

Research Article

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The Transgender Imagination in Folk Narratives: The Case of ATU 514, “The Shift of Sex”[#]

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Abstract: “The Shift of Sex” is a folktale type that begins with a young woman dressing in men’s clothes to have an adventure, and ends when the protagonist is magically transformed into a man, marries a woman, and lives happily ever after. My goal in this project is to analyze the 26 variants as a group in order to illuminate what they communicate about gender and transgender. ATU 514 has been treated as an aberration or anomaly, a tale that defies categorization. Several feminist scholars have argued that the climactic change of gender reinforces heteronormativity and sexist, patriarchal gender roles. More recent scholarship notes the tale’s transgender possibility, scholarship I build on in this project. My analysis identified two significant patterns in the tales: first, every variant has a happy ending for the protagonist, representing a narrative reward for a character who could variously be read as transgender or gender transgressive. Second, the tales are encoded with details, characters, and events that tell a “secondary narrative” that describes the threat of the patriarchy. I argue that the protagonist of ATU 514 is a transgressive character with transgender capacity and that the tale approves and rewards these transgressions through the concluding happily-ever-after.

Keywords: fairy tale, folktale, folklore

Introduction

“The Shift of Sex”¹ is a folktale type that has been continuously told for about 3,000 years, across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas, although its variants are not well known, and it rarely appears in published collections. Like many folk tales, this one begins with a young woman dressing in men’s clothes to have an adventure – but this story ends when the protagonist is magically transformed into a man, marries a woman, and they live happily ever after. My goal in this project is to analyze the 26 variants I have found as a group in order to illuminate what they communicate about gender and transgender. ATU 514 has been examined by folklorists over the years, usually very briefly. It has been treated as an aberration or anomaly, a tale that defies categorization. Several feminist scholars have argued that the climactic change of gender

[#] Trans sensitivity reading provided by Charles Ledbetter (@MostlyCharles).

¹ Folktales are categorized in Hans-Jörg Uther’s *Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, better known as the ATU Index (after the surnames of the three folklorists who created and then updated the index: Aarne (1910), Thompson (1928 and 1961), and Uther (2004)). The system organizes folk narratives based on motif: that is, a narrative event in a tale. All tales with similar motifs are categorized into a tale type. Within these tale types, an individual tale is called a variant. The tale type that is the subject of this article is cataloged in the index as ATU 514, “The Shift of Sex.”

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reinforces heteronormativity and sexist, patriarchal gender roles. More recent scholarship has disputed these claims and notes the tale's transgender possibility, scholarship I build on in this project. My analysis identified two significant patterns: first, every single variant of this tale has a happy ending for the protagonist, representing a narrative reward for a character who could variously be read as transgender or gender transgressive. Second, the tales are encoded with details, characters, and events that tell a "secondary narrative" buried beneath the first. This secondary narrative describes the very real threat of the patriarchy. Based on these findings I argue that the protagonist of ATU 514 is a transgressive character with transgender capacity and that the tale approves and rewards these transgressions through the concluding happily-ever-after.

I hope this collection and analysis will be of help to future folklore scholars; moreover, I want to draw attention to these strange and beautiful stories for lovers of folktales as well as those seeking out happy endings for characters with non-normative experiences of gender. To this end, I have created an online bibliography of English-language variants of ATU 514,² many of which are available to read free online, and I strongly encourage readers to seek them out and indeed to add to this collection more variants and translations. It brings me comfort and joy that this radical story has accompanied humanity for generations, being told and retold across the world. I believe that because of its transgressions of assigned gender and gender roles, this tale type creates a space in which radical, non-normative, and transgender selfhoods are not only possible but also deserving of happy endings.

To establish a collection of variants of ATU 514, I began with the ATU and the AT indexes, which list variants in 43 languages. I have located 26 English-language variants, originating in 16 languages. I made use of the regional tale-type indexes noted in the indexes, and found others through perusal of collections of regional tales, and yet others through library keyword searches, as well as mining previous analyses of ATU 514, some of which pointed me to new or hard-to-find variants. Hungarian storyteller and folktale scholar Csenge Virág Zalka generously translated for me two important variants from the Ossetian *Nart Sagas*, and I was given permission by the University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center to reproduce several Finnish variants – all of these can be found in English for the first time in my MA thesis.³

Once I had collected these variants, I broke each down into episodes (a "chunk" of the narrative – e.g., "protagonist must accomplish three impossible tasks") and compared the narrative structures of each. Each variant includes the following three components: (1) a woman dressed as a man, (2) the change of gender, and (3) a happy ending. Beyond this, there is quite a lot of variety in the structure: some overlap with other tale types, including a whole set of additional episodes, and many of the tales include unique details from the cultures in which they were told and collected: religious traditions or language; marriage practices; and the identity of the being who changes their gender, who is described variously as a giant, an ogre, a witch, a jinn, a jinni, a Brahman, or the goddess Isis, just to mention a few. I grouped the tales based on shared episodes, and noted that they can be divided into six distinct narrative structures: "The Borrowed Gender," "The Mother's Deception," "The Youngest Daughter," "Trickster Hero," "The Hero and the Princess," and "Magical Transformation." So that the reader has a sense of the tales and their variety, I summarize the narrative structure of each group.

