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Moonstruck for a Fortnight: A New Interpretation of the Animal Bridegroom Motif

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Abstract: This article integrates structuralist methodology, evolutionary linguistics and recent developments in paleogenetics to reinterpret a wondertale, The Three Enchanted Princes. The narrative contrasts darkness with light, wilderness with cultivation and bloodthirsty animality with civilized human form, concluding by celebrating the transition to agriculture, purposeful property management and wedlock. The story's solar and patriarchal stance frames moon-governed enchantment as a state of instability and chaos to be overcome by cultivation and daylight. By examining motifs of lunar periodicity, the study identifies a recurring but under-theorised narrative pattern in which it is the moon which lies behind the transformations. We argue that wondertales can be read through a time-resistant ritual-narrative syntax in which periodic enchantment mediates shifting structures of kinship, subsistence and temporal order, allowing earlier lunar logics to persist, often in marginal or demonised form, within later symbolic systems.

Keywords: wondertale, animal bridegrooms, gender, Moon, lunar, enchantment, transformation

This article analyses The Three Enchanted Princes, a wondertale widely known across both northern and central Europe (Gašparíková 2001: 937). To contextualise the story, we draw on the five-volume Inventory of Slovak Folk Tales (1923–1931) edited by the linguist, slavist, ethnographer and folklorist Jiří Polívka (1858–1933). Our tale matches ATU 552, Girls Who Married Animals and ATU 425A, The Animal as Bridegroom. Two Slovak variants conclude with ATU 302, The Ogre's Heart in the Egg. With respect to the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature (Thompson 1955–1958) the tale illustrates motifs S221.1 – A bankrupt father sells his daughters in marriage to animals – and B640, Marriage to a person in animal form. Critically for our purposes, it also illustrates D620, Periodic transformation: a person or thing is transformed at definite intervals and D621, Animal by day; man by night.

The twelve-hour interval is applicable in only one Slovak variant. For five Slovak variants of the tale, the Motif-Index offers no adequate classificatory solution: the available temporal transformation categories (D 622 weekly, D 623 every ten days, D 624 annually or during winter) do not capture lunar periodicity. Lunar motifs appear only under A720–A789 as celestial or personified figures without attributed causal agency in enchantment and are also absent from (D0–D699) *Transformation* and (D700–D799) *Disenchantment* sections.

Polívka (1923–1931), in his original classification of 19th century folk prose manuscripts and early prints, distances his principles from those of Aanti Arne and Václav Tille and mentions the transformative agency of the Moon in variants 4B '*The Brothers-in-law who became enchanted into animals*'. Of six variants of this tale recorded in Slovakia from 1844 (Polívka 1924: 14–27) to 1934 (Gašparíková & Filová 2001), five of them specify fourteen days or a month as the pendulum of enchantment/disenchantment. The following tale summarised below was published by Pavol Dobšinský in 1881; other variants are quoted later in the text.[1]

THE THREE ENCHANTED PRINCES

One day a king who had squandered all his wealth went hunting, killing more animals than he needed. An enormous bear came crashing through the bushes, shaking the mountain with his roar. "How dare you slaughter my subjects?", he growled. "For that you will either pay with your life, or you'll promise me your eldest daughter in marriage. In fourteen days, I will come for her."

There was no escape from the bear's clutches, so the king agreed and was released. But he had no intention of keeping his promise. On the fourteenth day he placed around his mansion a heavy guard of soldiers under orders to shoot dead any animal to approach. On the agreed day, at noon, a party of noblemen came thundering into the courtyard in twelve covered coaches. Weighed down with gifts for his intended bride and her parents, the young prince requested

the hand of the king's eldest daughter. The king expressed sorrow that he had promised her to a bear who was destined to arrive at that very moment. The prince replied:

> *"Surely, you're not going to give her to an animal? And even if the bear came, you've got a heavy guard out there, which will easily get rid of him."*

At nightfall, following a lavish feast, the King's daughter was driven away by the prince. The king went hunting again, this time aiming only into the sky. He provoked the wrath of an enormous Eagle and the events were repeated. Finally, the king turned to fishing and was confronted by a huge fish. Fourteen days later, his third daughter was taken by a nobleman in the same way.

Despite the riches brought as bride-price gifts by the three mysterious noblemen, it was not long before the king had squandered everything. Afraid to hunt, the king faced starvation. But then he had a different kind of dream. Abandoning his feckless ways, he paid off his debts, hired good servants, managed his resources properly and soon had a male heir.

While playing in the palace gardens, the King's young son wondered why three of the royal flowerbeds had been abandoned to weeds. His mother explained that those wild plots were grieving for her lost daughters. Despite his mother's protests, the son set off with an army of soldiers. They headed for the mountain. As they entered a thicket, an enormous bear leaped out at them, scattering the entire army.

The prince escaped from his coach into a dark cave. There he found a lovely princess playing with two bear cubs. Recognizing her brother, she cried "Oh, you've come at a bad time! My husband will tear you to bits!" The bear suddenly appeared, roaring: "Wife, there's a stink of human here, out with him!" The young prince fainted as the bear seized his leg.

