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MAGICAL RESULTS OF EATING AND DRINKING
IN MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE

by

Deborah A. Oosterhouse

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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The Medieval Institute

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1997

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Deborah A. Oosterhouse

MAGICAL RESULTS OF EATING AND DRINKING IN MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE

Deborah A. Oosterhouse, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1997

One of the most famous stories in Norse literature is the tale of Sigurd, who kills the dragon Fafnir. While roasting the heart of the dragon so that his companion, Regin, may eat it, Sigurd ingests some of the blood that burns his thumb and immediately understands the speech of the birds, who advise him to eat the heart himself in order to become wiser. Sigurd is not unique in being magically influenced by a substance that he eats. Foods and beverages that have magical effects on those who ingest them are a widespread occurrence in the literature of many cultures.

This thesis is an exploration of such magical food and drink as they appear in various medieval and medieval-related narratives from Europe and India, and of their relationship to the effects they have upon the persons who eat them. Such magical effects are commonly related to the symbolic associations of the foods that are ingested. In addition, I examine the roles of the various people involved in such magical occurrences, in particular, the difference between the portrayal of men and the portrayal of women. Although there are indications that men and women *can* be similarly involved when eating or drinking has a magical result, usually their behavior follows stereotypical patterns of male activity and female passivity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The magic that I will discuss in this thesis is a particularly intimate kind of magic. The magical items here are not clothes or jewels that can be donned and removed at will or ointments that merely rest on the skin; the magic does not involve charms that can be spoken from a distance or stars that influence human affairs from far away; one is not attempting to alter the characteristics of inanimate objects through the use of this magic. In order for the magic that I will discuss to work, a living being must eat or drink the magical substance and essentially make it a part of himself or herself. In its positive aspects, consumption of magical food¹ can involve the giving and acceptance of a reward or gift; in its negative aspects, it can signal deception. Accepting food that has the potential to affect one with magic is a sign of great trust, trust that is not always deserved.

Studies of food and drink in the Middle Ages are most commonly undertaken by historians. Cookbooks with recipes from medieval manuscripts are quite numerous, including works by Maggie Black, Madeleine Pelner Cosman, D. Eleanor and Terence Scully, and others.² Such works often include historical data on the types of food commonly eaten by medieval people (e.g., Black 6–16), cooking methods and utensils (e.g., Cosman 49–60), the characteristics of medieval banquets (e.g., Scully and Scully 40–45), and the medieval food trade (e.g., Cosman 67–91). Among these various

descriptions, the only symbolic association of food that receives wide attention is the relationship between food and social class (see, e.g., Cosman 105–09, Scully and Scully 45).

Very rarely are food themes in literature taken seriously as a basis for interpretive analysis, especially in the study of medieval literature. Many of the books and articles listed in Norman Kiell's recent bibliography on *Food and Drink in Literature* deal with works from the Renaissance and later. Among medieval authors, Chaucer's descriptions of eating and drinking have received the most attention and, like other accounts of food in medieval narrative, his works are often used in trying to determine the actual eating habits of the people who lived during the time periods when the literature was written (see, e.g., Hieatt). Similarly, William Sayers uses the Old Irish *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Vision of Mac Con Glinne) to speculate about the various foods that were eaten during that time period in Ireland (see esp. 2–6). In the accounts that I will examine, however, how well the eating patterns of the participants conform to actual medieval dietary practices is not important. On the contrary, the relatively limited number of food types would seem to indicate that the authors of these accounts had little interest in giving true-to-life accounts of medieval eating habits. What is important in these tales is the symbolism of the various foods ingested.

Purposes

I have four main purposes in carrying out this study. First, I am creating a base for the analysis of magical food motifs in medieval and medieval-related

literature where none has existed. Much of this process involved locating and compiling those motifs in which food magic is prominent from the wide variety listed in motif-indexes and, to a lesser extent, in Tale Type indexes. The main difference between indexes of motifs and indexes of Tale Types is that type indexes classify tales according to their similar plot structures and indicate variants in the specific elements, while motif-indexes classify according to the specific elements. Since it is these specific elements in which I am interested, I have organized the information in the following chapters according to the motifs rather than the Tale Types.

My second purpose is to test my hypothesis that food magic is both widespread and significant in medieval and medieval-related literature. This hypothesis was originally based on rather non-systematic reading of a variety of medieval literature including Norse (particularly the Sigurd legends and some of the sagas), Irish, and French material. The decision to include Indian material in this thesis was a later development, but one that I feel is important because food magic also appears in the literature of non-European cultures and offers an interesting basis for comparison. The specific reasons for my inclusion of accounts from India rather than another non-Western culture will be discussed below (p. 12).

My third goal in this thesis is to analyze basic trends in the types of foods involved in various magical occurrences. A common medieval philosophy about food is that “one becomes what one eats, rather than one transforms what one eats” (Salisbury 44). In a sense, this same philosophy is also present in tales in which food magically affects the person who eats it. Thus, one of the most important things to

consider in such accounts is the relationship between the type of food involved and its specific result. One difficulty that arises when examining these texts, and that will be dealt with further in the following sections, is that the reason a specific food has the effect that it does is not always stated. Rather, the fact that certain foods can have particular influences is taken as a matter of course. Although in many of the accounts I will include the magical food or drink is the flesh or blood of animals (including humans), these are by no means the only important substances that are ingested. Indeed, one of the most important distinctions in the various tales is the distinction between foods of animal origin and foods of plant origin.

My fourth purpose is to examine the various characters involved in stories of magical results from eating, either as the persons who are magically affected or in other roles. These accounts not only reflect the belief that certain characteristics may be obtained by ingesting certain substances, but also indicate human attitudes about the persons involved in the stories. Thus, I will examine one social phenomenon that is particularly prominent within the world of the tales—the roles of the men and women who are involved in the magical occurrences. One of the interesting features of these tales is the difference between the portrayals of men and of women as both givers and eaters of magical food.

Each of these last two purposes involves not only classification of the food types and the characters, but also an interpretation of their significance. Since this interpretation is largely exploratory, I have tested various methods of analysis at various points throughout this thesis rather than applying one strategy exhaustively. Although

the analyses that follow will often involve highlighting the differences between European and Indian³ tales, or between accounts that are clearly medieval and those that were collected later, it is not my intention to make full comparisons in this thesis.

The symbolism of food in medieval literature should by no means be considered only a secondary part of its importance. Human beings do not eat food only as a means of sustaining life and health. In human society throughout history, food and drink have developed levels of significance that transcend this basic biological function. There are many areas of human life in which the nutritional value of food takes a secondary role to its figurative importance. Since food is important in other figurative ways, the importance of its inclusion as a magical motif in literature should not be overlooked.

The Cultural Importance of Food and Drink

Food as Symbol

Food is used as a symbol of various human events, emotions, and beliefs. One of the important functions of food is that of expressing closeness, compassion, and relationship among human beings. Various pleasant events in human life are celebrated, and unpleasant ones consoled, by people coming together to eat and socialize. For example, Thanksgiving and Christmas, two of the most popular holidays in the United States, are characterized nearly equally by the foods associated with them and by people gathering to celebrate them. Recent television commercials have promoted

dinnertime as a sure means of saving the family and, in the process, saving American society, because the bonds among family members are believed to be strengthened in the act of coming together to eat. Food can also indicate group solidarity in the form of ethnic heritage or community spirit (see, e.g., Goode 242).

In contrast, food can also signify separation and difference among persons. Rules of the Hindu caste system, for example, specify “who may receive food from whom and who may not, thereby drawing very close social borderlines between different groups of people” (Klostermaier 165). Certain types of food are indicative of social class or status. Nick Fiddes notes that “within most nations today, the higher the income bracket, the greater the proportion of animal products in the diet” (13). The choices of which foods to eat and which not to eat can also reflect differing moral and ethical choices. One reason that vegetarianism has become more popular in modern times is the belief that animals should not be consumed for food or subjected to any other form of cruelty. Leonardo da Vinci, George Bernard Shaw, and Leo Tolstoy, among other prominent (and not-so-prominent) personages, espoused vegetarianism because they deplored the cruelty inflicted upon animals (see Spencer 190–92, 279–82, and 288–90).

Another sign of the significance of food and drink in human society is their frequent appearance in Golden Age legends. A sure sign of a paradise or Golden Age, whether it existed in the past, exists in a faraway land, or is still to come, is the presence of abundant food and drink that symbolize freedom from hunger and want. For example, in the many Irish legends of voyages into the magical West, those

making such journeys find islands where abundant food grows. Teigue son of Cian, on a voyage to find his kidnapped wife, finds “an orchard full of red-laden apple-trees” and a tree with “round purple berries hung on it, and every one of them was bigger than a man’s head” (O’Grady 2: 389, 390). Similarly, one of the promises God made to the Israelites in return for their obedience was,

I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. . . . You will still be eating last year’s harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. (Leviticus 26:4–5, 10)

Even modern society, despite our relative abundance of food, has not lost sight of this aspect of the utopia. For example, one of the features of the popular television show “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” which presents a utopian future, is the food replicator, a machine that can create any food or beverage for which one asks from its molecular components.

Magical Food

In the phenomena just described, food and drink are symbols of the events with which they are associated rather than the magical causes of those occurrences. For example, eating particular foods can make one appear to be prosperous, but simply eating those foods will not increase a person’s actual wealth. Although this does not make the inclusion of food in such phenomena any less significant, there are other instances in which certain effects are believed to be the direct result of ingesting

certain substances. In such cases, the foods involved still carry symbolic meaning, but when food that is ingested has a magical result, the symbolic becomes real within the world of the narratives.

One difficulty that arises in a study such as the one I am carrying out in this thesis is in the use of the term “magic.” This difficulty is also addressed by Richard Kieckhefer in his book *Magic in the Middle Ages* and his definitions offer a useful starting point in the consideration of this problem. Among the intellectuals of medieval Europe,

natural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. It was the science that dealt with “occult virtues” (or hidden powers) within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a perversion of religion. It was religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs. (9)

I am not entirely satisfied with the term “demonic magic” because of the negative connotations of the word “demonic.” My inclusion in this thesis of material from India makes such a term even more problematic. Although many medieval (and modern) Christians would perhaps classify the Gods and Goddesses⁴ of the Indian pantheon as “demons,” these deities are as significant to Hindus as the Christian God is to Christians. However, the definitions given by Kieckhefer make an important distinction between magic that is more closely related to science and magic that is more closely related to religion, and they also indicate the difficulties in differentiating magic from either science or religion in medieval narratives. Many of the accounts that I will discuss display similar ambiguities between magic and science on the one hand and magic and religion on the other hand.

Magic and Science

The differentiation between magic and science is particularly significant because science is generally perceived as being antithetical to magic in the (sometimes negative) sense that magic is outside of nature while science adheres to the laws of nature. In some cases, however, the effects that particular foods are believed to have on humans are based on the symbolism of those foods and thus bear greater similarity to some of the magical effects that I will discuss in the following chapters. Meat, for example, is credited with causing, or at least increasing, violence in humans. It is because of this belief that meat supplies for civilians are reduced during times of war so that more is available for the soldiers who must fight and kill (Fiddes 11). The same belief in the efficacy of meat is also present in societies that generally prohibit meat-eating. Frederick J. Simoons writes that “despite widespread commitment to vegetarianism, Hindus make an exception for members of the warrior *varṇa*, the Kṣatriyas, who consume meat without a loss in status. This is because they believe that meat is required for physical strength and military prowess” (9).⁵ However, such beliefs probably have more to do with the fact that meat is the flesh of an animal that has been killed and the belief that those who kill animals, or at least eat the flesh of dead creatures, may be more capable of killing other humans.

It is possible to clearly distinguish some of the magical accounts that I will analyze in this thesis from various forms of science, particularly medical practices. In other tales, the magic is signaled by the extreme nature of the effects, such as a

person being transformed into another creature, or by the immediacy of the effects. In general, however, I have followed a more “common-sense” definition of magic as “anything that sounds magical.”

Magic and Religion

Religious rituals and regulations involving food also indicate ways in which the symbolism of certain foods is made real by ingesting those foods. Often, the clear idea is that certain types of food have the potential to contaminate the person who eats them. For example, members of the Vaiṣṇava sect of Hinduism “classify all foods into *rājasik*, exciting, *tāmasik*, foul, and *sāttvik*, pure: only the last category is permitted, excluding thereby not only all meat and fish but also onions, garlic, red fruit like tomatoes, and many other things” (Klostermaier 165). Similarly, the Levitical laws of the ancient Israelites made clear distinctions between animals that could be eaten and those that could not (Leviticus 11). The terminology that consistently crops up with regard to the prohibited animals is that they are “unclean” or “impure.”

In other cases, the food or drink that are ingested have a positive rather than a negative effect. One of the most important rituals of the Christian religion, the Eucharist, is far more than eating a small wafer and drinking a tiny amount of wine. Since the bread and wine of the Eucharist symbolize the body and blood of Christ and, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation, even *become* the body and blood of Christ, to consume the Eucharistic host and wine “meant to consume, to assimilate, to become God” (Bynum 3).

Religion is often placed in the same position as magic of being antithetical to science. In this respect, the distinction between magic and religion is less clear and, at least for the purposes of this thesis, less important. Although various accounts that can be directly traced to the power of a deity display interesting features that are important to the analyses that follow, such accounts of “holy magic” are generally included with the examination of other types of magic, rather than contrasted with them.

Methodology

I have seen that occurrences of magical food and drink overwhelmingly fall into three basic categories: (1) magical transformation, in which the physical or mental attributes of an individual are altered when that person eats something; (2) magical conception, in which a woman becomes pregnant from eating; and (3) magical healing, in which a person is cured of an illness or some other affliction by eating a particular substance.⁶ Each of these categories will be examined in the three chapters that follow; more specific descriptions of the categories are included at the beginnings of each of these chapters.