1. *The Borrowed Gender*

"Sikhandin" from <i>Mahabharata</i>	India	800–400 BCE
"An Indian Princess Borrows a Jinni's Sex" from <i>A Thousand and One Nights</i>	Middle East	700–900 AD
"The Princess and the Div who Changed Sexes" from "The Rose of Bakawali"	India	1100 AD

² Available at <https://psychezready.com/atu-514-bibliography/>.

³ "The Shift of Sex" overlaps episodes with several other tale types; this is extremely common in folk narratives. Tale types include ATU 884, 884B, 884B*. In my MA thesis (Ready, "She Was Really the Man She Pretended to Be"), I examine these similar tale types in depth. For the present analysis, I have focused only on narratives where an assigned-female protagonist transforms into a man.

The tales in this variant group are some of the oldest tales in this collection and are all literary, although it is assumed that the *Mahabharata* and *A Thousand and One Nights* were collections of folktales. Clouston (1889) notes that the gender-changing protagonist is common in Middle Eastern popular narratives (xxxv), and Brown (1927) notes that there are several very similar tales in Eastern literature (10). These narratives begin because the mother or parents of the protagonist decide to raise their child as a boy – in a few stories, it is because the father wants a boy and has threatened to kill the mother or the child if it is a girl. The protagonist is raised as a boy and is eventually arranged to be married to a girl, but escapes to the forest and meets a magical being. The protagonist begs to be transformed into a boy, and the magical being agrees to swap his gender with the protagonist, but only temporarily – it must be returned at some point. But while they are a woman, the magical being sullies their gender in some way – engaging in taboo behavior like pre-marital sex. The protagonist is therefore allowed to remain a man forever, and he and his wife live happily ever after. The unique elements of these variants are, first, the reason for cross-dressing – the parents make this choice, rather than the protagonist. Second, the change of gender that takes place in these variants is not a curse, but an exchange, an agreement. As in other variant groups, the protagonist engages in appropriate masculine behavior and therefore narratively earns his gender.

2. *The Mother's Deception*

"Iphis and Ianthe" from Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>	Greece	0–100 AD
"The Weeping Pomegranate and the Laughing Quince"	Turkey	1946 AD
"The King with Nine Daughters"	Albania	1926–1929
"The Girl Who Changed into a Boy"	Armenia	1913

This variant group includes three folktales and one literary: "Iphis and Ianthe" from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is commonly understood that Ovid's epic poem is actually a collection of contemporary folktales rather than his individual creation, however, so it is likely that this tale was drawn from folk sources, rather than the other way around. These variants begin with a father who tells his pregnant wife he will kill their child if born a girl, so the mother dresses the child in boy's clothes. The protagonist leaves home and becomes a successful soldier, with the help of a magical horse, and weds a princess. These folktales all include a subplot that the princess's father severely restricts her freedom and, in some variants, gives her away as if she were property (Downing 83). The protagonist must succeed at three impossible tasks, the last of which is a fight against a monster. The monster puts the change of gender curse on the protagonist: "if you are a woman, be now a man, and if you are a man, be now a woman," and he returns home a man, marries his bride, and they live happily ever after.

"Iphis and Ianthe" is unique because, since it is a literary creation, the reader is privy to the characters' emotions and experiences in ways that we rarely get in folktales. In this poem, Iphis is desperately in love with the princess Ianthe, and her lamentations to the gods are full of longing and grief that she cannot marry her. She prays to be turned into a man, and the Goddess Isis descends during the wedding ceremony to do so. The couple live happily ever after.

3. *The Youngest Daughter*

"The Girl Who Became a Boy"	Albania	1881
"The Girl Who Went to War"	Pontos (was Greece, now Turkey)	1943
"The Courageous Daughter"	Kabardia (North Caucasus, now Russia)	1919
"A Woman Became a Man"	Serbia	1911

These folktales all begin with a king who needs a son to fight for their country, but he only has three daughters. The children dress in men's clothes and attempt to join the military, but the father sets a series of traps to defeat them. The first two daughters are foiled by the trap, but the youngest child succeeds, in several variants because they steal the father's magical old war horse or battle sword – the successful youngest daughter or son trope is very common in folktale types from across the world. The protagonist is very successful in the military and at all masculine tasks, attracting the love of a princess who is betrothed to someone she does not want to marry. The protagonist must accomplish a series of impossible tasks, the last of which is defeating a monster who casts the change of gender curse. Now the protagonist returns home a man, wins his princess back from the man she didn't love – in several variants the princess actually kills him – and they marry and live happily ever after. In just one variant, the protagonist kills the deceitful father at the conclusion (Pan 180). Variants of this group are notable in that it is not only the protagonist who is constrained due to the restrictions of their assigned gender – the princess's life is stifled by them as well.