On waking up he found himself in a magnificent palace. He leaped to his feet and looked out of the window. The sun was shining and the mansion's courtyard was full of vitality. The prince was warmly welcomed:

> *"Welcome, brother-in-law, welcome, now that you've made your way to us! Let nothing in the world surprise you. Yesterday, as a bear, I'd have torn you to pieces; today I welcome you as man to man and we know you well; but what you don't yet know is that we are enchanted. Know then, that apart from your sister all of us here are bears and wild creatures when the moon comes down to earth[2]; while the moon is full, we become people, just as you see us now. Yesterday, when I had you in my paw, the hour struck, and you were able to sleep with us as if at home. And now you are also our beloved guest for a fortnight."*[3]

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On the thirteenth day, his brother-in-law warned him to leave quickly before he turned back into a bear. The prince replied "I will not leave you before you tell me how to free you from this enchantment. Tell me, or I'll die here with you." The bear gave him a tuft of his own fur and instructed him to go and seek his brother the Eagle. The hero departed but on coming at nightfall to a brook, his retinue turned into rats, mice and other ground dwelling animals, leaving him all alone through the night. Lost in the wilderness, the hero climbed to the top of a tree where he found his second sister in an eagle's nest. The sequence was repeated as before. Having departed in search of his third sister, he once again got lost in the dark wastelands, finally reaching his youngest sister who lived deep in a lake. As her fishy husband arrived, he turned back into royal human form while the lake became a beautiful palace with pleasant gardens.

On the thirteenth day, the fish told him how to break the spell by finding a golden key at the top of a tall tree. Following these instructions, the prince saw a tree rising into the clouds. But the tree was slippery, and he crashed to earth, when a knife in his pocket cut him. He used the knife to climb higher and was soon half-way up. Just then, wild boars began to dig under the tree wanting to pull it down and tear him to pieces. As he rubbed the bear's fur between his fingers, twelve bears came came to his aid and tore the boars to pieces. Just as he was reaching for the golden key, hawks came pecking at his eyes. As he rubbed the feather between his fingers, a flock of eagles scattered the hawks.

The prince reached for the golden key and made his way down with it. When he reached the bottom, the rock which he had been told to open was towering over his head. His key struck against it and it suddenly opened wide. The hero ran through the first four rooms, halting only in the fifth. One side of him was now frozen and the other burning, while snakes had bitten him back and front. As he entered the fifth room, all his ailments healed. Opening the door of the sixth room, the hero saw the sorcerer lying stretched out on a bed, a golden trumpet hanging over his head. A maiden lay there in an iron chest, neither living nor dead. From time to time, the sorcerer would prick her with his sword. The hour of twelve struck. The sorcerer rose and cried: "Will you be mine now?" "Aaah, I will not!" she stammered.

The prince leaped in and reached for the golden trumpet. The sorcerer tried to cut off his hand, but the prince withdrew his arm and blew on the trumpet. The rock wall burst to pieces as the earth opened up and the sorcerer fell all the way down. The prince found himself in a huge mansion free of spells. In place of the wastelands was a city in fertile surroundings. Inside the palace, the arisen maiden – "delightful as an angel, red-cheeked and blooming as a rose, lovable as a dove" – cooed to the prince: "Ah, I will be yours only, because you set me free!"

Into the courtyard thundered the three brothers-in-law, now in human form and accompanied by their wives and children. They thanked the young hero for their liberation and gave him the hand of their sister together with four kingdoms.

'THE COSMIC HUNT' AND ENCHANTMENT

Although motifs of enchantment, metamorphosis, initiation and gendered control in European tales have been richly studied in both structural and socio-cultural terms (Bacchilega 1999; Bettelheim 1976; Franz 1996; Haase 2004; Kérchy 2011; Kropej Telban 2015; Lacombe 2018; Liugaitė-Černiauskienė 2015; Sarakaeva & Sarakaeva 2020; Šlekonytė 2024; Talieva et al. 2025; Zipes 2019 and many others), with the exception of Cardigos (1991, 1996) and Vaz da Silva (2002, 2023) we know of few scholars conscious of the ways in which 'enchantment' in any tale rests on traditional beliefs attributing fertility, death and periodic re-birth to the waxing and waning moon.

First, we briefly outline a set of interdisciplinary points, understood as heuristic tools that help frame the narrative clusters. In some ways like genes, the 'mythemes' constitutive of wondertales are heritable characteristics that diversify into lineages in being passed down from one generation to the next. Recent palaeogenetic research has established that human genetic lineages have followed similar paths, worldwide patterns in mythology echoing the human expansion out of Africa beginning some 60 thousand years ago (Delbrassine et al. 2025). We propose, as a working hypothesis, that what might be considered the real 'Dawn of Everything' (cf. Graeber & Wengrow 2021) occurred during a major transition inside Africa which, for the first time, empowered evolving members of our species to become (to quote evolutionary linguist Cedric Boeckx), 'hunter-gatherers of words' (Boeckx 2023).