I have chosen the majority of texts from (primarily) Christian Western Europe, especially Ireland, Iceland and Scandinavia, Britain, France, and Germany. Some of the accounts from Ireland and Iceland, in particular, may reach into pre-Christian times to deal with the activities of pagan deities, although they were not recorded until after Christianity had entered those countries. I have also included stories from the various peoples of India as both a comparison and a contrast to the tales from

Western Europe. Both the comparative and contrastive roles of these stories are equally important. Although it is not my intention in this thesis to substantiate or disprove “the thesis of [Theodor] Benfey and [Emmanuel] Cosquin and [William Alexander] Clouston that the master-tales had originated in India” (Dorson 334), the testing of this thesis was the purpose for many of the British collectors of Indian folklore. This desire among the British collectors led to the creation of a substantial body of material that was collected in more or less the same manner as European oral-traditional material. Thus, India is a logical non-Western choice for comparison. The contrasts occur primarily because Hinduism is the predominant religion in India, and has been since well before the Middle Ages. Thus, vegetarianism is also more prevalent and foods from plants rather than animals more common as magical foods in the literature of India.⁷

I have also included many narratives deriving from oral traditions in the analyses that follow; thus the accounts are not demonstrably medieval in the sense that the manuscripts can be dated or the authors of the works assigned to a specific time period. Indeed, many of the tales were not actually recorded until long after the Middle Ages: the Grimm tales in the 19th century, many of the French tales in the 17th century and later, and the Indian tales in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I continue a long-established tradition, however, in acknowledging the kinship of such traditional material with the medieval and including it with demonstrably medieval narrative for analysis. Although many of the specific exemplars of the genres were not recorded until relatively recently, the genres themselves, such as ballads (Entwistle

71), are medieval in their origins. Many of these oral-traditional tales represent the great majority of ordinary people who are not included in accounts of kings and nobles. Thus, I have also included these tales as a means of hearing the voices of those who fall outside the bounds of the lyrics, epics, and romances of the usual medieval canon, and are normally silent to us in ordinary literary scholarship.

I begin each of the remaining chapters with a list of the narrative motifs of magical foods that pertain to that chapter. The most useful motif-indexes for locating stories to use in this thesis were Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Inger Boberg's *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Tom Peete Cross' *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature*, and Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys' *The Oral Tales of India*. Although I have attempted to include a wide variety of accounts, I have by no means included all of the accounts that are listed in the various motif-indexes that I consulted. In order to locate some French materials, I made use of Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze's *Le Conte Populaire Français*. This last work organizes information according to the Tale Types developed by Antti Aarne in *The Types of the Folktale* rather than according to Thompson's motifs. Although I have incorporated the French material into the motif lists at the beginning of each chapter rather than making a separate list of Tale Types, I have noted in parentheses the Tale Type under which each story can be found. I have followed a similar pattern with the ballads listed in *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad*, incorporating them into the motif lists but indicating under which TSMB number the ballad may be found. Larry Syndergaard's *English Translations of the Scandinavian Medieval*

Ballads was particularly helpful in locating English versions of the ballads from TSMB. For a variety of reasons, I have made no effort to specify in which of the indexes the specific tales are listed. First, there is some cross-over between Stith Thompson's more general motif-index and those that pertain to certain regions. Second, some of the tales are listed under related motifs, but I have chosen to list each tale only under the most specific motifs (e.g., T511.1.3. Conception from eating mango, rather than T511.1. Conception from eating fruit) and have even relocated some that were listed only under less specific (or even erroneous) motifs. Finally, I had known of some of the stories that I include before examining the motif-indexes, or I discovered them even though they were not included in the indexes.

Endnotes

1. For the sake of simplicity, "food" throughout this thesis will often refer to both food and beverage, and "eating" will often refer to both eating and drinking.
2. A partial listing of books on medieval cooking can be found on the internet at http://www.pbm.com/%7Elindahl/articles/food_bibliography.html.
3. The terms "European" and "Indian" are both rather simplistic, since both Europe and India include a variety of cultures with varying beliefs and customs. The primary distinction between these two large categories is religious: European cultures are primarily Christian, while the predominant religion in India is Hinduism. Since both of these religions seem to have a great deal of influence upon the written literature and upon the oral-traditional tales of Europe and India, it is possible to use the broader terms when speaking of these accounts.

4. Throughout this thesis I have followed the rather unconventional practice of capitalizing God and Goddess when referring to non-Christian deities out of respect for the other religions discussed here.

5. Simoons also notes the specific example of the Rājputs of India, who are permitted both meat eating and wine drinking on the same grounds, but adds that “Rājputs themselves are not oblivious to general Hindu thinking about meat eating. Some appear uneasy about their use of wine and meat, and a few who are seriously interested in religion have even given up the practices” (10).

6. I have chosen to examine the narratives in this order because of the number of tales or persons involved in each type of occurrence. There are 60 narratives involving magical transformation, 45 stories of magical conception, and 31 tales of magical healing. Where the same tale, or a slightly different account of a person described in another story, is found in two or more different places, I have counted those variations as only one narrative.

7. India is not entirely vegetarian. Simoons notes that “Indian Moslems, Christians, and many tribal peoples do eat beef,” as do members of the lowest Hindu castes (113). In addition, meat-eating and sacrifices were common in the Vedic period but were later condemned under the influence of Buddhism (Klostermaier 45). As will be seen in the following chapters, however, magical foods in tales from India are more commonly plant products or animal products other than meat. This could reflect the greater effect of Hinduism than of any other religion on the literature of India.

CHAPTER II

MAGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The accounts that I have classified as magical transformations include a variety of effects: enhancing or diminishing strength, enhancing or diminishing memory or wisdom, changing a person into another creature and back into a human being, causing a person to fall in love with another. Since there is such a wide variety of possible effects, it is no surprise that stories of magical transformation are more numerous than tales involving either magical conception or magical healing. The one thing that all these accounts have in common is that transformations alter an otherwise healthy person's characteristics, for good or ill. Such alterations are usually permanent.

Significant Motifs

B124.2. Salmon of knowledge.

Finn mac Cumall: "The Fenian Cycle" in Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, pp. 32–50, esp. pp. 35–36; Ó Muirgheasa, pp. 405–10.

How the River Shannon got its name: "Sinann I" and "Sinann II" in Gwynn, pp. 286–97; Joynt, pp. 194–97; "Sinann," Stokes, "Prose Tales from the Rennes Dindsenchas," § 59, pp. 456–57 (Also D985. Magic nut).

B161.3. Wisdom from eating serpent.

"La Viande de serpent qui apprend le langage des animaux": Delarue and Tenèze, p. 583 (Type 673).

"The White Snake" (Grimm 17): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 67–70 (Type 673).

Erik the Eloquent: Saxo Grammaticus, vol. 1, p. 124.

B635.1.1. Eaten meat of bear-lover causes (unborn) son to have bear characteristics.
 “The Story of Bothvar” (Bera): from *King Hrolf and His Champions* in Jones, pp. 262–88, esp. pp. 266–69.

D551.1. Transformation by eating fruit.

“Les Trois Frères et la princesse”: Delarue and Tenèze, pp. 437–38 (Type 566).

“The Mother-in-Law Became an Ass”: Kingscote, pp. 102–06; Natesa Sastri, *Folklore in Southern India*, pp. 99–103.

“Sixth story (Right goes to the right)”: Natesa Sastri, *The Dravidian Nights Entertainments*, p. 134.

D551.2. Transformation by eating vegetable.¹

“L’Oiseau bleu”: Delarue and Tenèze, pp. 444–45 (Type 567).

“The Lettuce Donkey” (Grimm 122): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 438–43 (Type 566).

D551.2.4. Transformation by eating flower.

“The Man Who Became a Python”: Whitehead, pp. 255–56.

D551.3. Transformation by eating flesh.

“Bosi and Herraud” (Hleid): in Pálsson and Edwards, *Gautrek’s Saga and Other Medieval Tales*, pp. 57–88, esp. pp. 71–72.

D551.4. Transformation by eating bread.

“The Nine Score and One Babies”: Elwin, *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal*, pp. 202–04.

D551.6.3. Transformation by eating snake eggs.

“The Water-snake (Da’ dundu bing)”: Haldar, vol. 1/2, pp. 261–62.

D555. Transformation by drinking.

“La Fontaine dont l’eau change en lion”: Delarue and Tenèze, pp. 123–25 (Type 450).

“Brother and Sister” (Grimm 11): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 41–46 (Type 450).

D981.0.2. Magic fruit which causes madness or dumbness.

Folktale of the Bondo: Elwin, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, § 18, No. 51, p. 367.

Folktale of the Hill Saora: Elwin, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, § 18, No. 66, p. 377.

Folktale of the Kuttia Kond: Elwin, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, § 18, No. 69, p. 379.

Folktale of the Kuttia Kond: Elwin, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, § 18, No. 96, p. 398.

D981.1 Magic apple.

“Echtrae Conli: The Adventure of Conle”: Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, pp. 102–04.

D985. Magic nut.

The Origin of the River Shannon: See B124.2. Salmon of knowledge.

“Ráth Cnámrossa”: Gwynn, pp. 130–33; Stokes, “Prose Tales from the Rennes Dindsenchas,” § 31, pp. 333–34.

D1032. Magic meat.

“La Belle endormie”: Bladé, pp. 181–92.

“The Death of Muirchertach mac Erca,” §§ 19 & 20: Stokes, pp. 409–11.

D1040. Magic drink.

Cliges (the emperor): Staines, pp. 87–169, esp. pp. 123–28.

D1046. Magic wine.

“Les Princesses dansantes de la nuit”: Delarue, pp. 167–69 (Type 306).

“The Worn-Out Dancing-Slippers” (Grimm 133): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 474–77 (Type 306).

D1301.2. Drinking blood teaches animal languages.

“Regin Drinks Fafnir’s Heart” (Sigurd): Byock, pp. 65–66.

D1335.1. Magic strength-giving food.

Hother and Balder: Saxo Grammaticus, vol. 1, p. 75.

D1335.2. Magic strength-giving drink.

“Les Deus Amanz”: Burgess and Busby, pp. 82–85.

Sigurd: “Concerning Sigurd” in Byock, pp. 67–71; “The Lay of Sigdrifa” in Hollander, pp. 233–40, and Terry, pp. 161–68.

“Vilhjálm’s Saga Sjóds”: Loth, vol. 4, pp. 1–136, esp. pp. 75–76.

“Valdimars Saga”: Loth, vol. 1, pp. 51–78, esp. p. 64.

“William’s Story”: Pálsson and Edwards, *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*, pp. 312–13.

“Visit to Hreggvid” (Hrolf and Stefnir): Pálsson and Edwards, *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*, pp. 103–05.

D1335.2.1. Blood as magic strengthening drink.

“The Story of Bothvar”: from *King Hrolf and His Champions* in Jones, pp. 262–88, esp. pp. 274–76.

Hading: Saxo Grammaticus, vol. 1, pp. 24–25.

D1336.7. Magic drink gives weakness.

“The Death of Muirchertach mac Erca,” § 36: Stokes, pp. 421–22.

D1355.2. Magic love-philtre.

“The Love-Potion”: Gottfried von Strassburg, pp. 191–97.

D1355.14. Eaten fruit causes sexual desire.

“The Story of Chinasangba and Itiven”: Mills, pp. 319–21.

D1357.1. Eating ferocious animal’s heart makes person cruel.

“The Ale of Forgetfulness Is Blended for Sigurd” (Gudrun): Byock, pp. 78–79.

D1358.1.2. Eating serpent’s and wolf’s flesh makes courageous and impetuous.

Guthorm: “The Betrayal of Sigurd” in Byock, pp. 88–92; “Fragment of a Sigurth Lay” in Hollander, pp. 243–46; “Fragment of a Sigurd Lay” in Terry, pp. 169–72.

D1365.2. Drink causes magic forgetfulness.

“The Ale of Forgetfulness Is Blended for Sigurd”: Byock, pp. 78–79.

Gudrun: “The Disappearance of Gudrun” in Byock, pp. 93–96; “The Second (or Old) Lay of Guthrún” in Hollander, pp. 269–76; “The Second Lay of Gudrun” Terry, pp. 192–98.

“Chandra’s Vengeance” (Koila): Frere, pp. 291–313.

“The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulaind & The Only Jealousy of Emer”: Gantz, pp. 153–78, esp. p. 178.

“Sir Bosmer in Elfland”: Olrik, pp. 257–60 (TSMB A49).

D1366.1. Magic drink causes memory.

Sigurd: “Concerning Sigurd” in Byock, pp. 67–71; “The Lay of Sigrdrifa” in Hollander, pp. 233–40, and Terry, pp. 161–68.

“The Lay of Hyndla” (Óttar): Hollander, pp. 129–36.

“Recovery” (Ingibjorg): Pálsson and Edwards, *Göngu-Hrolfs Saga*, pp. 82–85.

D1735.1. Magic power by fasting.

“The Primitive History of Ireland, according to Tuan Mac Cairill”: D’Arbois de Jubainville, pp. 28–32.

D1735.4. Possession of magic knowledge, witchcraft from having eaten of father-of-man’s corpse.

“The Death of Nanga Baiga”: Elwin, *The Baiga*, pp. 328–29.

“The Magician’s Heritage” (drinking blood): Elwin, *The Baiga*, pp. 340–44.

- D1811.1. Magic wisdom from eating or drinking.
 “The Tale of Gwion Bach”: Ford, pp. 162–64.
 “The Fall”: Genesis 3.
- D1811.1.2. Magic wisdom from drinking of well.
 Well of Mimir: “Prophecy of the Seeress” in Hollander, pp. 1–13; “The Deluding of Gylfi” in Sturluson, pp. 29–93, esp. p. 43; “Völuspá” in Terry, pp. 1–10.
- D1812.3.3.6. Prophetic dream induced by eating meat of bull.
 “The Bull-feast”: Hull, p. 232; Stokes, “Mythological Notes,” p. 261, and
 “The Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel,” pp. 22–23.
- D2004.3. Forgetfulness by eating.
 Thorkill and Company: Saxo Grammaticus, vol. 1, pp. 263–64.
- E714.4.1. Eaten heart gives one the owner’s qualities.
 “The Story of Bothvar” (Hott): from *King Hrolf and His Champions* in Jones, pp. 262–88, esp. pp. 282–83.
 “Vilhjálm’s Saga Sjóðs” (Sjóðr): Loth, vol. 4, pp. 1–136, esp. pp. 119–20.
- G13.1. Ritual cannibalism: corpse of hero (demigod) eaten to acquire his strength.
 “Princess Niwal Dai”: Temple, vol. 1, pp. 418–528, esp. pp. 504–05.
- K1538. Death feigned to meet paramour.
 “Gay Goss Hawk”: Sargent and Kittredge, pp. 202–05.

