Cordelia, the youngest daughter, answers this question in a different way: she loves him according to her filial position – as a daughter – and thereby does not follow her sisters in comparing him to worldly goods like gold and with the abundance of eloquent flattery. Disappointing Lear in his expectations, Cordelia is therefore banished by her father and her inheritance forfeited. It needs to be stressed that the land which Lear wanted to give to his youngest daughter is a “third more opulent” (l. 86) than those which are given to the elder daughters, thus stressing Lear’s deeper love for his youngest daughter and as a consequence, his graver stubbornness and mourning, leading towards his madness.

The motive of a father denouncing his beloved youngest daughter can be found in various other versions, apart from Shakespeare’s. It is a folktale motif that re-occurs in fairy tales, legends, and accounts of different origin (Thompson, 1955). The motif has experienced various transformations. It survives in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* or *Histories of the Kings of Britain*. This ancient legend from around 800 was made into a Renaissance tragedy called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*, which served as the source for Shakespeare’s great tragedy (Bullough, 1973, p.276). Geoffrey of Monmouth also highlights the disproportionate imparity of Lear’s love towards Cordelia in Book II, Chapter XI of his *Histories of the Kings of Britain*: “Male issue was denied unto him, his only children being three daughters named Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, whom all he did love with marvelous affection, her most of all the youngest born, to wit, Cordelia.” (Monmouth, 1912: 29) Here, too, the consequence of Cordelia’s denial to answer according to Lear’s wish to know “which of them was most worthy of the *largest* share” (ibid, p.29, my italics) is that of banishment. She responds to the test with similar unwillingness to flatter as the youngest daughters in later Renaissance tragedy:

Father mine, is there a daughter anywhere that presumeth to love her father more than a father? None such, I trow, there is that durst confess as much, save she were trying to hide the truth in words of jest. For myself, I have ever loved thee as a father, nor never from that love will I be turned aside. Albeit that thou are bent on wringing more from me, yet hearken to the true measure of my love. Ask of me no more, but let this be mine answer: So much as thou hast, so much art thou worth, and so much do I love thee. (Monmouth, 1912, p.30)

Notwithstanding her denial to play along the rules of the courtly ritual of praising the king should he wish so, Cordelia's answer seems logically explained – much more than her response in *King Lear* –; nevertheless, Lear is not satisfied and banishes her. Only towards the end of Lear's life, once he has suffered from his elder daughters' behaviour towards him, Lear finds a mutual truce with Cordelia again – and only once Lear understands the honesty of his daughter's love; together, they war successfully against the other daughters' husbands Cornwall and Albany.

The Lear story is ascribed to a Celtic legend, warning parents of the flattery of their children (Greenblatt, 1997, p.2308), but the topic belongs to a world-wide folklore motif which even spreads to the Asian continent (Bullough, 1972, p.271). The story of the comparison between the two evil sisters and the pure one can also be found in fairy tales like *Cap o'Rushes* or *Cinderella*. The motif “has been well documented as part of a whole congeries of legends sometimes grouped under the heading of ‘Love like Salt.’” (Halio, 2001, p.xii). Salt is not, as far as it is depicted in the folktale motif, a central topic in *Lear* though. However, in *Cap o'Rushes*, an English folktale in the collection of Joseph Jacobs and called type 923 in the motifs of folk tales (Thompson, 1977, p.128), the parallel between the two plots is apparent: “In Europe, the love-test appeared in the story of the Goosegirl-Princess who told her father that she ‘loved him like salt.’” (Bullough, 1973, p.271, compare also Foakes, 1997, p.93) The youngest daughter, in this tale, “does not reply as her father wishes when he asks her how much she loves him. She says that her love is like salt, in contrast to her sisters who have compared theirs to sugar.” (Thompson, 1977, p.128). In *Cap o'Rushes*, the youngest daugh-

ter of a rich gentleman professes that she loves her father “as fresh meat loves salt” (Jacobs, 2009). Her father is only convinced of the truth of her allegiance and love once he tastes the quality of a meal without salt and bursts into tears: “now I see she loved me best of all” (ibid). Thus the fairy tale ends happily but only after cruel neglect of the youngest daughter.