Narratives have long been understood as reflecting ritual patterns, most notably initiation ceremonies, identified as central to the social organisation of hunter-gatherer societies (Propp 2003 [1928]). Propp notes, that "a careful comparison of the folktale and the past leave no doubts about the historical roots of most folktale motifs" (1984: 126). However, Vaz da Silva warns that Propp's model needs to be "stripped of its androcentric assumptions", pointing out that "feminine enchantments are the prime mover of complex plots" (Vaz da Silva 2023: 61). As Roman Jakobson and Piotr Bogatyrev argued (1982 [1929]), while community-shared values and norms shape the ways in which stories are performed and interpreted, they do not alter the underlying narrative structure. In this vein, the comparative mythologist Julien d'Huy has applied statistical methods derived from evolutionary genetics to reconstruct lineages of mythemes. At the root of his tree is an ancient palaeolithic narrative – 'The Cosmic Hunt' – concerning a wounded, bleeding animal which escapes its pursuers by leaping up into the sky. In an Iroquois variant, three hunters pursue a bear whose streaming blood turns the autumn leaves red. To escape, the Great Bear rises into the sky as the constellation Ursa Major (Berezkin 2005; d'Huy 2016, 2013). We can find many other indications of periodicity or shape-shifting in rock art across the world, with women's monthly changes a recurrent underlying theme (Power 2004). A familiar example is an

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Upper Palaeolithic artist's depiction of Bison-Woman (Leroi-Gourhan 1971) as she flits between her animal and human form:



While d'Huy restricts his analyses to oral narratives, we ask how ancient mythemes might relate to recurrent hunter-gatherer ritual traditions. Of significance to the cosmic hunt is the fact that across much of Africa, bleeding animals are likened to menstruating women (Power 2015, 2017, Watts 2024). With menstrual metamorphoses in mind, it seems likely that the wounded bear in Julien d'Huy's 'Cosmic Hunt' is no ordinary hunted animal but a menstruating woman retreating into seclusion, conceptualised metaphorically as escaping into the sky.[4] Archaeological evidence for the use of red ochre pigments indicates that the transition to symbolic culture in our species culminated in Africa some 160,000 years ago (Dapschauskas et al. 2022; Knight & Power & Watts 1995). According to evolutionary anthropologist Camilla Power, the outcome can be modelled as a 'source cosmology' from which later symbolic patterns may be derived (Power 2017). The hypothesis is that women took the first step by using blood-coloured cosmetics to mark their bodies as 'sacred' or 'taboo' (Power 1999, 2009, 2010; Power & Watts & Knight 2024; Watts 2009). When women ceremonially marked their bodies blood-red each new moon, they would seclude themselves from everyday life and especially from all contact with the opposite sex. In recent years this theoretical approach has also inspired field archaeologists in Southern Africa to interpret their spectacular findings of rock art in novel ways (Vowles & Parkington 2025).

A recurrent hunter-gatherer belief is that the moon causes menstruation by visiting women each month, barring men's access to their wives. More generally, it would be hard to find any traditional culture which did not link menstruation with the moon (Knight 1991).[5] Menarcheal rituals in time with the moon have been documented across a wide range of African hunter-gatherers to this day (Power 2015; Watts 2024). A striking illustration from the Congo Basin is the Bayaka concept of *ekila* as described by Jerome Lewis. *Ekila* refers to a polysemic cluster revolving around not only menstruation but also supernatural potency, hunting luck, vitality, conservation and taboo (Knight & Lewis 2017). Bayaka men feel twinges of jealousy when the moon makes their wives bleed, viewing him with dark humour as a rival in love – as they put it – 'women's biggest lover is the moon' (Lewis 2008). Among Hadza, the moon is 'the brother of all women', causing women to menstruate in synchrony around

dark moon (Power 2015, Woodburn 2025). Since menstrual blood is both linked with and counterposed to the blood shed by men when hunting animals, it seems unsurprising that ritual respect for a menstruating woman should spill over into similar respect for animals wounded in the hunt (Testart 1986).

A leading figure in hunter-gatherer research, James Woodburn, was among the first to report that when a woman menstruates, her blood is likened to that of a wounded game animal: "the whole process of hunting big game ... is symbolically linked to the whole process of female reproduction ... Activities in one process are mystically dangerous for activities in the other. A man whose wife is menstruating cannot hunt big game because the poison of his arrows is believed to lose its efficacy. If his wife is pregnant, he cannot walk on the tracks of a wounded game animal because this will cause it to recover from its wounds. Reciprocally, if a man whose wife is pregnant laughs at or mocks a dead but not yet dismembered carcass ..., the unborn baby will be born with defects which resemble the characteristics of the dead animal" (Woodburn 1982: 188). Much subsequent research confirms that among the Hadza, menstrual cyclicity is understood as exerting a powerful influence over men's hunting luck (Watts 2024). When a girl menstruates for the first time, the event is celebrated with the public announcement that she has 'shot a zebra' with an arrow, *//akakwa dongo* (Power 2015: 351). It is striking to find the same concept among diverse Kalahari hunter-gatherers, among whom a girl who is having her first menstruation suddenly metamorphoses into a hunter who has just 'shot an eland'.[6]