The Types of Food and Their Results

One of the important things to consider, of course, is the type of food or drink involved and its relationship to the specific type of transformation. The foods that cause magical transformations are of three basic types: foods of animal origin, especially meat and blood; beverages other than blood; and foods from plants. These three types display an almost direct correspondence to three different views of the role of food in the changes that occur.

In tales in which transformations result from eating foods derived from animals, the overwhelming idea is that by eating the flesh or drinking the blood of an animal one can absorb certain characteristics of that animal. Although human flesh can be classed with the flesh of other animals on the basis that such stories involve this same idea, there are important differences that distinguish the eating of human flesh from eating the flesh of other animals, which will be explored further below.

When drinking a beverage causes a magical transformation, the magic involved comes from some other source, such as magic spells or the magic of the vessel from which the beverage is drunk, and the drink is simply a medium by which the magic can influence the person drinking. In fact, there is one type of beverage that is nearly unique to tales of magical transformation—a drink with unspecified ingredients. Such drinks are not found at all in stories of magical conception and only once among the tales of magical healing. In that one account, the magic beverage is the same as one that is also included in this chapter—a drink that causes Hrolf and Stefnir to become stronger (D1335.2 above: “Visit to Hreggvid”). Since these various beverages are a conduit for other types of magic rather than causing the transformations themselves, it is not always necessary to specify the ingredients of the drink. Yet causing a person to drink a beverage is still one of the most efficacious means by which to influence that person with magic.

Some of the tales in which foods from plants cause a magical transformation follow the two patterns just discussed or even combine the two phenomena. In others, however, a plant food causes a person to change into another creature, with no apparent connection between the food and its result.

Flesh and Blood

Interestingly enough, animal foods appear more frequently as a cause of magical transformation than of magical conception or magical healing. The distinction between animal and plant foods follows very closely the division between tales from Europe and tales from India. In fact, foods from animals are involved in only four of the Indian tales listed above, and in three of them the food is human flesh or blood, substances that often carry different connotations than the flesh and blood of other animals. Various Indian stories portray very negative views of cannibalism. For example, in the story “The Origin of *Sabai* Grass” (Bompas 466) six brothers taste a small amount of their sister’s blood and, since the blood tastes so sweet, they decide to kill her and eat her flesh. The sister eventually returns to life and when the brothers see her living again they are so overcome with remorse that they beat their heads against the ground until it opens up to swallow them, leaving only their hair sticking out. In this story and others like it, the main reason that cannibalism is so terrible is that the eaters murder the person whose flesh they eat.

Such violent means of obtaining human flesh are not present in the stories in which such food causes magical transformations. In fact, the one feature that distinguishes the ingesting of human flesh or blood from ingesting the flesh or blood of other animals, in both Indian and European accounts, is that humans must give their permission for their flesh or blood to be eaten, and usually command that it be done, while other animals are killed and eaten without such concern. Although this could

in part reflect logical necessity, since most animals cannot communicate their permission to be eaten, it also indicates the greater value generally placed on human life than on the lives of other animals. This phenomenon also parallels Christ's commandment in the Eucharist that his followers eat the bread that represents his body and drink the wine that represents his blood. In "The Death of Nanga Baiga," Nanga Baiga, the ancestor of the Baiga tribe, instructs his sons to eat his flesh when he dies, although he does not specify why they are to do this. Similarly, Dhanwantar the Leech in the poem "Princess Niwal Dai" tells his disciples to eat his flesh so that "you will all become as Dhanwantar the Leech" (Temple 1: 504, line 1310). In both of these stories, however, the taboo against eating human flesh is still present. The God Bhagavan convinces Nanga Baiga's sons that cannibalism is wrong, and they throw the pot of flesh into the river; it is found by three women who eat the flesh without knowing what type of flesh it is, and they become witches (Elwin, *Baiga* 329). Tatig the Nâg, the enemy of Dhanwantar the Leech, has the people of the village drive Dhanwantar's disciples away for practicing cannibalism, and the disciples are also prevented from gaining Dhanwantar's power. The third Indian tale involving magical results from cannibalism is "The Magician's Heritage," in which Bhagavan tells Nanga Baiga that whoever drinks Nanga Baiga's blood will gain magical powers, presumably those powers possessed by Nanga Baiga himself (Elwin, *Baiga* 340). Although within the story no humans drink the blood in order to achieve such a result, one would presume that they would not be able to do so without Nanga Baiga's permission.

European stories display the same distinction between human flesh and the

flesh of other animals as magical food. The two European accounts in which human flesh or blood causes a magical transformation when it is ingested occur in the same tale—"The Story of Bothvar." In one case, Frothi tells his brother Bothvar to drink Frothi's blood in order to become stronger (Jones 276), just as Nanga Baiga and Dhanwantar the Leech had commanded their followers to eat their flesh. In the other case, Bjorn, who had been enchanted into a bear by the wicked queen, White (his stepmother), knows that he is soon to die and instructs his lover, Bera, *not* to eat the flesh. However, White coerces Bera into eating a small amount of the meat. (The specific effects of the flesh are discussed below, pp. 25–26.) Thus, White amply fulfills the traditional role of wicked stepmother not only by turning her stepson into a bear when he refuses her sexual advances, but also by forcing Bera to cannibalize Bjorn, thus causing Bera's three sons to display the marks of this cannibalism.

Although human flesh and blood carry a different significance than flesh and blood from other animals, they are similar in that each of them involves eating and digesting as the means by which to obtain particular characteristics of the persons or animals that are eaten. It is interesting that magical results from eating non-human flesh are far more common in European accounts than in Indian. This could reflect the greater influence of Hinduism and its prohibition of meat-eating upon the literature of India, especially when one considers that the only Indian tale in which food derived from a non-human animal causes a transformation comes from the Ho, a tribal people.

In various Scandinavian tales, the flesh of bears, lions, or wolves can increase a person's strength and ferocity, a quite natural result since all three of these animals

can easily be recognized as stereotypically strong and ferocious. In *The Saga of the Volsungs*, for example, Gunnar and Hogni give wolf and snake flesh to their brother, Guttorm, to induce him to kill Sigurd. The result is that “with this nourishment and Grimhild’s persuasions and everything else, Guttorm became so violent and fierce that he promised to do the deed” (Byock 90).² Similarly, in Saxo Grammaticus’ *History of the Danes*, Liser prophesies that Hading will fight against a ferocious beast³ and stab it with his sword, at which point Hading is to

bring your throat to its steaming blood
and devour the feast of its body with ravenous jaws
Then new force will enter your frame, an unlooked-for
vigour will come to your muscles, accumulation
of solid strength soak deep through every sinew. (1: 25)

The bear flesh in “The Story of Bothvar” differs from these accounts not only in the fact that the bear is actually a transformed human, but also in that the flesh does not affect Bera, the woman who eats it, but it affects the strength, size, and violent tendencies of the three sons that she is carrying at the time she eats the flesh: Frothi, the eldest, was so strong and violent that he injured and killed many men before he was twelve years old, and when he left his mother he “became an evil-doer, killing men for their money” (Jones 270); Thorir, the second son, became king in Gautland because he fit into a throne large enough for two men (Jones 272); and Bothvar, the youngest, beat to death the wicked queen White, who was ultimately responsible for the death of the three brothers’ father, and no one dared to oppose him (Jones 273). In addition, this bear meat has a more unusual influence on the physical appearance of the three sons in a direct correspondence to the amount of flesh that Bera had

eaten. Bera ate one mouthful, and Frothi is half elk; the wicked queen, White, gave her another mouthful that Bera spat out but “one small grain of this mouthful too went down” (Jones 268), and Thorir has hound’s feet; Bera ate no more of the meat and Bothvar is fully human. Thus, in two ways—their strong and violent natures and their physical appearance—the sons are marked with the enchantment of their father while they are still innocent children in the womb.

Only one animal in any of the tales listed above can confer either strength or knowledge upon the person who eats of it: the serpent or dragon. Here, too, the attainment of either physical or mental enhancement from eating serpent flesh or venom is not incompatible with the image of a serpent, particularly a dragon, as both strong and crafty. The dragon Fafnir, for example, as well as others of his species such as the dragon that Beowulf fought, are rather formidable foes; the serpent that induced Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in one of the basic narratives of our civilization, is described as “more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1).⁴ The latter example also indicates the possible negative character of the knowledge received from the serpent, since the serpent convinces Adam and Eve to disobey God’s commands and they are punished for their disobedience. Indeed, either physical or mental effects can be found within the same source. In *The History of the Danes* by Saxo Grammaticus, for example, snake venom mixed into Balder’s food gives him increased strength, and one of the nymphs who prepares his food also offers it to Balder’s enemy, Hother (1: 75). Later in the text, Erik the Eloquent eats the porridge into which his mother, Kraka, had mixed

snake venom and he receives “the most authoritative human wisdom . . . a bulk of knowledge beyond credence in all subjects, so that he was even skilled in understanding the speech of wild animals and cattle” (1: 124). Both physical and intellectual enhancement are also found in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The inclusion of snake flesh in the foods that incite Guttorm to slay Sigurd has already been mentioned (p. 25). Sigurd himself receives the power to understand the speech of the birds when he accidentally tastes blood from the roasting heart of the dragon Fafnir (Byock 66). In this case, the knowledge that Sigurd receives is also indicative of a more negative view of the knowledge received from a serpent than is the knowledge received by Erik the Eloquent. Since Sigurd learns that Regin is plotting to kill him and he should kill Regin in order to save himself, the blood of this serpent represents a fall from innocence and trust into suspicion.

“The salmon of Linn Féic, which would bring all knowledge to him who should eat it” (Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* 35), acts upon the Irish hero Finn in a way that is similar to Sigurd’s experience. While cooking the salmon for the poet who had caught it, Finn burns his thumb and puts it into his mouth to cool it, thus unintentionally gaining the wisdom of the salmon for himself. The Ulster folk version, “An Dóigh a Chuaidh Fíon i Dtreis,” also contains the fall from innocence, since Finn cooks the fish for two men whom he happens across as he flees from the king who is trying to kill him—and when he puts his burned thumb into his mouth, he discovers that the two men intend to kill him.

The way in which the salmon of knowledge affects the person who eats it

follows the pattern of tales in which beverages cause magical transformations in that the salmon is a conduit for magic from another source, instead of the salmon itself being viewed as a wise creature. Although the Finn legends do not mention it, the salmon that confer magical knowledge on those who eat them are those that chew on “the hazels of the science of poetry” (Stokes, “Rennes Dindsenchas” 457), which fall into Connla’s Well in the Land of Promise. Sinann, the woman after whom the River Shannon is named, sees both the salmon and the hazel-nuts on her quest to the Land of Promise to attain wisdom, but she drowns in the river that bears her name without attaining her goal.

Beverages

When a beverage (other than blood) causes a magical transformation, the drink influences the person with the magic that has been instilled into the beverage rather than the person absorbing characteristics associated with the drink itself. One of the most common types of magic associated with drinks in the tales listed at the beginning of this chapter is either enhancing or diminishing memory.⁵ In fact, the only beverage that causes a magical transformation in an Indian story causes one of the main characters of “Chandra’s Vengeance” to forget his wife and parents so that he will marry another woman (Frere 302). Such occurrences are more common among European tales. Brynhild, before granting Sigurd’s request to teach him, gives him enchanted ale so “that you will later remember what we speak of” (Byock 67). The ale that Grimhild gives Gudrun so that Gudrun would forget her sorrow at Sigurd’s

death is itself enchanted with “Herbs of all trees / And acorn burned, / Hearth’s black dewfall, / Entrails offered, / Boar’s liver boiled” (Byock 95; see also Hollander 273 and Terry 194) and also served in an enchanted horn covered with runes.

In many of the stories in which the ingredients of the beverage are not specified, it is the vessel from which the beverage is drunk that seems to contain the magic that causes the transformation. In *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*, for example, William recounts that Grim, the man who gave him a strengthening drink, “took a horn from under his cloak and gave me a drink from it” (Pálsson and Edwards 87), thus emphasizing the horn rather than the drink. Such is also the case with the strengthening beverages drunk by Hrolf and Stefnir from the vat given to them by King Hreggvid (Pálsson and Edwards, *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga* 105) and by Valdimar from the drinking horn of an old giantess (Loth 1: 64).

Plant Foods

Finally, we come to plant foods that cause magical transformations. The only stories involving fruits or vegetables in which there seems to be a direct connection between the characteristics associated with the food and the magical result of eating that food are those in which the food causes one person to fall in love with another. Many types of fruit, such as apples, peaches, and figs (Toussaint-Samat 621, 647, 674) have long been associated with various elements of sexuality, and Piero Camporesi quotes the assertion of Juan Ludovico de La Cerda that “the apple [is] under the jurisdiction of Venus,” the Goddess of Love (*Anatomy of the Senses* 10).

In “Echtrae Conli” eating an apple causes Conle to fall in love with the woman from The Land of the Living who had given the apple to him (Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* 103). Eating an unspecified fruit seems to increase Itiven’s sexual desire in “The Story of Chinasangba and Itiven” so that “Itiven gave herself to her lover” (Mills 320). The nuts that Maer wife of Bersa sends to Finn in “Ráth Cnámrossa” would cause him to fall in love with her, so he refuses to eat them (Stokes, “Rennes Dindsenchas” 334).