"A Woman Became a Man" is unique and has a notable conclusion. Rather than being cursed by the magical being, the protagonist is given instructions on how to become a man – a complicated series of ritualistic steps involving cutting out the heart of a duck – and they go out and accomplish this themselves (Pan 181), demonstrating conscious, active choice in the change of gender and agency and responsibility for the change.

4. *Trickster Hero*

"The Princess that Turned into a Prince"	Hungary	1935
"The Girl Who Served as a Soldier and Got Married with the King's Daughter"	Norway	1843
"Woman as a Man"	Finland	1880s
"The King's Son-in-Law, a Woman, a Shooter, a Chain-Man, a Wood-Fell and a Blower"	Finland	1880s
"The Girl Who Went to War instead of her Brother"	Finland	1880s
"Satu"	Finland	1880s

This large group of variants, nearly all of them Finnish, has the same basic narrative structure as the other variant groups, however, they are clearly meant to be humorous, and they each conclude with the protagonist performing a fairly disgusting breach of social norms. The story begins because a brother is supposed to go to war, but he does not want to, so an assigned-female sibling dresses as a man and goes instead, finding great success in the military, and getting quickly wedded to the king's daughter. The protagonist is extremely heroic, skillful, and well-loved, and travels about with a band of followers and friends. When they are given the series of impossible tasks, they set out as a group to accomplish them, and succeed. However, on their way home, they encounter a cottage with no one home and decide to enter it: in four variants the protagonist defecates somewhere in the house, and in one they "only" destroy the inside. When the owners return, they curse the protagonist – in these variants, the curse is not to become a man, but instead to grow a problematically large penis: "If she were a girl, let her get a penis as a stallion has! If he was a boy, let him get genitals as a field-gate!" (Ready, "*She Was Really*," Appendix 2, tale 3). The language of these curses demonstrates the absurdity of a story meant to draw laughter from audiences. In one variant, "Satu," the protagonist is not cursed with a change of gender, they actually just approach a witch and ask her to change their gender for "500 marks" (Ready, "*She was Really*," Appendix 2 tale 4). Another very active change of gender.

In folktales especially, the reader expects that the good characters will be rewarded and the bad punished – in this group of tales, however, the protagonist is both a hero and a villain – and this is the role of the trickster. In folklore, the trickster is:

one who engages in trickery, deceives, and violates the moral codes of the community. Oral and written tales associated with this pervasive figure are usually humorous...The entertainment value of trickster tales is predicated on not only the trickster's clever actions per se but also on the subversive nature of his trickery. (Fernandes 992)

The trickster bucks social norms but laughs about it; entertaining for audiences, but also drawing attention to injustices or inequalities by creating chaos. As Fernandes argues, while most tricksters are male, female tricksters “transgress the boundaries between men’s and women’s spheres and enter public space.” She goes on to argue that these figures “represent women’s struggle for autonomy from men” (Fernandes 994). The trickster of ATU 514, then, both woman and man, is a liminal figure who through acts of social transgression creates within the tale room to consider and question those very cultural and social norms. Already engaged in the taboo acts of cross-dressing and marrying a woman, the trickster is also laughing in the face of accepted rules of decorum by defecating on tables and doorknobs. That the trickster tales, and these variants in particular, are humorous, allows the audience to consider gender roles and gender identity in a light-hearted way.

5. *The Hero and the Princess*

“Alimbeglanya” from <i>The Nart Sagas</i>	Ossetia (Georgia & Russia)	1000 BCE
“The Girl Who Pretended to Be a Boy”	Romania	1894 AD
“The Princess Who Would Be a Prince or Iliane of the Golden Tresses”	Romania	1870s

This variant group is perhaps the most well known, owing to one Romanian variant’s inclusion in Lang’s (1901) *The Violet Fairy Book*, a volume of one of the most popular fairytale collections of all time. This tale is long and complex and includes, in addition to many of the episodes in other variant groups, an additional episode: the rescue of the princess. These tales are a combination of ATU 514 and the classic romantic tale of Iliane and Fet-Fruners, Fet-Fruners being a male hero of many folktales from the region (Harris and Ipcar xii–xiii). The protagonist, then, in these tales not only succeeds as a man, but is a Prince Charming, the idealized masculine role. The stories begin when an aging and poor father needs a son to send to military service, and his daughters dress in men’s clothes, but he sets up traps for them when they leave. The youngest succeeds with a magical horse. The protagonist must accomplish a series of impossible tasks, the final being rescuing the princess Iliane (Lang 320–334 and Ispirescu 241–266). Here follows a complicated narrative of capturing Iliane back from a monster who wants to marry her. The protagonist succeeds, and in the final task gets into a scuffle with a monster who gives them the curse of the gender change (342). The couple marries and lives happily ever after.