This story, according to Thompson, is known in Scandinavia, and India, and its relative *Cinderella* in Africa and America. “In those stories where it is appropriate, the heroine shows her father how much more valuable salt really is than sugar.” (ibid, p.128) The significance of salt thus plays a central role in the variation of the motif of the youngest loving daughter. Salt is essential for the existence of human life. It is a mineral that is ascribed healing qualities: “On account of this property salt was regarded as emblematic of durability and permanence, and hence of eternity and immortality” (Jones, 1951, p.23), and is considered a “pure, white, immaculate and incorruptible substance” (ibid, p.42).

The motif of sibling rivalry and the obvious first preferral of the elder sisters is mentioned in other fairy tales, too, like the better-known *Cinderella*. Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment* defends the pedagogical use of the seemingly cruel motif in fairy tales: They provide an educational and character-forming value for children and “direct the child to discover his identity and calling” (Bettelheim, 1975, p.24) The child is confronted with suffering and pain but is rewarded with a happy end.

The story of the old, weak king and his daughters re-occurs in the Czech/ Slovak fairy-tale film *Sol nad zlato/ The Salt Prince* from 1982, distributed in 1983 and based upon a collection of Slovakian tales and legends by Božena Němcová. As in the folk tale *Cap o’Rushes*, the youngest daughter compares the love for her father to the necessity of salt, a supposedly worthless mineral when compared with gold. This motif is still relevant in today’s society which is just as materialistic or wealth-oriented as that in the stories, but where – nevertheless – “nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale.” (Bettelheim, 1975, p.5)

The Salt Prince is based upon the fairy tale *Byl jednou jeden král* which can be translated as ‘Once upon a time, there was a king’. The film deals with the old King Pravoslav who feels that it is time to entrust his realm to one of his three daughters. He is – in con-

trast to Lear – convinced that only one can rule the kingdom, a decision that must be applauded with regard to the possibility of an ensuing civil war. “Of my three daughters, only one can become Queen. Maruška is my favourite.” (00:12:11) From the beginning, the youngest princess is presented as the most lovable one. Both elder sisters are first introduced as playing with gold and wearing jewels, while Maruška first appears in the green gardens of the palace.

Maruška fails to meet her father’s expectations. In a tournament held to find husbands for the three daughters, she asks to stop the fight for her hand in marriage, while her sisters Vanda and Barbara admire the strength and prowess of their knightly suitors. King Pravoslav sees this as an insult towards his guests and later even teases her for this seeming indeterminateness.

Pravoslav’s demand for his daughters’ love is rationally explained by his intention to find an heir to the throne before he advances too much in years and his eyes become worse: “A blind king is not a good king.” (*The Salt Prince*, 1982, 00:11:58) This is a striking parallel to *King Lear*. Though Lear does not become blind himself, his sight deteriorates metaphorically, so that Kent advises him to “[s]ee better” (I.i.159). Both Lear and Pravoslav do not understand the honesty of true love. To a similar degree, Freud in “Das Motiv der Kästchenwahl” compares Lear’s choice to that given in *The Merchant of Venice*: only the wooer who chooses the leaden box in contrast to the silver and the golden box wins the hand of the attractive and intelligent Portia (Freud, 1913). King Pravoslav arranges the love-test and offers the crown as a reward to the winner.

It is interesting to analyse the genesis of the love-test in *The Salt Prince*: while it is the king who invents this courtly ritual in all the sources, here the fool suggests the profession of love as proof of the right heir to the throne (and thus also the possibility of future flattery) in a scene that takes place before the courtly reception – and it almost appears that he truly means for Pravoslav to set the demand of love and it is not directly apparent whether he puts the idea forward as a game or riddle of a truly unwise fool to his king. He appears to be in earnest when recommending it, and the king embraces the idea without hesitation. The following courtly test can then be interpreted as a less spontaneous testing of his daughters than Lear’s. However, the fool – who can be seen as a wise fool – might also try to draw attention to the arbitrary decision-

making of his king. Both Lear’s and Pravoslav’s tests are conceptualised as courtly rituals which affirm a celebration of the authority and also highlight the possible arbitrariness of majesty.