In other cases, plant foods, like beverages, are conduits for magic from another source. For example, in the Indian tale “The Mother-in-Law Became an Ass,” a Brahmin’s mother-in-law receives from a Goddess a mango that changes her into a donkey. The only logical reason for the food to be a mango is that the Brahmin’s mother had previously received a mango from the same Goddess, and it had caused her to become young again—an effect that, as will be seen in Chapter 4, is related to the figurative significance of fruit. The Brahmin’s mother-in-law goes to the same temple and tells the same story in order to receive the same result; thus the same food is probably given to her so that she will not be suspicious of the effect. Although in only one case is the effect of eating related to the food that is eaten, in both situations it is the power of the Goddess rather than the fruit itself that causes the change.

In tales in which fruits and vegetables change a person into another creature, such connections are not always present. In the Grimm tale “The Lettuce Donkey” the hero finds two varieties of lettuce—one that turns a person into a donkey and another that changes the donkey back into a person. One possible connection between

the lettuce and the transformation that results is that donkeys eat vegetable food, so perhaps eating the same variety of food as a particular animal can cause a person to become that animal. Moreover, this tale and the two similar French stories—“Les Trois Frères et la princesse” and “L’Oiseau bleu”—come from collections made centuries after the countries of origin had converted to Christianity. It is possible that these stories are descended from a pre-Christian tradition in which the magic of the fruit was derived from a specific source, such as a pagan deity, and that the source was eventually removed under Christian influence, leaving only the magical fruits and vegetables with no apparent rationale.

One particularly interesting feature of stories of magical transformation is that strength and courage are not enhanced by plant foods in any of the stories I have brought together. In fact, the opposite occurs in “The Death of Muirchertach mac Erca”: the woman Sin enchants ferns so they appear to be meat and Muirchertach and his men feel full after they eat the “fictitious swine” (Stokes 411). The following morning, however, all those who ate of the false meat have diminished strength. The enchantment can disguise the appearance of the food, but not the fact that plants are not magically suitable for enhancing strength. We have seen that most of the people who become stronger from eating—Bothvar and Hott from “The Story of Bothvar,” Guttorm from the Sigurd legends, Sjóðr from “Vilhjálm’s Saga Sjóðs,”—ingest meat or blood. In all the other cases—the unnamed lover in “Les Deus Amanz”; Sigurd in *The Saga of the Volsungs* and the Eddic poems; William, Hrolf and Stefnir from *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*; Vilhjálmm and his men in “Vilhjálm’s Saga Sjóðs”; and Valdimar

in “Valdimars Saga”—the ingested substance is one of the unspecified beverages discussed above.

The absence of plant foods in the magical enhancement of these particular characteristics can be attributed to the long-held belief that flesh and blood are the best means by which to gain strength, a belief that is based on the symbolic association of meat with physical power. Even the *Rule of St. Benedict*, which prohibits monks from eating meat, allows that, “to regain their strength, the sick who are very weak may eat meat” (Benedict 36.9). Mahatma Gandhi also recounts that he once tasted meat from the belief that “it would make me strong and daring, and that, if the whole country took to meat-eating, the English could be overcome” (qtd. in Fiddes 67). Beliefs in the efficacy of meat in enhancing strength have also been expressed in scientific literature, which our culture has come to believe is more authoritative and accurate than folk beliefs. The 19th-century scientist Justus von Liebig, for example, “glorified meat as the essential source of material to replenish muscular strength” (Fiddes 177). Even today, vegetarians are consistently warned by some doctors and nutritionists that the elimination of animal flesh from the diet can result in a deficiency of protein, the substance that purportedly increases muscular strength. Since other scientists report that “*human beings have no nutritional requirements for the flesh or milk of animals*” (Klaper 7; emphasis in original), even scientific opinions on the necessity of meat for strength-building seem to be based more on the symbolism of meat rather than physical reality.

One thing that all these varieties of food have in common, whether they are

of plant or animal origin, is that they are usually unique in some way. This phenomenon attests to the special nature of these magical occurrences—one generally cannot eat just any food one finds and achieve a magical result. In some cases, the food itself is a variety that is not eaten as everyday sustenance. Human flesh, for example, is generally consumed as nourishment only under extreme circumstances such as famine (*Dictionary of the Middle Ages* 6). Other foods are unusual in other ways. For example, it is not just any salmon that will confer magical knowledge on those who eat of it but only the salmon who ate the hazelnuts from Connla's Well. Beverages that cause magical transformations are unusual according to the very definitions set out above: that they are means of affecting persons with types of magic that are not related to the food itself. Thus, all beverages are either themselves enchanted or they are served in enchanted drinking vessels. Many of the fruits and vegetables that magically transform are unusual because of the place from which they come or the person by whom they are given. For example, the mango in "The Mother-in-Law Became an Ass" was given to the woman by a Goddess, and the apple that causes Conle to fall in love comes from the Land of the Living and is given to him by one of its people.

Another interesting feature of these accounts is that plant foods are more often given to the persons who eat them by persons associated with more powerful magic, either their own magical abilities or the power of a deity. Thus plant foods seem to be at least partially influenced by the magical powers of the givers, while animal foods are more often obtained directly by the persons who eat them. One very logical

explanation for this phenomenon is the fact that animals are mobile creatures while plants are not, but this alone is not sufficient. After all, an animal does not simply come to a person in order to be eaten any more than a piece of fruit does. Instead, a person must often pursue and kill it. Thus, this phenomenon also indicates that the magic associated with the animals themselves is stronger than the magic of plants, most likely because of the presence of blood, which, as will be seen in Chapter 4 in particular, is a very potent magical substance.

Finally, it is remarkable that a very small number of food types cause magical transformations. The most common varieties of magical food in this chapter that will also be discussed in the following chapters are fruit and the flesh and blood of animals. (Magical beverages are also quite common in this chapter, but are not as prominent in the following chapters.) Vegetables, in particular, are very rarely found as foods involved in magic, probably because of their association with the lower classes. In fact, the hero in “The Lettuce Donkey” only eats the lettuce that he happens upon because he is starving, but he also states that lettuce is not a fitting food in other circumstances and that fruit would be preferable (Magoun and Krappe 441). Although bread and grains often carry a great deal of symbolic significance,⁶ they are probably also excluded from the magical category because of the same characterization, as food for peasants. Thus, the varieties of food that have magical results, even when the magic seems to originate more in an outside source rather than the food itself, are very much related to human snobbery about food types that are fitting for the heroic persons involved in the tales.

The Persons Involved

As stated in the Introduction, stories of magical results from eating various substances not only reflect beliefs about the foods that are ingested, but also indicate social attitudes about the persons who are involved in the stories. In accounts of magical transformation by food, the main characters in the tales are usually the persons who are transformed, and such persons are usually male. In addition, a comparison of the minority of tales in which women are magically transformed and those in which men are magically transformed reveals differences between the involvement of men and the involvement of women. Women, for example, always receive their magically transforming food from other persons, in some cases from the man who earned it, such as Gudrun receiving some of Fafnir's heart from Sigurd (Byock 79). Although some men are also given food that magically transforms—Hott eats the flesh and blood of a beast that Bothvar had killed (Jones 283) and Sjóðr eats some of the heart of the lion that Vilhjálmr had killed (Loth 4: 119–20)—men are the only characters who take food for themselves and achieve a positive transformation as a result. In only one tale, a Bondo folktale about the origin of the dog, does a woman take food that does not belong to her, and the results are insanity and a beating at the hands of her mother (Elwin, *Tribal Myths* 367).

Related to this concept that men have the ability to take magically transforming food for themselves while women are given such food by others is the fact that whenever the food is the flesh or blood of an animal that must be hunted, men

always do the hunting and killing. Just as meat is associated with strength and power, so hunting is associated with the domination of men, rather than women, over nature.⁷ In fact, some anthropologists consider the development of hunting as one of the distinguishing factors between primitive man and other animals (Fiddes 55–56). In addition, the process of hunting a strong animal in a potentially dangerous contest is a means by which a member of the “stronger sex” can pit his strength against nature, thus earning the real or symbolic strength-giving properties of the flesh or blood that is ingested, either for himself or for another person to whom he gives the meat.

Women are also the only persons really punished with transformations. The tale “The Mother-in-Law Became an Ass” has already been discussed (p. 30). Transformation is also a form of punishment in a particularly disturbing folktale of the Hill Saora in which a man rapes a girl he wants to marry and when she still refuses to marry him, he puts in her mouth a medicine that causes her to go mad (Elwin, *Tribal Myths* 377). The foods that transform a person into a donkey in the variations of Tale Types 566 and 567—“The Lettuce Donkey,” “Les Trois Frères et la princesse,” and “L’Oiseau bleu”—are used to punish the women who steal the magical items of the heroes of those tales. In contrast, one has to stretch quite far to consider any of the transformations of male characters as punishments. One could perhaps argue that the transformations of the boys in “La Fontaine dont l’eau change en lion” and “Brother and Sister” are a form of punishment for lack of self-control, since the boys are warned not to drink the water that causes them to change into a lion and a fawn, respectively. However, neither of these tales has the very negative tone of the tales

in which women are punished by being magically transformed. Indeed, the transformed boys are ultimately responsible for rescuing their sisters from the cruel treatment inflicted upon them by their mothers-in-law.

Although the persons who give magical food to others are not usually the most prominent persons in the tales, they are, nevertheless, significant characters. In this position, too, women are often portrayed more negatively than men. The most common negative results of eating or drinking are causing a person to forget loved ones and transforming a person into another creature, essentially robbing a person of his or her humanity. When foods that women give have such effects, the woman is described as deceitful and manipulative toward the person to whom she gives the substance. Grimhild, for example, gives Sigurd a drink that causes him to forget Brynhild and ultimately leads to his murder. In addition, she gives it to him “one evening when they sat together drinking” (Byock 78), and Sigurd has no idea that the drink is magical. Similarly, the Elf-maid in “Sir Bosmer in Elfland” gives Bosmer a drink that causes him to forget his family, his home, and his true love so that he will stay with her in Elfland and love only her. The final scenes in this ballad are his family lamenting that he will never return to them and his true love weeping herself to death (Olrik 260). When foods that men give have negative effects, however, such effects are viewed as just punishments for wrongs that have been committed against them. Although the men give the foods to the women without the women knowing that the foods are magical, in these tales the action is not portrayed as deceitful. The transformations in “The Lettuce Donkey,” “Les Trois Frères et la princesse,” and

“L’Oiseau bleu,” as discussed in the previous paragraph, are portrayed as appropriate actions for the men to take in response to having their magical items stolen by the women who are transformed.

The more frequent involvement of men, particularly as eaters of magical foods, can largely be explained by the dichotomy between nature and culture and the association of women with nature and men with culture (see, e.g., Jacobsen and Leavy 78–79). Many of the tales discussed throughout this thesis essentially involve the usurpation of the powers of nature by humans—men control nature by making it a part of culture, that is, by making it a part of their own bodies through the process of eating and digesting. Since women are associated with nature rather than being in opposition to it, they only receive magically transforming foods from the men who have assumed control of the natural forces present in the food. Thus, women are “redeemed” by being brought into the forces of culture. In contrast, when a woman affects a man with “natural magic” (to use Kieckhefer’s term) without his knowledge that magic is present, such actions are deceitful because the woman is contaminating culture with nature. Only when a man requests such magic of a woman, as when Sigurd asks Brynhild to teach him (see above, p. 28), is such magic permissible, since the man can knowingly assimilate nature into culture rather than unknowingly being overwhelmed by natural forces.

The various differences in the treatment of male and female characters in these stories, and in the tales that will be discussed in the following chapters, are essentially a socially-defined limitation rather than a function of the magic itself. Since women

can be influenced by magical foods in ways similar to the ways in which men are affected, the magic of food itself could transcend such social constructs as gender, but it does not. Just as human attitudes toward various foods limit the varieties of food that have magical results, those same attitudes about the relative value of men and women in society limit the roles of women in these accounts.

Endnotes

1. These tales, and the story “Les Trois Frères et la princesse,” also include fruits or vegetables that change a person back in a human being. Although I have included most stories involving such disenchantment in the category of magical healing, I have included these in this chapter because eating causes both the change from a human into a donkey and the change back into a human. In the disenchantment stories that will be discussed in Chapter 4, the original transformation from a human being into another form is accomplished by means other than eating, but eating results in the change back to human form.

2. It is interesting, however, that in the Eddic poem from which this scene in *The Saga of the Volsungs* is derived, “Fragment of a Sigurth Lay,” there is no specific mention of the purpose of giving the wolf and snake flesh to Guttorm. This could be an indication that the idea of absorbing a ferocious animal’s characteristics by eating its flesh was well enough known that the hearers or readers of the poem would realize the connection without needing to have it directly stated.

3. Fisher and Davidson note of this beast that “the word used here (*leonem*) is translated by Elton as ‘lion’, but appears to have been used for any wild beast.

Possibly the animal was a wolf in the Norse sources used by Saxo” (Saxo Grammaticus 2: 31, n. 37).

4. It is also interesting, however, that in later collections of tales, such as the Grimm collection and those in the Delarue and Tenèze volumes, the only type of enhancement that is gained by eating snake flesh is mental; the physical seems to have disappeared. Perhaps this is a function of the change in vocabulary among the words denoting “snake,” “serpent,” and “dragon.” In Old English, for example, the word “wurm” can designate “reptile, serpent, snake, dragon” (Hall 427), while in Modern English “worm” generally refers only to the small creatures that burrow in the ground, and there are vast differences between snakes and dragons.

5. Various potions involved in love magic are also common, such as the one drunk by Tristan and Isolde that causes them to fall in love (Gottfried von Strassburg 194–97), or the one given to the emperor in *Cliges* that causes him to believe he is making love with his wife (Staines 126–28), or the one drunk by the heroine of “The Gay Goss Hawk” that causes her to appear dead so that she is carried out to her lover (Sargent and Kittredge 203). Because love magic in general has received more treatment than beverages that cause memory or forgetfulness (see, e.g., Kieckhefer’s “Erotic Magic in Medieval Europe”), I have not discussed it here. Within the tales that I have brought together in this chapter, enhanced or diminished memory are more common than love magic.

6. See, e.g., Piero Camporesi’s *Magic Harvest*, esp. Chapter 1, “Bread and Death: Food and Peasant Rituals in Italy,” pp. 3–34.