This group includes the oldest tale in this collection, “Alimbeglanya,” a tale from the Ossetian Nart Sagas, mythological narratives that date to around 1,000 BCE. The Nart sagas are difficult to date because they are oral in nature and were not recorded until the nineteenth century, but are agreed to have roots in ancient Iran, and there is evidence that portions of the sagas date to 1,000 BCE. The sagas originate in the North Caucasus region, which was populated by peoples speaking a variety of languages, including many in which variants of ATU 514 appear: Greek, Turkish, Kabardian, Abkhaz, and Russian. Many of the sagas, therefore, are considered to stem from ancient Eastern sources. Although much older than the other variants in this group, and mythological rather than folkloric, “Alimbeglanya” is clearly of type ATU 514, containing the episodes of riding out in men’s clothes on the father’s horse, entering into service of the king, being sent on an impossible series of tasks, and rescuing a beautiful princess.

6. *Magical Transformation*

“The Unicorn”	Spain	1947
“The Metamorphosis”	Spain	1924
“Florinda”	Chile	1962
“Story of a Mule-Driver”	Mexico	1917

"Untitled"	Finland	1880s
"The Princess who Became a Man"	Denmark	1881

This group of variants is the most mysterious of the entire collection, and I personally find them the most moving. These tales vary rather widely from each other, but all include a similarly mysterious concluding change of gender scene. The tales begin with the protagonist choosing to dress as a man for a variety of reasons – in three variants it is to escape an incestuous father, or in others to escape a murderer. In others, the protagonist wants the freedom to leave home to travel, become rich, or simply to find a job. Central to each of these narratives is an episode of tests of masculinity. This is a trope that appears in more than half of the variants of ATU 514 in this collection. In these tests, the protagonist is given a series of challenges where they must demonstrate their manhood – often these tests are posed by a member of the king's court who does not believe the protagonist is a man. For example, in two variants ("The Girl Who Pretended to be a Boy" and "The Princess Who Would be a Prince") the protagonist is led through rooms, one filled with weapons, and one with flowers, and their doubters watch to see which they respond to the most. The final test involves the protagonist being nude – going for a swim with the king, taking a bath with someone, etc. It is during this final test that the magical change of gender takes place.

In "Story of a Mule Driver" the protagonist swaps genders with a bull; in the "The Unicorn," a mysterious "creature with very large antlers" (Lanclos 69) transforms the gender of the protagonist by making the sign of the cross over their groin. In "The Metamorphosis," the protagonist, without any explanation, kills a doe and hangs the head on their waist, and is magically transformed into a man (Lanclos 81); in "The Princess Who Became a Man," the protagonist chases a deer into the woods, and finds a magical helper who performs the gender change (Kristensen 248).

In an untitled Finnish tale, the protagonist asks a magical helper to change their gender, and a fox runs up and affixes new genitals (Ready, "She Was Really," Appendix 2, tale 5). In "Florinda," the protagonist carries a beloved crucifix with them everywhere, and when they face the final test of nudity, the "crucifix came flying over the waters. With that, Florinda stood up in the river and found herself turned into a man" (Pino-Saavedra 107).

The mysterious appearance of animals at the moment of the change of gender is clearly central to the story. It is notable that some of the animals (a unicorn, a stag, a bull) have phallic horns, which may be symbolic of manhood. The animals may also signify a ritual sacrifice – in two variants in this group, the protagonist is asked to sacrifice or symbolically sacrifice their wife's first-born child after their change of gender (Ready, "She Was Really," Appendix 2, tale 5; Kristensen). What is notable about these mysterious changes of gender compared to the other variant groups is that the changes of gender are not curses, but are gifts. The change of gender is presented as a narrative reward, a beneficence towards the deserving protagonist, most notably in the case of the crucifix, perhaps connected to the fact that the protagonists suffer so greatly early in the story, escaping from incestuous fathers or violent murderers.⁴

Literature Review

Analyzing texts using feminist, queer, and transgender theories produces a variety of readings and meanings. Historically, ATU 514 has been considered from a feminist or a queer perspective, and I hope that a brief overview of the literature will demonstrate the importance of centering a transgender theoretical approach.