Lévi-Strauss suggested that the 'cosmic dimension' of his entire set of myths revolves around "a fundamental category, that of periodicity, which modulates human existence by assigning it a certain duration, and by establishing, within this duration, the major physiological rhythms which have their seat in the female organism" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 506). 'The Origin of the Spots on the Moon', according to Lévi-Strauss, is representative of a 'vast group' of similar stories which appear in virtually identical forms 'from the extreme north to the extreme south of the new world'. While pointing this out, Lévi-Strauss informs the reader of 'a fact of supreme importance' – that all the myths of the Americas are logically derivable from this one simple tale. "We might even say", he writes, "that it constitutes the most plausible initial state for the whole series of transformations" (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 218–219; see also Siskind 1973).

The final myth in Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* is entitled 'the Two Moons'. Told by the North American Ojibwa Indians, it concerns a conflict between a man's mother – described as 'an old hag' – and his young wife to whom he gives choice pieces of meat. Jealous of her attractive daughter-in-law, the old woman forces her young rival to take off her clothes and tie herself to a swing. When this is in full motion and sweeping over a precipice, the hag cuts the cords and lets her rival drop into the lake below before stealing her clothes. The young woman's death turns out to be deceptive – beneath the water she marries an aquatic monster dwelling in the depths. For Lévi-Strauss, this concludes

his demonstration that the myths of the Americas amount in the final analysis to 'One Myth Only', their shared structure a pendulum swinging between full moon and dark – domains as far apart from one another as kinship from marriage, death from life, heaven from earth (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 600). This was an achievement, but although Lévi-Strauss attempted to elucidate the core syntax – the invariant logic or 'elementary structure' – underlying the world's magical tales, he did not provide this structure in a form amenable to empirical testing, leaving space for later, more explicit modelling efforts.

THE TIME-RESISTANT RITUAL-NARRATIVE SYNTAX

Although Lévi-Strauss focused on magical tales from the Americas, he stressed that he might equally have extended his analysis to include European fairy-tales (Lévi-Strauss 1995: 184–185). Jiří Polívka's findings and correspondence with Roman Jakobson and Piotr Bogatyrev (Zelenka 2008) places him within the structuralist lineage that later inspired Claude Lévi-Strauss, all of them pursuing, through different methods, the reconstruction of original narrative forms. In 1991, following an exhaustive re-analysis of *Mythologiques*, Knight built on Lévi-Strauss' findings to propose a more explicitly formulated model of invariance, intended to be comparatively testable in the light of mythic and ritual details from symbolic traditions across the world. His model (Knight 1987, 1991, 1997) – fleshed out by Camilla Power and Ian Watts (1997, 1999; Watts 2005), Isabel Cardigos (1996), Francisco Vaz da Silva (2023) and Deon Liebenberg (2020a, b) – is explicit. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, its new and old moons are not content-free categories but alternating phases of the observable moon. What Knight, Power and Watts (1995) term the 'time-resistant syntax of ritual and myth' is a heuristic tool developed to explore recurrent symbolic patterns across myth, ritual and narrative summarised as follows:

Enchantment ON	**Enchantment OFF**
Young/waxing/dark moon	Old/waning/full moon
Animal identity or skin	Human form
Other world / Cave	This world / Mansions
Beyond reach	Within reach
Darkness	Light/Sunshine
Blood	Fire
Wet	Dry
Raw	Cooked
Stink	Fragrance
Hunger/being eaten	Feasting on cooked food
Thunderous noise	Conversational speech
Gender reversal	Fertile sex

Menstruation/Seclusion	Ovulation/Availability
Kinship/Siblings	Marriage

In applying this model to the interpretation of Portuguese fairy tales Cardigos notes that "the 'male' view values one side of the female cycle alone – the 'ovular', fertile and male-responsive aspect of woman. The 'menstrual' phase is labelled as negative and alien. But it is also powerfully magical and corresponds to the sphere of enchantment in which the adventure in fairytales takes place" (Cardigos 1996: 41). Referring to *The Girls Who Married Animals*, Cardigos notes that the metamorphosis common to such tales "takes shape not in the girls but in the strange beings who are their husbands." She continues: "There is a weighty tradition that assigns to the snake or to the moon the role of woman's first husband, this partner being thought to be the cause of menstruation..." (Cardigos 1991: 66). The 'strange beings' in our tale are the enchanted princes, who are referred to as *divoky*, 'the wild ones'. A related stem *div* also denotes awe, miracle and ultimate revelation while *deva* and *dievka* is maiden. The lexemes *divoký, div, diviť sa, deva* and *dievka* across Slavic languages delineate a shared semantic field linking wilderness, metamorphosis and enchantment within the narrative lexicon of fairy tales.[7]

Marriage to an animal is already implicit within the 'time-resistant syntax', dependent on lunar phase. So is the metaphor of the periodically descended moon as 'women's biggest lover', who appears to her in animal skin. In Amazonia, the menstrual maiden may emerge from her seclusion as a Jaguar, whereas across Eurasia and North America she may instead take the form of a Bear. Whatever the species, the creature concerned can be interpreted as the Guardian Spirit or Master (or Mistress) of the game animals. As they act out 'wrong species', performers strive not simply to resemble their animals – but quite literally to *become* them. As Nurit Bird-David explains: "In the animistic cosmos beings are invoked as participants and members of a single community of sharing. They cannot be depicted and looked at as objects. They have to be invoked and engaged with as co-subjects. They cannot be looked at; rather one has to look with them sharing a perspective" (2006: 48, also 1999).