7. In fact, the domination of men over nature often *includes* domination over women. One of the punishments given to Eve for her disobedience in eating the fruit

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is that “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). Nick Fiddes, in Chapter 10 (“The Joy of Sex”) of *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, notes the association of women with animals in the language of courtship and sex (see esp. 145–54), areas of human life in which, at least until very recently in human history, men have been generally perceived as initiators and women as recipients of male attention.

CHAPTER III

MAGICAL CONCEPTIONS

In contrast to the wide variety of possible effects categorized as “magical transformations,” the accounts that will be described in this chapter have only one effect: a female (usually but not always a human female) eats a particular substance and becomes pregnant as a direct result of eating. The main variation that will be discussed below is in the implications of the pregnancy. That is, either the food is a means of enhancing a woman’s fertility or the substance that is swallowed itself develops into the child that results.

Significant Motifs

D1925.1. Barrenness removed by eating or drinking.

“S. Molasius of Devenish”: O’Grady, vol. 2, p. 23.

“The Birth of Aedh Sláine”: O’Grady, vol. 2, p. 90.

“Life of Mochua of Balla,” § 4649: Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, p. 282.

T511. Conception from eating.

“Le Chat et les deux sorcières”: Delarue and Tenèze, pp. 649–51 (Type 708).

T511.1. Conception from eating fruit.

“King Dalim and the Apsarases”: Damant, p. 219.

“The Four Princes”: Knowles, pp. 415–41.

“The Horikaḍayā Story”: Parker, vol. 1, pp. 152–54.

T511.1.1. Conception from eating apple.

“Odin Guides Sigi from the Otherworld” and “The Birth of Volsung”: Byock, pp. 35–37.

“The Story of Rājā Jagdeo”: Temple, vol. 2, pp. 182–203.

T511.1.2. Conception from eating berry.

“Poem 50”: Magoun, pp. 330–38.

T511.1.3. Conception from eating mango.

“The Boy who Learnt Magic”: Bompas, pp. 134–38.

“The Mongoose Boy”: Bompas, pp. 478–79.

“The Boy Whom Seven Mothers Suckled”: Day, pp. 117–23.

“The Real Mother”: Dracott, pp. 6–10.

“The Faithful Brother”: Elwin, *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal*, pp. 34–36.

“The Hare-Prince”: Elwin, *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal*, pp. 147–50.

Folktale of the Gond: Elwin, *Myths of Middle India*, §7, no. 21, p. 158.

“Chandra’s Vengeance”: Frere, pp. 291–313.

“True Friendship”: Knowles, pp. 130–38.

“Fourth story (Faith is always rewarded)”: Natesa Sastri, *The Dravidian Nights Entertainments*, p. 55.

“How the Dead and Buried Children of the Raja Were Restored to Life”: Roy, pp. 221–24.

“Malanchamala”: Sen, pp. 267–322.

“Prince Half-A-Son”: Steel, pp. 275–83.

T511.1.4. Conception from eating orange.

“The Legend of Creation”: Stack, pp. 70–72.

T511.2.0.1 Conception from eating root.

“The Two Rival Chieftains”: Mukharji, pp. 79–82.

T511.2.0.2. Conception from eating leaves.

“The Fakir and the Pot of Boiling Oil”: Brown and Mayedo, pp. 210–14.

T511.4.1. Conception from eating rose.

“The Young Slave”: Croce, pp. 192–95.

T511.5.1. Conception from eating fish.

“The Primitive History of Ireland, according to Tuan Mac Cairill”: D’Arbois de Jubainville, pp. 28–32; see also MacAlister, p. 43; Meyer, “Tuan mac Cairill’s Story to Finnen of Moville here below,” pp. 294–301.

“Les Deux Jumeaux”: Bladé, pp. 277–86.

“Les Trois Fils du Meunier”: Delarue, pp. 147–49 (Type 303).

“The Gold Children” (Grimm 85): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 307–311 (Type 303).

T511.5.2. Conception from eating worm (in drink of water).

Conall, son of Findchoém and Amargein: Loomis, p. 275.

“The Birth of Cú Chulaind”: Gantz, pp. 130–33.¹

“Compert Concobuir”: Meyer, “Anecdota from the Stowe MS. N^o 992,” pp. 173–82.

“Áth Luain”: Stokes, “Prose Tales from the Rennes Dindsenchas,” § 66, pp. 464–67.

T511.6.1. Conception from eating woman’s heart.

“The Short Seeress’ Prophecy”: Hollander, pp. 137–39.

T511.7.3. Conception from eating meat.

“Story of Sringabhujā and the Daughter of the Rakshasa”: Penzer, vol. 3, pp. 218–35.

T511.8.2. Conception from eating medicines.

“Tilbhushki and Chalbushki, or The Two Brides”: McCulloch, pp. 218–28.

“The Prince and the Ogre’s Castle”: O’Connor, pp. 103–15.

T511.8.3. Conception from eating mess of fairy pottage.

“The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel”: Gantz, pp. 60–106; Stokes, pp. 9–61.

T511.8.4. Conception from eating grain (seed).

“The Tale of Gwion Bach”: Ford, pp. 162–64.

“Prince Lionheart and His Three Friends”: Steel, pp. 42–60.

“The Adventures of Rājā Rasālū”: Temple, vol. 1, pp. 1–65.

T512. Conception from drinking.

“The Sambhar’s Son”: Elwin, *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal*, pp. 361–63.

“Kathāmukha”: Penzer, vol. 1, pp. 94–103.

T512.3. Conception from drinking water.

“The Wooing of Étaín”: Gantz, pp. 37–59.

The Means of Conception

We see from the motifs listed above that plant foods appear more frequently than animal flesh in accounts of women who become pregnant from eating, about twice as often. One possible explanation for this trend is that magical conception from eating or drinking is more frequent in Indian tales than in European, and 26 of

the above tales are from India while 19 are European. In fact, pregnancy is the most common magical result of eating in Indian tales: in each of the other two categories, magical transformations and magical healing, Indian tales account for only 22% and 28%, respectively, of the total number of tales, while 59% of the magical conception stories are from India. Animal foods of any kind occur in only two of the Indian stories: one instance in which a physician makes an elixir from goat's flesh (Penzer 3: 218), and another in which milk is one ingredient of the drink consumed by the queen (Penzer 1: 95, n. 2).² In addition, flesh is involved in only ten of the European tales, while various other substances are involved in the remaining tales.³ Thus, this low frequency could reflect the idea that life cannot be created from the death of another creature. Indeed, meat is often associated with the taking of life rather than the generating of it (see, e.g., the discussion at p. 9).

Another reason that plant foods more commonly result in pregnancy than animal foods must be the association of plants, particularly fruit, with fertility, especially since the most common type of food involved in causing pregnancy is fruit. To be "fruitful" is to be "fertile." Children are sometimes characterized as the fruit of the womb. Gertrude Jobes includes "abundance" and "harvest" (1: 614) among the symbolic meanings of fruit. In addition, the reproductive processes of plants, and the parts of the plants involved in those processes, are more visible than those of mammals. Fruit in particular swells and grows around the seeds of the fruit tree that are contained within the fruit. Since "seed" is also a term used for sperm, there seems to be a figurative association between human seed and the seeds of plants. In

The Saga of the Volsungs, Odin gives an apple to Rerir in response to the prayers of Rerir and his queen for a child. One unusual feature of this story is that Rerir, rather than the queen, eats the apple. Most often, the magical food is ingested only by the woman, although in some tales, such as “The Boy Who Learnt Magic” and “Malanchamala,” it is eaten by both the man and the woman (or women). Fully half of the magical conception tales from India involve mangoes, although apples and oranges also appear.⁴ When one compares these tales with the medical text *Caraka-Saṃhita*, it becomes even more apparent that the involvement of fruit in tales of magical conception relies more on its symbolism than on any concept of its medical or nutritional value. Although there are many types of food recommended in the *Caraka-Saṃhita* for those desiring children, mangoes and other fruits are not included (Sharma and Dash 2: 463–73). In an earlier section of the work, ripe mangoes are said to “promote flesh, semen as well as strength” (Sharma and Dash 1: 519), but one would presume that the fruit would thus be eaten by the man rather than the woman.

Many of the European tales in which ingesting an animal results in conception reflect the idea that one cannot begin a life by taking the life of another creature. In some cases, the tiny creatures involved in conception do not die as a result of being swallowed. For example, two Irish heroes—Conall and Conchobar—are conceived when their mothers drink worms that are in their glasses of water (Loomis 275; Meyer, “Anecdota” 180). In both of these accounts the small animal that is involved in conception is swallowed whole and does not go through the usual process of digestion. Rather, Conall and Conchobar are born holding in their hands the worms

that resulted in pregnancy. In addition, the worms that cause pregnancy are surely symbolic of sperm. Freud notes that in dreams, “to be infected with vermin is often the equivalent for pregnancy” (Brill 373–74). Thus, the worms in these tales partially serve the same function as fruit in other tales, although the symbolism of worms is not as broad.

The French and German tales in which eating a fish results in pregnancy—“*Les Deux Jumeaux*,” “*Les Trois Fils du meunier*,” and “*The Gold Children*”—are similar to the accounts of magical transformations that result from eating human flesh or blood in that the fish gives his permission to be killed and eaten. Thus the fish in these tales is essentially elevated to the status of human being and, although the fisherman catches the fish three times, he does not, and perhaps cannot, give the fish to his wife to eat until the fish allows him to do so. There is also an element of Fate in the accounts since the same fish is caught three times. In fact, in the Grimm tale the fish acknowledges this inevitability when he tells the man, “I plainly see that I’m bound to keep falling back into your hands” (Magoun and Krappe 309), and he resigns himself to being eaten. There may also be an unconscious typological connection between the generation of new life in the woman by means of eating a fish and the rebirth promised in Christianity, since Christ is frequently represented by the fish and he also said to Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3).

Some of the stories in which eating an animal causes a woman to conceive a child are directly identified as stories of rebirth in which the food signifies life

through death. In each of them, the predominant idea is that in order for the persons involved to change from one creature to another, it is necessary for the present form to die.⁵ This is accomplished through the process of eating and digesting. In the story of Tuan mac Cairell, in particular, it is clear that the essential part of the person, the part that passes from one form to another, continues to exist beyond the death of that present form. After spending hundreds of years as various animals, Tuan at last becomes a salmon that is caught, cooked, and given to the wife of Cairell, who becomes pregnant after eating the fish. Despite the fact that Tuan as a salmon was killed and cooked, Tuan relates to St. Finnen, “I remember the time I was in the womb of the wife of Carell. I have kept the memory of all that was said in the house and all that was done in Ireland at that time” (D’Arbois de Jubainville 32). Alfred Nutt argues that rebirth in Irish stories differs from Indian reincarnation in that it “has no apparent connection with any belief in a soul as distinct from the body, or in a life led by the soul after the death of the body” (96). However, the tale of Tuan mac Cairell makes clear that some part of Tuan existed continuously from his original birth and through hundreds of years as various animals until he was reborn as a human.

Although it is not as explicitly stated by the characters themselves in the three other stories involving rebirth, the same phenomenon is present. Through eating the creature that results in pregnancy, a woman (or a cow) participates in the process of rebirth by making the creature a part of herself for a time and imposing her form upon it. The woman Étaín is reborn as a human girl after being transformed into a fly and swallowed with the water that Etar’s wife drank (Gantz 47). Two swineherds

spend a year in each of seven forms; their fifth form is that of two worms that are swallowed by cows who become pregnant and give birth to calves because of swallowing the worms (Stokes, “Rennes Dindsenchas” 466). The story of Cú Chulaind’s birth is also one of rebirth, since the creature that Deichtine drinks is actually an incarnation of the god Lug (Gantz 132–33; see also Nutt 43).

The brief account in “The Short Seeress’ Prophecy” of Loki’s eating the heart of a woman and becoming pregnant is a particularly unusual situation that does not conform to either of the patterns mentioned above involving animal flesh. Since Loki himself fluctuates both in his biological sex and in his allegiances to either Gods or giants, we would not expect him to conform to the usual patterns involved in magical conceptions. First, Loki is generally described as a male God and should not be able to become pregnant. This is not the first time that Loki has borne a child, however. Loki had given birth to Sleipnir after transforming himself into a mare in order to lure away the stallion of the giant who built the stronghold of the gods so that the giant would not be able to finish it in time and would forfeit his payment (Sturluson 66–68). Since the conception from eating a woman’s heart is the second account of Loki becoming pregnant, it is clear that Loki’s sex is not permanently fixed. Indeed, the fact that Loki eats a *woman*’s heart probably triggers the female side of Loki’s doubleness and allows the conception to occur. Second, the result of Loki’s peculiar pregnancy is the race of ogres. Although Loki is a God, his giving birth to evil creatures is a sign of his connections to the “evil” giants who are the enemies of the Gods.

Like the foods that were involved in magical transformations, many of the foods that cause conception are unusual in some way, primarily in the way in which a person comes to possess them. By far the most common means in all the accounts, whether European or Indian, is that the food, or the instructions for obtaining it, is given by another person (sometimes by a deity), for good or evil intent. In fact, the presence of a holy man or magician who commonly takes this role is nearly universal in Indian tales. Sometimes the fakir or yogi or sadhu⁶ gives such assistance for personal gain—he demands one of the children as a payment (as in “The Faithful Brother,” “The Boy Who Learnt Magic,” “The Fakir and the Pot of Boiling Oil,” and “The Prince and the Ogre’s Castle”).

Most commonly, food that causes a woman to magically conceive when she eats it is given because of the sincere desire of a king and his queen(s) for children. In these stories, the fruit and the children that result are essentially a reward for good behavior, although that behavior may be no more than expressing a belief that a holy man has the power to influence pregnancy. In one case the reward is mistakenly bestowed: the king happens upon a fakir who has been sleeping for twelve years; he wakes the fakir, who believes that the king has been caring for him the entire twelve years, and the fakir gives him mangoes for his wives in return for the service (Dracott 6). Other Indian tales portray fruit as a reward in that the king is given instructions for obtaining the fruit and problems arise when these instructions are not followed correctly. In the story “Prince Half-A-Son” the fakir tells the king to throw the fakir’s stick twice against a certain tree. After the king does so, he decides to throw the stick

again in order to gain more than the seven mangoes that had fallen. When he does so, however, the mangoes that had already fallen fly back into the tree and the king cannot get any more down until he goes back to the fakir and confesses what he had done (Steel 275–76). Selfishness and greed can also interfere with the result of eating the magical fruit. In “How the Dead and Buried Children of the Raja Were Restored to Life” the raja can get only one mango, which six of his wives divide among themselves while the seventh is away. Their greed backfires, however, because the seventh rani eats as much mango flesh as she can scrape from the rind and she is the only one to become pregnant (Roy 221).