Feminist folkloristics argues that folk art expresses a "multiplicity of meanings" ("Folklore"), and that the analysis of folk art, the unraveling of that meaning, is complex. In their 1987 article "The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature," Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser create a

⁴ I talk about the Danish variant in depth in Ready ("Transitioning").

typology of the patterns with which women or other marginalized groups embed their texts or works with “radical subtexts.” Storytellers, artists, and authors work details of their lives and their own sentiment into their creations, intentionally or not. Radner and Lanser do not distinguish between the theoretical importance of conscious or unconscious subtext; both are expressions of a lived experience, the communication of which may have been perceived as a threat by dominant groups and are therefore important presences within a text. These subtexts are often occulted because they are a threat to the *status quo*: “women’s creations and performances often covertly express ideas and attitudes proscribed by the dominant culture” (412). Experiences and truths that have historically been coded into narratives and works include sexual scenes or feelings, radical political positions, repressed or suppressed feelings of sadness, despair, or anger, not to mention strengths deemed inappropriate or threatening when held by a marginalized person, such as intellect, pride, power, or bravery. I make use of Radner and Lanser’s method of “(de)coding” to examine the secondary narratives that underlie the primary plot of ATU 514.

Queer theory builds on feminist theory and represents a shift in critical focus that centers sexuality and transgressive expressions of gender and gender roles in the analysis of any text. In *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (2012), a collection of queer analytical approaches to the Grimms’ folktales, editors Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill explain that they use Radner’s concept of coding, of “reordering or restructuring in an attempt to reveal the narrative’s latent content” (15). They read these folktales, in other words, between the lines: seeking out hidden or disguised experiences or feelings. Folktales are a rich source of cultural information, both explicit and implicit, because they do not shy from themes that are taboo, contentious, or provocative: “The fairy tale owes much of its longevity to contingencies and contradictions associated with desire and pleasure” (Turner and Greenhill 22). Sex, marriage, identity, family dynamics, wealth, and transformation are all classic themes of folk narrative. Folktales are also, because they are fantastic, a place to experiment with turning the world and its conventions on its head; a place to explore alternatives to accepted reality. One of the alternatives that folktales explore, Turner and Greenhill argue, is non-normative sexuality. Queer readings of folktales take notice of these episodes of world-flipping related to gender and sexuality: a story in which up is down, or woman is man, may be a signifier that the narrative is radically re-imagining cultural structures.

The earliest mention of ATU 514 historically is from Norman Brown in 1927, who provides a cross-tale analysis of a large number of variants, arguing that they draw directly from Hindu change of gender narratives (as in the variant group “The Borrowed Gender”). Brown reads the tales rather literally, connecting them to cultural experiences of homosexuality, intersexuality, and non-binary gender identities. Unfortunately, his analysis is peppered with transphobia and slurs, an indication that folklorists even as late as the early twentieth century may have considered ATU 514 and similar tales to be profane.⁵

In 1987, Danish folklorist Bengt Holbek mentions ATU 514 parenthetically, and his brief mention of the tale type is revealing. Holbek’s work centers on binary tensions in folk narratives, including male and female – he assumes that stories with female protagonists are favored by female storytellers and audiences, and those with male protagonists by men. In a note to one of his charts, he explains that “some tales must be disregarded” (618, footnote 119) from this system, including ATU 514, because of its anomalous position in his binary division of tales. Because the protagonist is a man and a woman at different times in the narrative, it is, to Holbek, uncategorizable. In fact, the tale type carries signifiers of both binaries, because the protagonist is female in the beginning of the story, but the protagonist’s adventure is a fairly standard male hero’s journey. Holbek calls the tale type a “curious case” in which “a girl assumes the hero’s role” (423). The gender transgressive ATU 514 throws a wrench in the works of Holbek’s binary. Anthropologist Lanclos (1996) analyzes variants of ATU 514 collected from the Iberian Peninsula and South America. Based on her scholarship of masculinity in these cultures, she argues that the variants “are symbolic accounts of the journey a boy raised in a traditional Hispanic family must take on his way to manhood” (Lanclos 74).

⁵ An ongoing conversation in folkloristics is censorship – over the centuries, publishers, editors, and folklorists have curated the tales included in published collections, and it was common, especially in the Victorian era, that “vulgar” stories were either left out entirely or deeply bowdlerized (Ashliman); Brown’s analysis is certainly evidence that “The Shift of Sex” has been considered at best aberrant, at worst, offensive.

This fascinating region-specific analysis was later disputed by Pauline Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire, (2014) which I'll expand on below.