ANIMAL BRIDEGROOMS AS 'WRONG' SPECIES, 'WRONG' SEX, 'WRONG' TIME FOR A FORTNIGHT

Narratives of courtship commonly revolve around the search for a partner who is 'right' in every respect: the 'right' species, the 'right' sex, and the 'right' time – conditions that correspond to a state of disenchantment. Knight, Power and Watts (1995; Power & Watts & Knight 2024) argue that in Darwinian models of signalling, for females to signal refusal they present themselves as of the 'wrong' species, the 'wrong' sex, and the 'wrong' time – being animals, males, and bleeding. We shall now use this model heuristically, as "a tool with

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which to probe binary oppositions that are no longer simply those of gender" (Cardigos 1996: 41), focusing on Slovak variants that explicitly invoke lunar time.

In our narrative, when the King faces the Bear's wrath, the ferocious creature is enraged by the hunter King's disrespect toward 'a whole heap' of his unnecessarily killed subjects. It is as if the King was encountering the Guardian Spirit of all land-dwelling creatures. Interpreted through the lens of the 'time-resistant ritual-narrative syntax', this Bear can be read as the 'biggest lover' of the King's eldest daughter, who takes for granted that she belongs to him. We can interpret his ground-shaking roar as a marker of *'wrong' species*, *'wrong' sex*, *'wrong' time*.

It is the awesome Bear himself who explains that it is on the darkest night each month – "when the moon comes down to earth" – that his subjects turn into wild beasts. This suggests that the King may be understood as hunting at a forbidden time – dark moon. In doing so, the foolish hunter is defying a prohibition against shedding the blood of animals when women may be shedding their own blood. But this prohibition lasts for only fourteen days. "While the moon is bright," continues the Bear, "we become people, just as you see us now." The oldest known Slovak version from 1844 is no less precise.

Each spell lasts until full moon, having been cast at new moon. It is at full moon that masters of the three animal kingdoms as well as their retinue and dwelling resume their human form: "When the moon is full, they turn back into noblemen."[8]

Lunar timekeeping is a central organising feature of this story, but we soon see that it is not just a question of gradations in luminosity. The to-and-fro alternations are sudden, as if a switch were being flicked: "On the fourteeenth day, all was calm, not even a breeze blew from the sea but suddenly, right on the stroke of noon, a party of noblemen in twelve covered coaches came thundering into the courtyard." Every enchantment or disenchantment occurs suddenly, "as the hour strikes", or as a border is encountered on each fateful fourteenth day. Three times, then, the gullible king is fooled into surrendering his daughter to a beast who has temporarily assumed human form. The king has military might at his disposal, but this counts as nothing when up against the forces of the moon.

In the 1844 version (Polívka 1924: 15), the Bear who demands the king's daughter in marriage promises to come for her not in fourteen days but a full month later. By that stage the moon will once again be dark. In the 1881 version, as we have seen, there is a celebration and wedding feast with gifts for the maiden's parents. Two weeks later is the ritually appropriate time – marked by the bride's availability and the sudden appearance of brothers-in-law. Now the noble suitor comes in human form, implying that it must be full moon. Dark moon is not the correct time for feasting or for a successful wedding. In the 1844 version, sure enough, there is no celebratory feast. Instead, we learn that

four weeks following the King's encounter with the Bear, a roll of black cloth suddenly unrolls from a coach straight to the princess's room. It wraps her up and takes her away. A roll of black cloth which seizes hold of maidens is yet another metaphor for Dark Moon. In this case, the King returns from his disastrous hunt to find his chambers filled with brideprice gold without encountering any human. The same happens with the royal eagle and subsequently with the royal fish.