Conception of a child by ingesting a substance is also a form of reward in European tales. Saints reward faith in the stories of barrenness removed by eating or drinking (D1925.1 in the above list): the tears of a young Mochua of Balla cause a barren woman to conceive when she asks him for help (Stokes, *Lives of Saints* 282); bishop Finnacha was conceived when Molasius of Devenish blessed water for Finnacha’s mother, who had given milk to Molasius and his attendants (O’Grady 2: 23); and water blessed by Finnian of Moville and bishop Aedh son of Bri causes queen Mugain to become pregnant three times (O’Grady 2: 90). Similarly, Odin gives the magical apple to Rerir and his queen after the couple “fervently implored the gods that they might have a child” (Byock 36), and Frigg also interceded with Odin on their behalf. Even the conception of Cú Chulaind is partly a reward for a service that had been rendered. Deichtine helps to deliver a baby in a house to which a flock of birds had lured Conchobar and a group of his people. The next morning, the house

is gone, so they take the boy home and raise him, but he dies when he is still young. Shortly after, Deichtine receives the drink in which is the small animal that causes her to become pregnant, and that very night Lug comes to her in a dream and tells her that he is the tiny creature that she swallowed and she will give birth to him (Gantz 132–33). In some versions of the story (although not Gantz’s) Lug also tells Deichtine that he was the child she had raised (Nutt 42). Thus, in return for the service of raising the first boy, Deichtine gives birth to the greatest of the Ulster heroes.

Another unusual means by which a person receives food that results in pregnancy is consuming it by chance or being Fated, or perhaps chosen in some way, to receive it. This is also one of the features that distinguishes many of the European tales from the Indian tales. The only Indian tale with this feature is “The Sambhar’s [*sic*] Son,” in which a raja spits on the ground while he is out hunting; a sambhar later licks up the spittle and conceives a child. This story seems to involve chance rather than the Western concept of Fate. Klostermaier notes that the Hindu philosophy of karma is different from the idea of Fate in that “karma can be influenced or even totally neutralized through religion” (216), while Fate cannot be changed. It is possible that the raja is responsible for such influence simply from his desire for a son. Although it could be considered something of a stretch to believe that a sambhar would just happen to lick up a raja’s spittle in the midst of a vast forest, in a realm where a raja’s spittle can cause a sambhar to conceive a child, a chance event that leads up to that conception should not be thought implausible. In contrast, some European tales are directly identifiable as involving Fate or the

somewhat related concept, the will of God. The tales of the fish who are caught three times have already been discussed (p. 47). The eating of the salmon Tuan by the wife of Cairell was accomplished through the will of God, since Tuan relates that “for a long time I escaped from perils, from the nets of the fishermen, from the vulture’s claws, from the spears which the huntsmen cast at me to wound me” (D’Arbois de Jubainville 31). Yet at the appropriate time God allows a fisherman to catch Tuan and give him to the wife of Cairell, and Tuan once again becomes a human.

Like the plant foods involved in magical transformations, plant foods that cause magical conceptions are nearly always given by a person who represents a different type of magical power. Most often, that person is the representative of a deity, but in some of the Indian stories he is himself a magician. Thus, the magic in plant foods that cause a woman to conceive a child derives at least partially from an outside source. This does not diminish the symbolic significance of the specific foods that are involved, since the person who gives the food could choose to give a different type of food if he (or, rarely, she) so desired.

The obtaining of animal foods that cause magical conception, although it follows to some extent the same pattern as obtaining animal foods involved in magical transformation, displays some significant differences. Although the fish that cause women to become pregnant must be caught, like many of the animals that cause magical transformations must be hunted, there is a strong element of Fate in these and other accounts of magical conception that is not present in tales of magical transformation. In accounts in which pregnancy is caused by swallowing worms, the role

of Fate is even more pronounced. Nessa, for example, strained the water she was getting for her husband, Cathbad, through her veil but still found two worms in it, and Cathbad forced her to drink the water. The account of Cú Chulaind's birth represents the greatest departure from the general pattern that animals must be hunted, since the God Lug chooses Deichtine as his mother and comes to her as the tiny creature that causes her to become pregnant.

Although no human mothers give birth to fruit, or fish, or worms, in some stories the food that causes conception has a particularly apparent effect on the child that is born. In this respect, the foods that cause conception are similar to the bear's flesh eaten by Bera (in "The Story of Bothvar," discussed in Chapter 2). Although the flesh does not cause Bera's pregnancy, eating the flesh marks two of her sons with the enchantment that had turned their father into the bear whose flesh Bera ate. Similarly, Prince Half-A-Son is only half a boy because a mouse ate half of his mother's mango before she ate the rest (Steel 277). The Mongoose Boy "was the most beautiful with a face like a mongoose" (Bompas 478) because a mongoose had nibbled on his mother's mango. The Hare-Prince represents something of a twist on this concept: his mother gives birth to a hare because her co-wives had thrown out her mango, a hare had eaten it "leaving the stone covered with its spittle" (Elwin, *Folk-Tales* 148), and she had swallowed the stone and become pregnant. However, the Hare-Prince can also shed his skin and become a human; he remains a human when his mother sees him do this, and she burns the skin. The obvious influence of the food on the resulting child is not only a feature of Indian tales. In the Grimm story

“The Gold Children” the two boys are solid gold because the fish their mother ate to become pregnant was a gold fish.

Magical conception, whether or not the resulting child displays such physical signs, is one of the important features of the monomyth concept utilized by David Leeming and others. As Leeming writes, “the monomyth itself is an expression of the journey of the hero figure and a reflection of our own journey from birth to the unknown” (6). Although many of the narratives discussed here are short tales that do not include all stages of the monomyth, the fact that they include the very important first step indicates their significance to the societies in which they were created and to the collective human psyche. On the psychological level, such miraculous conceptions represent not only the entry of each of us into the world as a baby, but also any major life changes. Thus, when an eaten food that causes magical conception has a direct effect on the resulting child, that effect can also represent the fact that external events can be a catalyst for such psychological changes.

In some cases, the influence of the mother who carries the child is more apparent than the influence of the food on the child. Perhaps the clearest distinction between these two kinds of influence appears in the contrast between the two stories in which animals, rather than humans, become pregnant from eating or drinking: “The Sambhar’s Son,” and “Áth Luain.” In the first story, the sambhar who licks up the raja’s spittle gives birth to a human baby—the human origin of the substance that causes pregnancy exerts greater influence over the child than the creature who gives birth to him. In the second story, two cows become pregnant by drinking worms with

their water and give birth to calves—the worms that cause the cows to become pregnant are transformed by their hosts rather than causing the offspring to be worms. This latter phenomenon is not only prominent in the Irish rebirth stories (Tuan mac Cairell, Étaín, and Cú Chulaind), it seems to be necessary. Rebirth is essentially leaving one type of life in order to put on another, and the pregnancy is the means by which such a transformation occurs. Again, such changes also reflect the potential of all humans to be influenced in their lives by events around them.

The Results of Conception

Since miraculous conception and birth are signs of heroes in the monomyth, the children that result from such magical pregnancies are always more prominent characters than the women who give birth to them. Thus, although only women can become pregnant (except, of course, for Loki), males are more prominent in all stories of magical conception, whether European or Indian, since boys are born far more frequently than girls. In all of the stories listed at the beginning of this chapter, a total of 163 sons are born, compared with only eight daughters. In addition, it is no surprise that the sons who result from these magical conceptions have extraordinary adventures and perform heroic feats. Cú Chulaind, Conall, and Conchobar, who were all magically conceived through eating, are great Ulster heroes. Indeed, Cú Chulaind is the subject of an entire cycle that relates his various heroic (and not-so-heroic) deeds. Many of the Indian princes who are magically conceived also perform heroic feats such as killing ferocious beasts or evil magicians, winning beautiful princesses

as their wives, or saving themselves from being unjustly executed. The heroism of one Indian prince involves returning his seven unjustly maligned mothers to their former positions as queens by killing the Rakshasi responsible for having them driven away by the king (Day 117–23).⁷

When female children are born the stories are very different from those that involve only male children. Heroines follow two patterns of behavior, each of which differs from heroic male behavior. Most often, girls are important because of things that are done to them rather than because of things they themselves do. Although their male counterparts are able to extricate themselves from the difficult situations they face, women must wait for men to rescue them. When a woman does take action, it is done for the benefit of another (usually a husband) rather than for herself, and that person's health, safety, and love are her rewards for such behavior. Although magically conceived male children also perform heroic feats in service to other persons, there are often other, more tangible rewards involved, such as fame, wealth, and/or status. For example, the boy whom seven mothers suckled (in the tale of the same name) both restores his seven mothers to their rightful places as queens and is himself recognized as the king's heir (Day 123). These patterns relate once again to the nature/culture dichotomy and the need for "natural" women to be controlled by "cultural" men. As Jacobsen notes, "women do not have a separate social identity in a patriarchal society, they are the wards and responsibilities of men" (Jacobsen and Leavy 81). Such a view of women as being dependant upon male approval and desire also prevails in traditional concepts of appropriate feminine behavior (see, e.g., Friedan 123–25).

Daughters are magically conceived in only two of the European accounts listed above. The rebirth story of Étain (mentioned above, p. 48) is characterized by the various kings who pursue her, and the jealous wife who tries to get rid of her, rather than by Étain's own actions. In the Irish tale "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel," another Étain conceives when her mother, a *Side* woman, gives her porridge. Étain's reaction to her pregnancy is to tell her mother, "A wrong you have done me, for it is a daughter I will bear." Her mother consoles her by saying "No matter that, for a king will seek the girl" (Gantz 63). A king indeed seeks Étain's daughter, who gives birth to the hero Conare, after which she drops out of the story.

The few Indian stories in which female children result, just like the European tales, are of a very different nature than those in which only male children are born. Again, the girls are passive recipients of the actions of others rather than engaging in actions themselves. In two of the stories in which girls appear—"The Real Mother" and "How the Dead and Buried Children of the Raja Were Restored to Life"—they are born together with male siblings, and the passivity of the daughters extends to the sons. In each of these tales the woman who gives birth to the children loses her status and the children are responsible for returning her to her position, but only indirectly, not by confronting the people responsible for her disgrace. None of the children pass beyond childhood within the stories, so they do not attain the physical maturity usually necessary for such heroic deeds. Instead, the children are killed by the enemies of their mother, or agents of those enemies, when they are still young. When the children are buried, plants grow from their graves—from the daughter's

grave, a flowering plant. The only one who can pick the flowers from this plant is the children's true mother; when she does so, the children return to life and the deceit of her enemies is revealed. Thus, magic rather than the children themselves brings about the mother's reinstatement.

In some ways the tale "Chandra's Vengeance" contradicts this general pattern of female inactivity, but, in contrast to stories of male heroism, Chandra's actions are taken with no other purpose than for the benefit of her husband, and his safety and health are the only reward she receives for her actions. According to the characteristics of the hero described by David Leeming, Chandra is more of a hero than her husband, Koila, although both children are magically conceived when their mothers eat from a mango given to them by the God Mahdeo. For example, one of the signs of a hero's birth is that "the infant hero is so often exposed to nature. . . . Most often he is released into the natural flow of the river" (Leeming 48). In this tale it is Chandra, not Koila, who is sent floating down the river when a Brahmin warns her parents that "if she stays in [this country] she will destroy all the land with fire and burn it utterly" (Frere 297-98). In addition, Chandra is in many ways more active and more powerful than her husband. Koila is powerless when a jeweler falsely accuses him of stealing the anklet of a rani (Chandra's mother) and the raja orders his execution. When Chandra discovers that Koila has been killed she burns her parents' kingdom through the force of her grief. Chandra even tears out the heart of the jeweler who had falsely accused Koila and feeds it to the eagles whose offspring the jeweler's son had killed. She also finds Koila's body, sews the two

halves of it back together, and successfully prays to Mahdeo to restore him to life. Afterward, Chandra and Koila “returned and lived in their own land” (Frere 313) although, since Chandra was the only child of the now dead raja and rani, presumably they could have ruled in Chandra’s homeland.

Men are also prominent in tales of magical conception in relation to a woman’s obtaining the food that results in pregnancy. Very frequently the food comes to a man first, then to the woman, rather than to the woman directly. Once again, this is a function of “a patriarchal ideology that sees the control of women, that is, of female sexuality and procreative powers, as one of its most intricate and momentous duties” (Jacobsen and Leavy 78). This is another point of contrast between European and Indian tales. It is extremely rare for women in Indian tales to obtain magical food themselves; most often, it is given to their husbands to give to the wives. In European tales the opposite is generally true: it is more common for a substance that causes pregnancy to come directly to the woman rather than passing through a man’s hands to come to her. On the one hand, this could indicate greater independence of women in European tales than in Indian stories. In fact, in most Indian stories, the king is the person who is described as wanting children, while the desires of his queens are not specified—as if a woman would naturally desire children or she would want whatever her husband wanted. In other words, a woman has no individual identity but is identified with the husband. On the other hand, it is not unheard of for a food that causes magical conception in European stories to be obtained by a man to give to his wife as, for example, in the tales in which eating a

fish causes pregnancy. In addition, men are sometimes involved in magical conceptions in more negative ways, such as Cathbad threatening to kill his wife, Nessa, if she will not drink the water she brought for him that had two worms in it (Meyer, “Anecdota” 180).