His elder daughters’ answers avowing their love for him to be like that of gold and jewels; and their future husbands’ oath to defend and even expand his kingdom with their shield and sword respectively please him. Maruška, however, upholds the maxim of her beloved. She is enamoured with the son of the King of the Underworld, the Salt Prince who has told her about the value of salt and its qualities. Maruška’s response to her father’s question is the following: “Without salt, there would be no life. I love you, father, like salt.” (00:23:34, and she repeats her sentence again in 00:24:30) Thus she reinforces and exceeds the concept of love as it is presented by Cap o’Rushes’ – not only does Maruška love her father “as meat loves salt” (Jacobs, 2009, p.53), but she reduces the declaration to the pure love of salt and the need of human beings for the mineral.

She is awarded with laughter and curses for this (the fool being the only member of the court who does not laugh at her utterance). The court, her sisters and her father misunderstand her and she is banished from the palace. Pravoslav denies her the presence at court and the throne until the potentially impossible day when “salt is more valuable than gold. Then,” thus he continues, Maruška “will be queen!” (00:26:30) In the course of the film, she has to face many dangers on the way to find her loved one, the Salt Prince, again. The film adds a sub-plot to further highlight the importance of salt, which is supported by the statement: “Salt is the most precious stone the earth contains” (00:08:45) by the Salt Prince. His father, the King of the Underworld is so aggravated by the ignorance of mankind towards the treasures of nature that he transforms his only son into a column of salt: “They fight, kill, and conduct wars for gold and jewels. The treasures of the earth are being looted by them out of greed.” (00:10:28) Mankind does not estimate the value of nature. His curse is so strong that he finds himself unable to rescue and liberate his son in the aftermath of the climactic banishment and transformation – Maruška needs to fulfil this task.

The curse also comprises the transformation of all the salt in Pravoslav’s country into gold. At first overjoyed, the population soon understands the miserable condition from which the country is now suffering and they feel compelled to emigrate when it be-

comes clear that salt cannot be imported but turns into to gold at the border of the state. The lack of salt provokes physical and simultaneously psychological deterioration. Nevertheless, the fairy-tale film ends happily: through the power of love, Maruška can save her Salt Prince, though not without a descent into the underworld – a step that Bettelheim equips with an approach to the unconscious and thus the true nature of human emotions, a step that the elder sisters would never dare because their values rest on the surface (Bettelheim, 1975, p.107). Thus, the film adds another layer of psychoanalytical description of the depth of the youngest daughter’s feelings. In the end she presents her father with a bag of salt that never ceases to be full, a gift from the loving and giving Mother Earth – and she can thus provide the country with salt again. The initial curse apparently cannot be lifted – thus the reminder of the worthlessness of gold provoked by its abundance in contrast to life-supporting salt can be reflected eternally to prevent lucre and avarice.

As a result of the understanding that dawns on the king and then convinces him fully, his demand – before giving the crown to his youngest daughter and the Salt Prince who promised everlasting peace to his father-in-law – is the gift of salt to every visitor to the country, as “[i]n Eastern countries it is a time-honoured custom to place salt before strangers as a token and pledge of friendship and good-will” (Jones, 1951, p.25; compare *The Salt Prince*, 01:23:11).²

King Lear and *The Salt Prince* – though one is a Renaissance tragedy, the other a film version of a fairy-tale – share the same origin and address the same human fears: a father’s misunderstanding of his daughter’s honestly professed love. The physical want of and need for salt, which is presented as a sickness in *The Salt Prince*, also underlines Greenblatt’s idea of the bodily quality and representation in *King Lear*: “If Shakespeare explores the extremes of the mind’s anguish and the soul’s devotion, he never forgets that his characters have bodies as well, bodies that have needs, cravings, and terrible vulnerabilities.” (Greenblatt, 1997, p.2311). Lear strips himself and lacks shelter until he finds the truth of his needs – he acknowledges his tears as salty (“Why, this would make a man of salt, / To use his eyes for garden waterpots”, IV.vi.191-192). The physical need for health seems even more apparent in *The Salt Prince*: it is the need for a nourishment that contains salt. The need not only for nourishment of the body but thus of the soul by the essential profession of love –

without a golden decorum – is the common denominator for both these stories based on the same origin.