Several scholars have analyzed ATU 514 from the perspectives of feminist and queer theory. Hooker (1990) discusses it in comparison to other tale types where women dress in men's clothes. She is ultimately disappointed by ATU 514, which she repeatedly refers to as "bizarre," even within the generally bizarre genre of folktales:

The heroines are vindicators of adventurous womanhood; they are models of valour and confidence and far outshine the male characters in the stories, seemingly proving that anything a man can do a woman can do better. However, in each case the girl loses her femininity completely by the end of the tale ... The prevailing message is certainly that it is not acceptable for a woman to step so fully into a man's shoes and that the privilege of acting like a man is not [to] be gained without sacrifice. (181)

Hooker's reading hinges on viewing the change of gender as a "sacrifice" or a "punishment" (182); I argue it is not evident in the tales themselves that the conclusion is a punishment – in fact, they end in the reward of a very happily ever after. In fact, in many variants, the change of gender is actively sought after by the protagonist. Hillers (1995) compares Gaelic variants of ATU 514 to other tale types in which a *man* transforms into a *woman* and back again.⁶ In these, the protagonists bemoan their transformation, and go to great lengths to regain their man's body. In contrast to these stories, Hillers explains that in ATU 514, the change of gender is a reward that "endorses society's preference of a boy over a girl" (178). Her conclusion could be extrapolated to signify that, like Hooker, Hillers believes that ATU 514 reinforces the superiority of men over women. However, Hillers does concede that "the gender change motif is a particularly daring mental experiment, enacting a role reversal in the rigid gender division of traditional Gaelic society" and that ATU 514 "is a complex statement about gender, a temporary role reversal of the imagination" (188). I certainly agree, and the observations I will make below about the presence of secondary narratives in ATU 514 support the tale type's nuanced perspective on gender and gender roles.

Pan (2013) analyzes variants of ATU 514 from the Balkans from the perspective of queer theory: early on in the tale, two assigned-female characters fall in love and are betrothed, and so Pan argues that the protagonist's gender is changed "to disable and even prohibit the unacceptable relationship" (179) and that "the heroine becomes deprived of any agency over her sex and sexuality" (165). I would counter that this perspective ignores the transgender possibility of the narrative – the protagonist is only deprived of agency if the change of gender is not desired. Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire build on these readings to consider "transgender imagination," which they define as "thinking about or expressing the idea that a person, self or other, is or could be a different sex/gender than it appears" (56). They argue that ATU 514 and tales like it express "transgender imagination and transgender possibility quite explicitly" (63), and describe earlier critiques, in particular Lanclos, as transphobic, noting that she and Hooker are "apparently unable to conceive of the protagonist's transsexual transformation as anything but a loss of womanhood" (69). Like Hillers, Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire point to ATU 514 as a mental experiment upon gender and gender roles. Their conclusion is "the tale can be interpreted – as can trans itself – as a subtle exploration and undermining of sex and gender" (57). Their argument is further supported by my own analysis of the secondary narratives I will discuss below.

Transgender theory broadens and complicates queer theory and its approaches to texts; it examines what "gender means and does" in the present day, but it is not restricted to the present: it "seeks as well to reevaluate prior understandings of gender, sex, sexuality, embodiment, and identity in light of more recent transgender phenomena" (Stryker and Aizura 3). My reading of a transgender protagonist of ATU 514 draws from several concepts: first, what David Getsy (2014) calls "transgender capacity," "the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple" (47) as well as *trans*historicitities*, a theoretical approach that incorporates both investigation and

⁶ There are numerous tales across the world featuring a male to female transformation; however, in these tale types the man always transforms back into a man at the end of the story – Tiresias from Greek myth is probably the most famous example. I discuss these tales in depth in Ready ("She Was Really the Man She Pretended to Be").

imagination: Devun and Tortorici suggest we “move beyond the question of ‘Is a particular historical figure or community trans, and how do we know?’ to the further questions of ‘What does such a history do? How does it trouble our certainty about the past, present, or future?’” (531). In this analysis, I am both asking, “what does this transgender character do?” as well as marveling at what the transgender capacity of this tale type tells us about the ways storytellers and their audiences have felt and thought about gender.

Finally, I quote at length from M. W. Bychowski on the role of *imagination* in transgender studies:

Imagination and story is how we find ways of functioning, ways of making connections, and getting from yesterday to tomorrow ... Transgender was at times and in ways unthinkable and unspeakable in the past, but that does not mean it was nonexistent. If silence were the same as nonexistence, many of us would not be here. Other times, transgender is thought and spoken between words, in appropriated words, in metaphors and suggestions. Our job is then not only to help the past speak but to learn to read the ways the past gives us signs and gestures. Working symbiotically between past and present, textual and imagined histories, the trans historian and trans history can co-operate in the telling. (677)

My project is an effort of imagination, in reading both the transgender capacity of the protagonist and the experiences I have identified as secondary narratives.