The fact that the children who result from magical conceptions are more significant than are the women who give birth to them is one of the ways in which the roles of women in these accounts are diminished. Essentially, the women are no more than vessels through which a great hero enters the world. In addition, male children are generally desired more than female children in tales of magical conception from eating various substances. Note, for example, Étaín’s dismay at the knowledge that she will give birth to a daughter (see p. 58). Many Indian tales specifically state that “sons” are desired rather than “children” (see, e.g., Mukharji 81, Penzer 1: 95, and Sen 267). Not only are male children born more frequently as a result of magical conception than female children are, but also they are usually more active than female children. Here, as in tales of magical transformations, the differing roles of men and women in the accounts represent human limitations on the power of magical food.

Endnotes

1. It is important to note that, although Cross classifies the story of Cú Chulaind as T511.5.2, conception from eating worm (in drink of water), neither Gantz (132: “tiny creature”), nor Nutt (42: “little beast”), nor Loomis (277: “little animal”)

identify the animal as a worm, using instead the more generic terms listed.

2. Penzer's interpretation of this drink seems to come from a similar drink described in the *Caraka-Saṃhitā* (Sharma and Dash 2: 469) that a priest administers to a couple desiring a child.

3. One should note, however, that in some versions of Tale Type 708—Delarue and Tenèze's "La Fille innocente qui accouche d'un monstre"—conception results from eating a "ragoût de chat noir" or "une tête de chat" (Delarue and Tenèze 652), although in the version printed in the volume the magical food is a "gâteau" made by a witch (Delarue and Tenèze 649).

4. I could discover no reason for mangoes to be more prevalent than other fruits in causing conception in Indian tales other than the fact that mangoes are a common fruit in India. *Collier's Encyclopedia* says of the mango that "its importance in the tropics has been likened to that of the apple in the temperate zone" (332).

5. This could also explain why Tuan mac Cairell fasts before each of the transformations that occur before his becoming a human (noted in the motif list of Chapter 2): the fasting was perhaps a means by which the creature that Tuan currently inhabited could be destroyed so he could become something else.

6. There seems to be no consistency among the various tales in the titles used for the holy men or magicians who appear. Indeed, the same title can be used to describe the positive holy man figure (e.g., the fakir in "The Real Mother") or the more negative magician figure (e.g., the fakir in "The Fakir and the Pot of Boiling Oil").

7. There are other versions of this story in which the children do not result from a magical conception but are born without any magical influence; see, e.g., "The Ogress-Queen" (Knowles 42–50), "The Son of Seven Mothers" (Steel 89–101), "The

Story of Twelve Sisters” (Milne 230–37), and “How a Prince was chased by a Yaksanī, and what befel” (Parker 1: 186–90). All of these stories have the same basic sequence of events: the (seven or twelve) wives of the king are blinded and driven out at the instigation of a monster disguised as a woman; they eat their children as they are born; the last wife saves her child by feeding the other wives the pieces of their children that she had saved; the child grows up and restores the queens to their former positions. Since the Day story is the only one of these five stories in which the child was conceived magically, it seems likely that the magical conception is an addition to this version rather than being an element that was removed from the other four.

CHAPTER IV

MAGICAL HEALING

The category of magical healing includes not only physical ailments that are cured when a person eats something. Also included here are stories in which a person eats something in order to remove an enchantment that has been cast upon him or her. In addition, old age and death are characterized as afflictions from which a person may sometimes be cured by eating something (or at least having a substance placed in his or her mouth), so these accounts are also discussed in this chapter.

Significant Motifs

A153.2. Magic food gives immortality to gods.

Goibniu's Feast: O'Grady, vol. 2, p. 243.

D764. Disenchantment by eating or drinking.

Transformed maiden: "The Transformed Damsel" (2 versions) in Borrow, vol. 7, pp. 145–46 and 147–49; "The Feathered Maiden" in Dal, pp. 41–43; "The Maiden in Bird's Plumage" in Olrik, pp. 117–20 (TSMB A16).

The Valraven: "The Verner Raven" in Borrow, vol. 7, pp. 120–24; "The Wood-Raven" in Olrik, pp. 274–77 (TSMB A17).

D764.3. Disenchantment by eating certain salmon.

"Dumae Selga": Stokes, "Prose Tales from the Rennes Dindsenchas," § 71, pp. 470–72.

D981. Magic fruit.

"Life of Ciaran of Saighir (I)": Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, pp. 103–04.

- D981.10. Magic (giant) berries.
 “Life of Coemgen (II)”: Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, pp. 148–49.
- D1003. Magic blood (human).
 Folktale of the Gadaba: Elwin, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, § 18, No. 15, pp. 345–46.
- D1338.2.1. Rejuvenation by juice of plant.
 “The Voyage of Mael Duin,” § 30: Stokes, pp. 72–79.
- D1338.3. Rejuvenation by fruit.
 “The Mother-in-Law Became an Ass”: Kingscote, pp. 102–06; Natesa Sastri, *Folklore in Southern India*, pp. 99–103.
 “Story of the Wonderful Mango Fruit”: Kingscote, pp. 171–77.
 “The King and the Parrot”: Swynnerton, pp. 37–43.
- D1338.3.1. Rejuvenation by apple.
 “The Deluding of Gylfi”: Sturluson, pp. 29–93, esp. p. 54.
- D1349.1.5. Magic sweets: one can quench thirst and the other can allay hunger.
 “Motclal and the Pearls”: Elwin, *Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal*, pp. 174–77.
- D1373.2. Two loaves of bread—one to excite, the other to appease hunger.
 “Words of the Wise”: Haldar, vol. 2/3, pp. 291–93.
- D1500.1.4. Magic healing plant.
 “Guilidelüec and Guiliadun” (“Eliduc”): Burgess and Busby, pp. 111–26.
Duanaire Finn, § 93: Murphy, p. 397.
 “The Two Brothers” (Grimm 60): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 226–43 (Type 303).
- D1500.1.5. Magic healing apple.
 “La Fille du sabotier”: Delarue and Tenèze, pp. 559–60 (Type 653A).
 “The Griffin Bird” (Grimm 165): Magoun and Krappe, pp. 541–47 (Type 570).
 “Irish Mirabilia in the Norse ‘Speculum Regale’,” § 15: Meyer, p. 9.
 “The Irish version of *Fierabras*,” §§ 92 and 95: Stokes, pp. 127 and 129.
 “The Voyage of the Húi Corra,” § 47: Stokes, p. 43.
- D1500.1.11. Magic healing drink.
 “Visit to Hreggvid”: Pálsson and Edwards, *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*, pp. 103–05.
 “Life of Brigit,” § 1368: Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, p. 189.

D1500.1.9. Magic blood (healing).

“The Age of Christ, 1411”: O’Donovan, p. 805.

D1500.1.29. Magic healing honey.

“Life of Patrick,” § 108: Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, p. 152.

D1500.1.33. Magic healing milk.

“The Miracles of Senan,” § 11: Plummer, p. 17.

D1500.1.38. Flesh of white cow with red ears as only cure for mysterious illness.

“The Cyle of Mongán son of Fiachna and Brandub son of Eochu, A.D. 624”: Dillon, *Cycles of the Kings*, pp. 49–55, esp. p. 50.

D1503.11. Wounds healed by eating fruit of magic tree.

From *The Dean of Lismore’s Book*: M’Lauchlan, pp. 54–58.

E113. Resuscitation by blood.

“The Magician’s Heritage”: Elwin, *The Baiga*, pp. 340–44.

“The Son of Seven Mothers”: Steel, pp. 89–101.

“Princess Niwal Dai”: Temple, vol. 1, pp. 418–528, esp. pp. 446–47 and 472.

The Foods That Magically Heal

Among the accounts of foods that result in magical healing, only when the food is blood or fruit is the effect related to the properties attributed to the substance that is ingested. Both blood and fruit are associated with life, vigor, and vitality to a greater degree than are other foods. Indeed, blood, even more than flesh, is seen as the substance of life. The ancient Israelites, for example, although they were allowed to eat certain varieties of meat, were forbidden from eating blood because “the life of a creature is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). Blood is a particularly powerful healing substance because of this association with an individual’s very life. In fact, blood is nearly always involved to some degree as a food item that brings a

dead creature back to life.¹ Princess Niwal Dai brings a deer and, later, a buck back to life by cutting open her finger and pouring her blood into their mouths (Temple 1: 446–47, 472). An old hag brings the son of seven mothers back to life by forming his ashes into the shape of a little man, putting a drop of her blood into its mouth, and blowing on it (Steel 100). In a Gadaba folktale from Verrier Elwin's *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, blood even has the power to animate nonliving material when a girl, Galo, puts a drop of her blood in the mouth of a bear modeled from cow dung and it comes to life. In Marie de France's *lai* "Guidelüec and Guilliadun" ("Eliduc") the involvement of blood is symbolized rather than actual, since Guilliadun, Eliduc's lover, is revived by a flower that Guidelüec, Eliduc's wife, places in Guilliadun's mouth. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby note that the bright red flower "is probably symbolic of the flow of blood and the restoration of life to the dead girl" (128).

Fruit is not as strongly symbolic of life as blood, in that fruit is not involved in the restoration of life to a dead person. Instead, the association of fruit with vitality and healthfulness is most apparent in its effects on those still living. For instance, fruit is the food that causes elderly persons to become young again in all of the tales above in which such renewal occurs except the account of the Irish deities, who attribute their perpetual youth to Goibniu's feast (O'Grady 2: 243).² An apple and a mango are the revitalizing fruits brought by parrots to their human friends in two Indian stories, "The King and the Parrot" and "The Story of the Wonderful Mango Fruit." A mango from a Goddess in "The Mother-in-Law Became an Ass" turns a Brahmin's mother into a sixteen-year-old girl so that she can defend herself

from her abusive daughter-in-law (Kingscote 103). The apple is also the fruit that the Norse Gods and Goddesses eat to become young again (Sturluson 54). A similar type of rejuvenation from a different fruit occurs when Diurán, a companion of Mael Duin, drinks water into which berries had been crushed after he sees a bird become younger and stronger by doing so: “Passing strong were his eyes thereafter so long as he remained alive; and not a tooth of him fell (from his jaw), nor a hair from his head; and he never suffered weakness or infirmity from that time forth” (Stokes, “Voyage of Mael Duin” 79).

The restorative power of fruit is evident not only in accounts of returning youth and vigor to the elderly, but also in the healing of other afflictions. In “The Irish version of *Fierabras*,” for example, Floripas gives Oliver an apple that heals his wounds (Stokes 129). Healing fruit in *The Dean of Lismore’s Book* is guarded by the monster that kills the hero Fraoch, who tries to retrieve the fruit in order to heal Mai, the woman who loves him (M’Lauchlan 56). Fruit is also the food that Stupid John, the youngest son in “The Griffin Bird,” uses to cure a king’s daughter of her illness, and this healing is one of the tasks that eventually leads to his marrying her and becoming king (Magoun and Krappe 542–43). Similarly, Stéphan in “La Fille du sabotier” wins his bride because he saves his father’s life by giving him healing apples.

In many of the tales of magical healing the food eaten does not heal by imparting its characteristics to the person eating it but is a symbol of something else that causes healing to occur. In tales in which eaten flesh magically heals, the

substances are generally a sign that the giver is willing to relinquish a part of himself or herself to the person in need of healing, a symbolism that surely bears some typological relationship to the flesh of Christ consumed in the Eucharist. This phenomenon is particularly obvious in the versions of *The Transformed Maiden* (TSMB A16) and *The Valraven* (TSMB A17). In ballads of the first type, the hero cuts a piece of flesh from his chest in order to lure a bird, who reverts to her true human form when she eats the flesh. In ballads of the second type, a raven becomes a man again after feasting upon the first-born son of the woman he had carried away to her lover. The healing from enchantment results from the willingness of each of these persons to suffer physical pain or the pain of losing a new-born child. The sacrifice of Irmindlin in one version of TSMB A17, Borrow's "The Verner Raven," is doubly rewarded in that the enchanted valraven is her brother and that the baby returns to life after Irmindlin's brother is restored to his proper form (7: 124).

The idea of healing food as a symbol of sacrifice is also present to some extent in accounts in which blood is the healing agent. Since blood is the substance of life, those who are willing to give some of their own blood in order to revive another creature are essentially giving up some of their own lives for the benefit of others. Indeed, such a sacrifice is at the heart of Christian belief, since the blood of Christ was spilled in his Passion in order to restore his followers to eternal life. The account of magical healing blood from the Holy Crucifix of Raphoe in the year 1411 (*Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*) is a direct representation of this ultimate sacrifice in the Christian religion.³

In other accounts, healing through food is accomplished as a sign of a greater power, as in the stories of saints who heal through the power of God. The power of God through his saints is particularly prominent in accounts of afflicted persons who request a type of food that is not available, but God allows his saints to find such food. St. Ciaran of Saighir uses berries that he had found growing in winter to heal the queen, Eithne Uathach, of the adulterous love that she had developed for Concraid (Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn* 104). St. Kewinus (Kevin) finds apples growing on a willow tree in the month of March and brings some of them to his ill kinsman, who is cured when he eats them (Meyer, “Irish Mirabilia” 9). St. Brigit turns water into milk to fulfill the request of a sick nun who is healed upon drinking the milk (Stokes, *Lives of Saints* 189).⁴ In some cases, the ability of a saint to call upon the power of God allows the saint to influence a particular variety of food not on just one occasion but permanently. Both St. Patrick and St. Coemgen are credited with giving certain healing foods to the general populace: Patrick gave herbs (Murphy 397), while Coemgen left “Blackberries in winter, / Apples of a sallow branch, / And shoots from the rock / Which heal sicknesses without delay” (Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn* 148).⁵

As noted in the Introduction (n. 6), there are only half as many stories of magical healing from eating as there are tales of magical transformation, and only two-thirds as many as tales of magical conception. Thus it is important to discuss not only the various foods involved in healing, but also why the motif does not occur more often. There are a variety of factors that could account for this low frequency.