An even more significant difference between these two kinds of story [fairy tale, i.e. *The Salt Prince* vs myth, i.e. *King Lear*] is the ending, which in myths is nearly always tragic, while always happy in fairy tales. [...] The myth is pessimistic, while the fairy story is optimistic, no matter how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be. (Bettelheim, 1975, p.37)

Their similarity is striking, as is their difference: Lear questions his own identity (“Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?” I.iv.218), as Pravoslav loses his sense of identification: he does not recognise Maruška until he has tasted from her bag of salt, Lear only finds himself through the tears he sheds for his daughter Cordelia. *The Salt Prince* ends happily and Maruška gains the inheritance of the kingdom together with her husband, while in *King Lear*, both the hero and his daughter die. The fairy tale allows good to win and evil to be punished: fairy tales can reach “the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult.” (Bettelheim, 1975, p.5-6), they educate children to understand the meaning of values in this world to gain “a feeling of selfhood and self-worth, and a sense of moral obligation” (ibid, p.6). Thus the story’s topic and the “existential dilemma” of the folk tale motif (ibid, p.8) and its educational value can still permeate contemporary culture, just as the myth is still as fascinating for an adult audience.

Greenblatt draws the following conclusion:

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare explores the dark consequences of his dream not only in the state but also in the family, where the Renaissance father increasingly styled himself ‘a little God.’ If, as the play opens, the aged Lear, is ‘every inch a king,’ he is also by the same token every inch a father, the absolute ruler of a family that conspicuously lacks the alternative authority of a mother. Shakespeare’s play invokes the royal and paternal sovereignty only to chronicle its destruction in scenes of astonishing cruelty and power. (Greenblatt, 1997, p.2307)

The everpresence of this problematic situation is depicted or performed through all ages and all around the world. It appears not only in the medieval chronicle by Geoffrey of Monmouth, as in the Renaissance tragedy and the Slovak fairy-tale version. It re-occurs in other stage versions, folktales and contemporary films, too, like Jane Smiley’s Lear adaptation *A Thousand Acres*. There is the Jewish tale of the rabbi’s daughter Mireleh set in 1920s’ Poland (Jaffe, 1998). They all play with the motif of the dominant father who demands to know which of his daughters loves him most – the human desire to be shown compassion in old age – and his inability to understand his youngest’s unflattering and honest declaration of true love.

All forms of story based on the tragic myth and the fairy tale are appealing to audiences at all times because they address a basic human need: the question of the integrity of love. And thus all forms of the story are attractive to the reader and viewer because they “stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him” (Bettelheim, 1975, p.5); by depicting the cruelty of mistrust, and the failure of sharing thoughts and feelings, even the tragedy might – to a certain extent – teach trust and mutual understanding.

Notes

- 1 The quotes from Lear are taken from the Arden edition which uses the conflated version. William Shakespeare: *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes. The Arden Shakespeare. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997).
- 2 In this context, it might be fruitful to analyse the Salt Prince as a Christian allegory. Compare Matthew 5.13.

References

- Bettelheim, B.**, 1975. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bullough, G.** (Ed.), 1973. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. VII Major Tragedies Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul/ New York: Columbia University Press.
- Freud, S.**, 1913. “Das Motiv der Kästchenwahl”, in: *Imago. Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften* II.3. [Web] <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24017/24017-h/24017-h.htm>.
- Greenblatt, S.**, 1997. “[Introduction to] King Lear”, in: *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York/ London: W. W. Norton & Company, p.2307-2316.
- Halio, J. L.**, 2001. *King Lear: A Guide to the Play*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Jacobs, J.**, 2009. *English Fairy Tales*. London: Abela Publishing.
- Jaffe, N.**, 1998. *The Way Meat Loves Salt. A Cinderella Tale from the Jewish Tradition*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Jones, E.**, 1951. *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis II. Essay in Folklore, Anthropology and Religion*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Monmouth, G.**, 1912. *Histories of the Kings of Britain*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd/ New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc.
- Perrett, W.**, 1904. *The Story of King Lear from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Shakespeare*. *Palaestra*, Vol. XXXV. Berlin: Mayer und Müller.
- Der Salzprinz**, 1982. Martin Hollý [DVD] Germany/ Czechoslovakia: United Software Produktion. Omnia Film, Slovensky Film.
- Shakespeare, W.**, 1997. *King Lear*, In: R. A. Foakes. ed . *The Arden Shakespeare*. London: Thomas Nelson.
- Thompson, S.**, 1977. *The Folktale*. Berkeley/ L.A.: University of California Press.
- Thompson, S.**, 1955-1958. *Motif-Index of Folk Literature. A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fables, Jest-Books and Local Legends*. 6 Vols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.