I believe these efforts are crucial: several studies⁷ have illuminated the painful reality of trans representation in popular narratives today – even as we increase visibility of transgender, queer, and non-normative sexualities and identities in media, these narratives more often than not end in tragedy. The ending of a story tends to be a judgment of the characters – the good/normative ones live, and the bad/transgressive ones die. In this ancient folktale, however, we find a transgressive and/or transgressive character whose narrative ends in perfect happiness, a hero’s reward.

Analysis: Secondary Narratives

In charting the episodes, backstories, and details of these variants, it became clear that there was both a primary and a secondary narrative to each – the secondary narrative being an obscured, coded (a la Radner and Lanser) expression of fear of and frustration with the threats and restrictions of the patriarchy. The primary narrative, of course, is the adventure of the cross-dressing protagonist climactically transforming into a man – a narrative that upends the social norms of gender roles and assigned gender and creates a playful space in which to consider and question traditional gender roles and their restrictions. When looked at as a group, however, it was very evident that behind these fantastic, playful narratives was buried a series of details describing the agonies of the patriarchy and the restrictions of gender roles. There are too many details in too many stories to list here, however, I collected them and found that they fall into five themes: *rigid rules of marriage; restricted mobility and employment; heterosexism; gendered stereotypes; femicide; and violent patriarchs*. These themes are not typically addressed or drawn attention to within the narrative, they are instead simply presented as fact; in many variants, they are what initiates the story in the first place.

Rigid Rules of Marriage

These tales are littered with details of the sexist rules of marriage and women’s lack of control over their choice of mate. Often the brunt of these rules falls on the princess who falls in love with the protagonist. In

⁷ See Lauren B. McInroy & Shelley L. Craig. “Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media: LGBTQ Youth Perspectives,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2015, pp. 606–617. doi:10.1080/10911359.2014.995392; Keegan, Cael M. “Moving bodies: sympathetic migrations in transgender narrativity.” *Genders*, no. 57, 2013; Kehrli, Keffy R. M. “Tropes as Erasers: A Transgender Perspective,” *Apex Magazine*, 2016, <https://apex-magazine.com/tropes-as-erasers-a-transgender-perspective/>.

“Story of a Mule Driver,” “The Metamorphosis,” and “The Unicorn,” the princess is so smitten that she goes to great lengths to secure the marriage: she persuades her parents, or devises ways to bring them together. But because she is breaking the gendered tradition of men proposing marriage, she is reprimanded, and the text, which is somewhat sparse, goes out of its way to include a conversation between father and daughter. In “The Unicorn,” her father tells her, “daughter, it is he who must declare his love for you. Women never speak first” (Lanclos 69). Like the protagonist, who dresses in men’s clothes to experience certain freedoms, the princess is also stifled by the restrictions of her gender, and in many variants, she transgresses them. I quote a very touching line from “The Girl Who Pretended to be a Boy,” the lengthy romance included in Lang’s *The Violet Fairy Book*. In this tale, the princess Iliane is desired as a bride by a monster, the emperor, and the protagonist, who is sent to capture her. An extremely common trope in folk and fairy tales is the kidnapped and rescued princess. In this story, however, the reader’s attention is drawn towards the injustice of this situation for the princess. In between one kidnapping and the next, Iliane wonders aloud why, “while other girls did as they liked, she was always in the power of someone she hated” (338). She bemoans her utter lack of agency. In the tale, she is stolen and bartered for by three different characters, all masculine, as if she were an object. While the protagonist’s gender transgression and ultimate transition to manhood obviously steals the reader’s attention, Iliane’s story also demonstrates the restrictions of marriage traditions, women’s lack of agency in marriage, and the objectification of women as brides.

Several other variants include details about women’s lack of choice over who they marry. For instance, in the Serbian “A Woman Became a Man,” a father’s three children try to escape because he has forbidden them to marry, and when they escape, he kills the two he can catch. In other variants, daughters are traded and bartered for in marriage as if they were objects: in one example, the Armenian tale “The Girl Who Changed into a Boy,” the protagonist, when offered a wish from the king, has requested his magical horse Lulizar, and the king responds “Lulizar is worth my entire kingdom ... If I give her to you, I might as well give you my daughter too! And so he did” (Downing 83). The father of the princess hands over his daughter as an after-thought, equating her to an animal.