Each time, the bridegroom comes as a '*wrong species*' – he is in an animal form. When the King's son finds himself with his sister in the bear's cave, his entire army and retinue have just been turned into animals. When his sister sees him, we hear '*wrong time*' – the time of the dark moon – when she welcomes him with the words: "At the wrong hour you come!" She fears that her enchanted bear-husband will eat him alive. When the wild beast storms in, he roars: "Wife, there's a stink of human here, out with him! "[9] As so often, it is the stench of blood which arouses the monster to swallow his victims alive. With his leg in the bear's jaw, the terrified King's son loses consciousness. We may interpret his experience of death as one of several stages he must endure to complete his initiation. But following such temporary death comes resurrection. In terms of the 'time-resistant syntax', the landscape switches suddenly from 'Enchantment ON' to 'Enchantment OFF' – from savagery and darkness to the very different world of sunlight, good manners and civilisation. The prince is warmly welcomed by the Bear, metamorphosed back into human form. Half a moon later, he warns the young prince that he must leave because 'the hour is approaching' when he will turn back into a bear. The same applies for the servants turning into small creatures, as well as the whole environment: "As soon as he left the castle, it immediately turned back into a mountain, because the moon was stepping down."[10]

The pulse of enchantment can be heard not only as humans metamorphose into animals and then resume human form. The wondertale speaks to us equally in the voices of trees, flowers, plants and mountains. In the opening sections, the forest is just wilderness – a place where people, even kings and whole armies, get lost. It is in the image of a cultivated garden that the tale spells out its message. In the first half of the story, the characters lead a hunter-gatherer's lifestyle and perceive the forest as a source of fertility taken for granted. The second part, however, sets out to establish an alternative reality in which garden weeds for the first time play a role. With the onset of 'civilisation', wilderness becomes viewed as barren, the new assumption being that fertility can be sustained only through cultivation. In a garden, anything not artificially planted counts as a weed. In the tale, it is when the young prince notices weeds in what should be a flowerbed that he learns that he once had sisters. Abandoned seedbeds ('*zapustené, spustnuté hriadky*') are patches of soil left neglected, allowed to run wild. So, the three sisters themselves are metaphorically weeds, living not in brightly lit mansions but in the dark and

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in the wild – the first in a bear's cave, the second in an eagle's nest and the youngest deep under the water. To arrive at such places, the king's son must lose his normal bearings as well as his way back into the wilderness. At last, he aims to find the key to the cave of his enchanted bride.

In the first half of the tale, there is no notion of keys and fences. When property is not accumulated or privately owned, there is no need for locks. However, with the transition to civilisation, valuables are guarded. Only after the King had a different kind of dream, he abandoned his 'feckless' ways and managed his resources 'properly'. With arrival of his male heir the story changes dramatically. Marriage, within this new narrative logic, is refigured as wedlock and as an enduring institution. This contrasts with the hunter-gatherer tradition of bridervice, which permits a woman to separate from her partner whenever she likes or when visited by her biggest lover. Likewise in our story, in the first part, as if the King accepted that each of his daughters vanished, '*skapali*' with '*divoky*', the wild. This expression is used if an animal dies suddenly. It is striking that the prince appears ready to die in the same manner, as the wild, and pay a price that his father in his former life had refused.

As the prince attempts to climb up, he slips and falls. He finds he has been cut by his knife, and it is this which he uses to reach the top.[11] While high up in the tree, the hero is threatened from below and above – by wild boars who attempt to fell the tree and by hawks who try to peck out his eyes. Instead of being torn to pieces, however, it is the wild animals who suffer this fate. This happens because the hero can now rub a tuft of bear's fur to summon help from twelve bears who tear the wild boars to pieces and rub eagle feathers to summon eagles who will scatter the hawks. The fur of the bear, feathers of the eagle and finally secret knowledge from the fish help the hero not only to survive but to remain in touch with the wild as a source of supernatural potency.

Although the message of the civilising hero is that he can break the monthly spell, in truth he can do it only with the help of animal brothers-in-law who provide him with gifts consisting of parts of their own bodies. In this, we see how the wild animals are turned against others within their own class, mammals against other mammals, birds against birds. The civilised world can produce many things but not enchantment, so this must be extracted from the wild for use against the wild. Fur is set against fur, feather against feather. Instead of acting as guardian spirits of the wild animals, the three enchanted siblings are now assisting the solar hero in defeating his animal opponents and obtaining the symbol of the new order – the golden key. This key will eventually unlock the cave, destroying it and replacing the space by future property, a palace.

The plane on which the story unfolds now shifts from horizontal to vertical. The horizontal plane fits easily with those sections of the story still under the lunar spell. It is only when a solar character wrests supremacy that he must establish himself as high above his rival, the defeated moon, soon to be hurled down into the underworld. It is not until the *finale* of our story that we meet

in person the dark moon being demonised as a devil. As if he has imprisoned womankind not in ordinary seclusion but locked permanently inside an iron chest kept in the interior of an impenetrable wall of rock.

Once the golden key has magically opened up the rock, the prince finds himself falling through the utmost extremes of hot and cold, sickness and health, terror and joy. Finally, the prince reaches the deepest chamber, within which a sorcerer imprisons a young maiden, poking her from time to time with his sword. Here the narrative seeks to justify permanent wedlock – by claiming in effect that the moon wants the same. It is as if the Sorcerer who keeps poking and asking, "Will you be mine?" was yearning for permanent shedding of blood, without end. The maiden's answer to this prospect is "No". Despite being poked periodically by her tormentor's sword, then, she rejects the descended moon, as if she was married neither in this world nor the next. As the narrative puts it, ever since her enchantment she has been neither dead to this world nor alive to the other. Her enchantment is specified – as being poked in a cave, from time to time. However, the animals explained to the prince that their lunar spell is bound to her seclusion.