One reason may be that blood is such a powerful healing substance that it does not always need to be ingested in order to heal. In *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, for example, Percival's virginal sister gives some of her blood to the lady of a castle so that the lady may bathe in it and be healed from her leprosy (Matarasso 247). In the Indian tale "The Real Mother," a potter restores his seven adopted children to life by sprinkling the blood of a fakir on their bodies (Dracott 9).⁶ Piero Camporesi also notes the legend of a turtle-like animal living on a certain island whose blood has the power to rejoin severed limbs to the body when the part "is dipped in the aforesaid blood and then applied to the living body, to the fresh wound" (*Juice of Life* 15–16).

Another reason for the paucity of stories involving *magical* healing from ingesting something is that various foods are attributed with healing properties in medical systems, both medieval and modern. Medical practices are considered to be scientific in the sense that the effectiveness of such practices has been proven by a process of hypothesis, experimentation, and observation, and science is generally believed to be antithetical to magic in the (somewhat negative) sense that magic involves supernatural or mystical happenings. Thus, eating (or not eating) particular foods in order to improve one's health is considered natural rather than supernatural, since both are advocated in medical practice. In addition, the effects of eating in the accounts discussed in Chapters II and III are unusual results, things that do not occur as a part of everyday life. In fact, even in the few accounts of *magical* healing, the same pattern of unusual occurrence holds true: either the specific type of healing is unusual, such as restoring a dead person to life or causing an elderly person to

become young again, or the healing is a sign of some greater power at work, such as the work of saints who magically heal through the power of God.

This explanation is not entirely satisfactory, however, since the variety of foods involved in *magical* healing is far more limited than the foods involved in *medical* healing. The influence of food in medieval medicine and in the Indian Ayurvedic system is based on the theory of humors, or *doṣas* in Ayurvedic medicine, which must be kept in balance to maintain optimal health. A greater variety of food would be involved in correcting such imbalances, depending on which of the humors was determined to be out of balance, than the very limited variety seen in tales of *magical* healing. Thus, the greater involvement of fruit over any other food substance again owes more to its symbolic nature as a life-giving food than to its medically attributed healing powers. Luisa Cogliati Arano, for example, examines five manuscripts of “The Medieval Health Handbook *Tacuinum Sanitatis*,” versions of which can contain one hundred to two hundred entries or more “about the six things that are necessary for every man in the daily preservation of his health, about their correct uses and their effects” (6). Food and drink make up the second category although food items account for far more than one-sixth of the manuscripts and include not only fruits, herbs, and various types of animal flesh, but also vegetables, which are seriously underrepresented in all accounts in which eating has a magical result.

The frequent involvement of Christian saints in European accounts of magical healing suggests another reason for such tales to occur infrequently. Resistance to the

concept of food as a substance that magically heals could derive from the various negative attitudes of Christians toward food in general. Throughout various Christian writings, food is a substance that contaminates the human body and distracts the soul from the worship of God; thus it is rarely an appropriate means by which to restore faithful Christians to health. Especially among monastics and hermits, controlling the intake of food is one of the most important ways in which “to subjugate the powers of the flesh and to deliver the mind from distractions” (*Dictionary of the Middle Ages* 19). Indeed, some of the Desert Fathers, in their quest for purification, restricted themselves to one meager meal each day or every few days (Camporesi, *Anatomy of the Senses* 66). Even Christ himself healed the sick and raised the dead by means of a touch (e.g., Matthew 8:3) or a word (e.g., Mark 5:41, Luke 13:12, John 5:8) rather than by giving them things to eat.

Meat is one of the most consistently disparaged foods in Christian writings. Clement of Alexandria, for example, advised refraining from meat-eating because of “the linking of flesh-eating with the stimulation of passion which would disrupt the stability of Christian commitment” (Spencer 123). *The Rule of St. Benedict*, however, allows sick monks to eat meat in order to replenish their strength (36.9; see above, p. 32). This departure from the usual prohibition could explain the fact that flesh foods are not involved at all in accounts of saints and healing foods. Perhaps foods such as fruit, herbs, or miraculously transformed water are offered as a way for a person to be healed from an illness while still avoiding the contamination of meat-eating.

The Persons Involved in Magical Healing

For several reasons it is more difficult to analyze the persons involved in magical healing in the same way that I have analyzed the persons involved in magical transformations or magical conceptions. The relatively small number of accounts of healing compared to the number of transformations or conceptions is only one such factor. Another feature that distinguishes magical healing from magical transformations, in particular, is that healing is always a positive result of ingesting a magical substance, while some transformations are distinctly negative, and there are important differences in the way men and women are involved in such negative transformations. Since there are no such negative results in this present category of stories, it is not possible to distinguish between men and women in the same way.

In tales of magical transformation and magical conception there is also a difference in the level of activity of men and women—men are active while women are passive. In stories of magical healing, however, the vast majority of persons, male or female, who give healing foods to another person are rather passive, since the people who desire healing come to them for assistance. It should be noted, however, that in the few cases in which a healing food does need to be obtained and/or brought to the sick person, a man usually performs the task. Fraoch from *The Dean of Lismore's Book* is unsuccessful: he is killed by the monster that guards the healing fruit (see above, p. 68); but Stupid John heals the king's daughter and also accomplishes the other tasks that the king orders him to perform, and he eventually becomes

king himself (above, p. 68). A similar distinction is present between the ballad types A16 (The Transformed Maiden) and A17 (The Valraven). The man who offers his flesh to the bird in A16 actively pursues her, while the woman who gives up her child in A17 is approached by the raven when it is time for her to fulfill the promise she had made to him.

Women are actively involved in only two of the accounts of magical healing listed at the beginning of this chapter. Guidelüec, in Marie de France's *lai*, is an example of a woman who is active in the service of her husband, Eliduc. Guilliadun, Eliduc's lover, falls into a swoon when she hears that Eliduc has a wife and is apparently dead, and Eliduc places her in a chapel near his home. Guidelüec notices Eliduc's sadness when he returns, sends a servant to find out where he goes so that she might discover the cause of his melancholy, and thus learns of the chapel. She then goes there herself and finds Guilliadun, whom she revives with the red flower. The dutiful, self-sacrificing Guidelüec even offers to enter a convent so that her husband can marry his new love. Only one woman in all of these accounts is entirely self-serving in healing another person—the old hag who restores the son of seven mothers to life does so because she had been told that “his blood shall be as your blood” (Steel 100), and she is not very happy about having to do it.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, men far outnumber women as the most prominent characters in accounts of magical transformation and magical conception. In tales involving magical healing from eating a substance, the most important characters are generally those who offer healing foods to another person. Although

men still outnumber women in this capacity, the disparity is not as great as with accounts of transformation or conception. The fact that healing always involves performing a service for another person probably accounts for the greater involvement of women in tales of magical healing than in tales of magical transformation or magical conception, since that is a common form of heroism for women. It is also significant that of the thirteen men who give magical healing foods to others, six of them are Christian saints. Thus, their magical healings are not performed solely out of compassion and love for other humans, but certainly also in service to God and in order to show his power. In contrast, only one of the ten women who give magical healing foods is a saint. Again, this suggests that the “natural” role of women is to perform services for others while men more often need other motivations in order to do so.

Endnotes

1. The single exception to this trend is the Grimm tale “The Two Brothers,” in which a hare brings an unspecified root that returns his dead master to life.

2. J. A. MacCulloch also notes that “elsewhere this immortality seems to be dependent upon the eating of certain fragrant berries” (54).

3. However, the account does not mention that persons needed to ingest the blood in order for it to heal them. The *Annals* simply state that “the Holy Crucifix of Raphoe poured out blood from its wounds. Many distempers and diseases were healed by that blood” (O’Donovan 805).

4. These accounts of saintly involvement also indicate another way in which magical conception tales also involve a form of healing. Not only are the healing

accounts here paralleled by accounts in which European saints give a woman a substance that causes her to conceive, but also they bear a great deal of similarity to the Indian tales of magical conception, nearly all of which (as noted above, p. 50) involve a holy man or magician giving the food to the husbands of the women desiring children.

5. The fact that the food involved in the accounts of St. Ciaran, St. Coemgen, and St. Kewinus is fruit gives these substances particular potency, as the foods are associated both with the characteristics attributed to fruit and with the power of God.

6. Unfortunately, the children are killed again. See pp. 58–59 in Chapter III for the remainder of the tale.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Eating and drinking are not simply the means by which to ingest the nutrients that keep the body healthy, they are activities with wide-ranging social and psychological implications. When a person eats a particular substance, he or she is taking that substance into the body in one of the most intimate physical activities in which humans and other animals engage. Since food and drink have such broad significance in human life, it is not surprising that the power of food and drink can include magical power. Throughout this thesis I have examined some of the patterns surrounding the involvement of food and drink in numerous magical occurrences in various medieval and medieval-related tales.

Foods and Beverages

Food or drink can cause magical transformations, conceptions, or healing in three basic ways. First, the traits that are affected are associated with the food or drink that is ingested. For example, eating the flesh of a strong animal can make one stronger. As J. A. MacCulloch wrote, “from the knowledge of the nourishing power of food, sprang the idea that some food conferred the qualities inherent in it” (378). Second, the food or drink is affected by other types of power, such as magic spells or the power of a deity, and the person who ingests them is affected in turn. Third,

the food or drink is symbolic of other phenomena, such as love. These three explanations are not mutually exclusive. For example, a food that is associated with a particular characteristic, such as fertility, could be given to the person who eats it by a holy person who represents the power of a deity. In addition, the importance of food in these magical occurrences is not lessened when the magic is not solely associated with the characteristics of the food. Whatever the original source of the magic that a particular substance confers, eating and drinking in the stories discussed throughout this thesis are very immediate and direct means of affecting nearly any system of the human body.

The small number of food types that have magical results when they are ingested indicates the significance of the characteristics attributed to various foods in the vast majority of the accounts I have examined. In the various accounts discussed throughout this thesis, the most common types of food that have magical results are the flesh and blood of animals (including humans) and fruit. The frequent appearance of these foods is partially related to the fact that meat, blood, and fruit are highly symbolic substances. It also seems to reflect a hierarchy among foods that reflects human hierarchies. As suggested in Chapter II (p. 14), the rarity of certain types of foods, such as vegetables or bread, may reflect human biases against food that is characteristic of lower classes and thus “common.”

One of the most important distinctions between magical foods that is important throughout these tales is that between foods of animal origin, especially meat and blood, and foods of plant origin. These two types of food are usually involved in

very different magical occurrences. For example, plant foods never increase physical strength, while animal foods rarely cause magical conceptions or healing. Even when plant and animal foods have the same basic effect, the roles of the food in such phenomena differ. In tales of magical conception, for example, fruit is associated with fertility and life and has a symbolic connection to sperm, human “seed.” Many of the (relatively few) conception tales involving animal foods, however, are rebirth tales in which new life is generated through the death of the animal that causes pregnancy.

People

The tales that I discuss throughout this thesis are stories of heroes and of villains. These heroes and villains are themselves affected by substances they ingest, or they offer such magical foods to others, or they are born to women affected by magical foods. One pattern of heroism that I have applied to tales of magical conception, in particular, is the monomyth developed through the work of C. G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, David Leeming, and others. Many of the tales I discuss are short narratives in which the heroes do not pass through all the stages of the monomyth. However, the presence of some of those stages indicates the social and psychological significance of even these short tales.

Although both men and women can engage in heroic activities, the roles of men and women in these stories generally follow stereotypical patterns of male and female behavior. Male heroes actively involve themselves in their worlds and win rewards or extricate themselves from difficult situations by using their brains or their

brawn. Positively portrayed female characters generally follow one of two behavioral patterns: (1) they passively wait for things to happen to them rather than trying to attain the things they want for themselves, or (2) the actions they take are for the benefit of others (usually husbands) rather than themselves. This second pattern is particularly significant in that heroic men are often portrayed positively when their actions benefit themselves, but women are portrayed as selfish and deceptive under the same circumstances and receive some type of punishment.

One way in which this behavioral difference (as well as the fact that men are far more numerous than women throughout the tales) can be explained is by the distinction between culture and nature. According to this model, not only are men associated with culture and women with nature, but also culture is more highly regarded than nature. Many of these tales involve men taming nature and bringing it under the control of culture through the intimate activity of eating. Since women are associated with nature, they do not engage in this taming process but are sometimes “tamed” themselves when men give them magically transforming foods. In contrast, when women give magical foods to men, such actions are considered negative if the men do not know that magic is present.

Geographical Regions

Although the distinction between European tales and Indian tales is not a major one that I have made throughout this thesis, it is nevertheless significant. In fact, further distinctions could probably be made among the various regions of both

Europe and India, but my primary goal here was to examine patterns of food ingested and people involved. Similarities and differences between geographical regions form a part of both categories, but I have not considered them as a separate category.

As noted in the Introduction (p. 12), both the contrasts and the comparisons between European and Indian tales are significant. The contrasts are most evident in the types of food involved. Indian tales, for example, rarely include animal flesh or blood as magical foods, and of the small number that do, the majority involve human flesh or blood, substances that generally carry different cultural meanings because of the greater importance placed on human life than on the lives of other animals. Flesh and blood as magical foods are far more common in European tales. This trend likely reflects the influence of Hinduism, and its emphasis on vegetarianism, on the literature of India. European countries are primarily Christian and, although some Christian writers frowned upon meat-eating, eating the flesh of animals is generally permissible in Christianity.

The similarities between European and Indian tales are more evident in the characters in the tales in which magical foods appear. The main distinction I have emphasized with regard to the persons involved in the accounts is the difference between the roles of men and the roles of women. As already noted, men are most often actively engaged in heroic adventures, while women are most often passively influenced by events around them. This pattern holds true in both European and Indian tales. Although the two regions differ in their perceptions of which foods are appropriate magical substances, they agree to a large extent on what is appropriate male or female behavior.

Food magic is widespread throughout many cultures. The motif-indexes that I consulted listed Chinese, African, Native American, and other stories that also involve this phenomenon, but which I chose not to include in this thesis. One possible direction for further study would be to expand the principles of classification and analysis utilized in this thesis to food magic from other cultures. Indeed, since this thesis is very much an exploration into the realm of food magic, the possibilities for further study and for further types of analysis to apply are quite numerous. Whatever directions such future research should take, however, one thing should not be forgotten: the magic of food and eating and drink and drinking are not to be taken lightly.

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