In the 1844 version of our tale, it is an Ogre who has control over the maiden. Appropriately for a moon lover, this figure contains vast quantities of blood. After seizing his animal soul, when the prince cuts off his head and chops him to pieces, this blood "spurts out for five fathoms... the blood streams out like a brook..."[12] (Polívka 1924: 21). From the Ogre the hero obtains keys along with an egg; inside this is a magic golden ring with which the prince bangs onto the marble and liberates the maiden as well as his sisters from wilderness. In the 1881 version, the magic of gold is emphasized when the hero sounds a blast on a golden trumpet in order to lift the lunar spell. Noise in both cases functions in a reversed symbolism: rather than announcing the onset of enchantment, it signals termination of magic. The logic of 'symbolic reversal' (Knight & Lewis 2017; Power 2009) is further underscored by a transfer of ownership of this noise-making instrument from the sorcerer to the hero. The thunderbolts summoned by the golden trumpet (or golden ring) can be read as sonic manifestations of disenchantment. Thus, the King's son reconfigures the lunar template of the narrative by interrupting its rhythm. The sorcerer's final attempt to render the hero bloody – and thereby symbolically unavailable for marriage – may signal his effort to reassert the older regime of periodic transformation. That this attempt fails confirms that a solar regime has been decisively established.

This shift is not limited to the episode of disenchantment but extends into the tale's closing formulae, which present themselves as an emancipatory guarantee of fertility, civilisation and accessibility. The narrative explicitly announces a new order in which magic spells no longer operate and in which movement to and from weeds, wastelands, mountains, dark caves, and encounters with bears, eagles, monstrous aquatic beings, devils and ogres are brought to an

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end. Instead, the story culminates in the image of a shining city with palaces, where the animal bridegroom's sister is compared to an angel, a rose, a doe, and a dove.[13] These images articulate a transformed epistemic horizon: a world is no longer governed by cyclical descent into wilderness "when the moon comes down to earth", but by permanent accessibility. The positive valuation of 'getting stuck' (Power & Watts & Knight 2024; Knight 2024), in 'happily ever after' marks the termination of regular return to the biggest lover's wilderness. In this sense, the tale's ending confirms the conversion of cyclical oscillation into the enduring order of a non-reversible settlement incompatible with lunar timekeeping (Sims 2006; Knight 2022).

DISCUSSION

We recognise that the reinterpretation of wondertales proposed here represents only one theoretical lens among many. Postmodern, ecological, feminist, literary-historical, psychoanalytic or other readings may foreground different dimensions of the same material, yielding not necessarily incompatible interpretations. Rather than treating wondertales as static reflections of social structure or as symbolic residues awaiting allegorical decoding, we view them as ever-changing expressions of a world-wide underlying structure that stubbornly resists historical time (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1955, 1978, 1981; Knight & Power & Watts 1995). Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from structuralist folklore studies, evolutionary linguistics and paleogenetics, we propose that recurring motifs of periodic transformation and enchantment encode competing temporal regimes. These regimes do not map directly onto historical stages but preserve narratively organised knowledge about social reproduction, kinship and environmental relations. In this perspective, lunar periodicity functions as a structuring principle of narrative time, one that persists even where later solar or seasonal orders come to dominate.

Following Dundes's critique of typological indexing (1997) we propose that our analysis might be applied beyond tales of enchanted spouses or relatives (ATU 400–459) to a wider range of Tales of Magic (ATU 300–559). References to the moon in the Slovak wondertales function as indicators of periodic transformation. Enchantment, in this sense, is embedded in a period that is not arbitrary. In the corpus of Slovak magic tales alone there are several other tales and their variants in which monthly or bi-weekly transformation plays a decisive role in conjunction with motifs of bleeding, death and resurrection. In Polívka's Inventory alone, at least ten other distinct tales[14] and their numerous variants refer to the presence of the lunar rhythm. For example, the hero discards his bloody clothes once a month while climbing the cherry tree for three months; the dragon comes for the maiden after two weeks; the hero cuts down the enchanted trees in synchrony with the lunar cycle; the hero's mare fattens within two weeks; the maiden marries two weeks from when the spell is

broken; and the journey across the Red Sea lasts either a month or two weeks, depending on the counterpart figure waiting on the opposite bank.

Folkloristic as well as ethnographic data from contemporary and historically documented hunter-gatherer societies serve as a set of comparative references for possible symbolic links between motifs of lunar periodicity, bleeding, hunting and social organisation. The assumption is that comparable social and ecological constraints may generate analogous symbolic solutions in their narrative form. In this context, the concept of a time-resistant ritual-narrative syntax is advanced as a heuristic model with predictive capacity, suited to the close reading of wondertales structured around periodic transformation and animal-human metamorphosis.

While motif-index typologies have long accounted for diurnal cycles of transformation, lunar forms of periodically enchanted kin have remained largely implicit. However, the persistence of such patterns across numerous Slovak tales suggests that wondertales retain narrative models of transformation that are resistant to surface-level variation. Our reinterpretation of The Three Enchanted Princes may therefore be read as a form of narrative mediation through which opposition between a hunter-gatherer mode of life and an order grounded in cultivation, property and marital permanence are negotiated. The tale attempts to justify transformation from 'animal' to 'human', from 'wilderness' to 'civilisation' and from 'barrenness' to 'fertility' as natural and irreversible. However, the lunar syntax persists, demonised but structurally intact, within the very narrative that claims to overcome it.

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NOTES

1 Abbreviated from Pavol Dobšinský, Samuel Ormis, and Karol Venich (1973 [1881]: 391–406). In his extensive *Simple National Slovak Tales*, Dobšinský (1828–1885) drew on material from his own collections and over 400 tales gathered by more than fifty collectors. In each tale, he refers to the name of the collector and, in some cases, provides information on its local narrator, place of origin and dialect. Dobšinský belonged to the mythological school, portraying Slovak magic tales as pre-slavic in origin and archaic in form, owing to the isolation of less accessible mountainous regions (Dobšinský 1871; Bužeková 2020). A literary scholar, Piroščáková (2022), née Pácalová (2010) draws attention to editorial changes of the source material introduced by the first generation of ethnographers. However, according to Milan Leščák (1986) and Bocánová & Žeňuchová (2019), these editions do respect the oral sources both thematically and linguistically. With respect to other known variants, Dobšinský's archaicisms did not change the fairytale's morphology (Propp 2003 [1928]). Athough a variant of Three Enchanted Princes can be also found in Basile's 1634 collection of folk tales, *Pentameron*, Francisco Vaz da Silva (2023: 131) points out that this text cannot be the source of the oral tradition because it was written in Neapolitan and therefore not widely known elsewhere.

2 The phrase 'when the moon comes down to earth' refers to the period of the new or dark moon, when the moon descends below the horizon and is absent from the night sky.

3 "Vedz teda, že krem tvojej sestry sme tu všetci medvede a divoky, kým je mesiac na schode; kým je mesiac v svetle, ľudia sme, ako nás vidíš. Včera, keď už mal som ťa v dlabe, udrela hodina, a ty mohol naspať si sa u nás ako doma. A teraz si aj naším milým hosťom na dva týždne." (Dobšinský 1973: 399 [1881]).

4 Support for this idea comes from myths about 'star wives' or 'star husbands', including an instructive story recorded in Los Angeles County in the early nineteenth century. It tells of seven sisters who punish their deceptive, cheating husbands by rising into the sky to become stars (Reid 1939).

5 Languages across the world agree in likening menstruation to a wound caused by the Moon on his monthly visits. In Slovak, a woman who is menstruating may say that she is 'wounded' or that she is having 'mesiačiky', 'little moons'.

6 Indicating great antiquity, the Eland Bull dance in almost identical forms was traditionally performed among Kalahari people from widely divergent language families, among them K'xa (formerly Northern Khoisan), Khoe (formerly Central Khoisan) and Tuu (formerly Southern Khoisan) (Sands & Jones 2023: 7; Keeney & Keeney 2013).

7 The Sanskrit's root *dev* is also present in English: *devotion*, *divine*, *devil*.

8 The older variants referenced in the text can be found in Polívka (1924: 14–27), Fairy tales with supernatural elements II, 4B, The Brothers-in-law who became enchanted into animals, (Rozprávky s živly nadprirodzenými II, 4B Švagrovia, zakliati na zvieratá).

9 Readers familiar with English fairy stories will hear 'Fee, fi, fo, fum!' at this point (Opie & Opie 1980).

10 Reference to fourteen days' periodicity of enchantment is also present in a variant from 1934, in a large collection of Slovak folk prose (1928-1947), supervised by Frank Wolmann (Gašparíková & Filová 2001, Vol. 2, page 827).

11 Although the hero's bleeding is not explicitly mentioned, it is hard to avoid the implication that the wound caused by his knife contributes to his success. Losing blood from the nose, ears, arm or penis is a recurrent feature of male rituals of initiation (Bettelheim 1955; Knight 1991). According to an early version of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, for example, when Jack's grandmother throws out one of his beans it takes root, whereupon 'the Sprout of it Jumped out of the Earth and grew so quick that it gave Jack a Fillip on the Nose and made him bleed furiously....' (Fenwick 1796).

12 "Drjék sa zpne, a krv na pět sjáhov vysíkne, ... z těla krv potokom sa valila..." (Polívka 1924 [1844]: 21).

13 "povstalá panna, utešená ako anjelik, červená a prekvitajúca už ako ruža, bystrá ako srnka, milá ako holubička" (Dobšinský 1973: 405 [1881]; Polívka 1924 [1844]: 22).

14 *Chorý kráľ, Panna z rosy počatá, Laktibrada, Škrupinový zámok, Tri stromy, O Petríkovi, Zakliata hora, Laktibrada, Valibuk, Svetská krása, Mahuliena zlatá panna, Slncova panička* (Polívka 1923–1924).

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