Restricted Mobility and Employment

Most of the variants of ATU 514 begin because the king needs a soldier, and a family has no father or son who can go. In these tales, the role of the soldier is represented with great honor: a soldier, of course, is a valued and respected member of society. This is a role any able-bodied man may occupy regardless of class, yet traditionally no woman can, even if she is inclined. On the other hand, being a soldier is dangerous, and selection for duty is often a death sentence, and several variants feature brothers or fathers who want to avoid fighting for this reason. In one Finnish variant, a brother is supposed to go to war but wants to stay home to care for his mother: “The father died, and so the boy was now his sister’s and mother’s support. The boy was of age to go into military service, but this would have been a great grief for the mother, for she was quite helpless now” (Ready, “*She Was Really*,” Appendix 2 tale 1). This story demonstrates the restrictions of both gender roles: the brother, because of his gender, is required to leave the comforts of home and to risk his life in a king’s war, leaving his mother without support; the old woman cannot live alone without anyone to protect her because as a woman she is vulnerable. The stories’ focus on traditional military rules demonstrates the restrictive gender roles of both men and women: men are expected to serve, even when they cannot or do not want to, and women are forbidden, even when they are willing. There are other variants in which the protagonist dresses as a man not to go to war, but to gain employment to support their family, or even just to travel freely in the world (“Story of a Mule Driver”). These are freedoms traditionally held by men, but not women.

Heterosexism

In most variants, the protagonist and the princess either fall in love, are betrothed, or are married before the protagonist's change of gender. In several variants, the couple is happy with this arrangement, although afraid of the judgment or punishment they may experience for disrupting the cultural tradition of heterosexuality. Some variants include descriptions of romantic love between what could be viewed by the reader, at moments during the tale, as a queer relationship between two women. Ovid's "Iphis and Ianthe," in particular, includes heartbreaking lines:

And so it was that both their simple hearts Love visited alike

and both alike Were smitten – but their hopes how different...

Poor Iphis loved a girl, girl loving girl,

And knew her love was doomed and loved the more.

Almost in tears, "What will become of me?"

She said, "possessed by love unheard of, love

So monstrous, so unique?" ...

A female never fires a female's love.

Would I were not a girl! (Ovid 222)

In several variants, the couple is happy to be in a queer marriage. In the Spanish tale "The Unicorn," the princess discovers her partner's naked body on their wedding night and her response is to say: "well, look, don't worry about it" (Lanclos 69). In "Florinda," the princess is overjoyed in discovering her spouse's identity. She sweetly exclaims: "All the better then! We'll live together like two doves in the world" (Pino-Saavedra 109). In the Danish "The Princess Who Became a Man," on their wedding night, the protagonist "admitted to the princess that she was not a man, but was herself a princess. They promised one another that they would live happily together as they were without anyone knowing their secret" (Kristensen 248). Many variants of this tale type include descriptions of happy – if temporary – queer relationships as well as grief at the impossibility of sustaining those relationships in their communities.

Gendered Stereotypes

Nearly all variants include some variation of the "tests of masculinity," a series of tests the protagonist faces as soon as they leave home – killing an enemy, hunting an animal, shooting an arrow, success in a battle. In each of these tests, the protagonist demonstrates prowess at all traditionally masculine skills. Later in the tales, typically a member of the king's household doubts the protagonist's masculinity, and sets a series of tests designed to reveal the "true sex" of the protagonist. In one common episode, the protagonist must pass through gardens of beautiful flowers and resist the temptation to stop and admire them – a feminine habit; flowers may be placed on their pillow, because flowers will wilt in the hand of a man, but stay fresh in the hand of a woman.

In another narrative structure, the tests of masculinity are high and low chairs – the protagonist must choose, and it is expected that a woman will sit in the low chair and a man in the high chair. In the Chilean tale "Florinda," the protagonist is led through a garden containing men's flowers and women's flowers, and is watched to see which are appealing, and later is led into a room full of weapons; it is expected that a woman will not notice them, but a man would comment upon them.

These tests describe gender stereotypes: common social or cultural understandings of male and female behavior, many of them extremely silly or meaningless. The clever protagonist always easily overcomes

these tests, supported by their magical helper, and the reader presumably cheers them on or laughs at the silliness of these stereotypes. The audience, therefore, has the opportunity to call these cultural beliefs into question and confront them as fiction rather than fact – because although most of these stereotypes are silly or absurd, their perpetuation represents deeper cultural assumptions about gender that impacted the lived experiences of storytellers and audiences of this tale type.

Femicide

This is one of the most common backstory themes in all of the narratives: in 9 out of 26 variants, a mother is pregnant, and the father refuses to accept the birth of a daughter. In most of these variants, the father has threatened that if the child is a girl, he will kill her; in others, he threatens to: kill the mother, divorce his wife, kill the midwife, put the daughter into slavery, or declare war on another country. Again, this horrifically cruel practice is, quite glaringly, not addressed or called attention to as an injustice or an unusual behavior – it is simply presented as a fact in nine of these stories. The threat of femicide is the initiator of the primary conflict in these stories, and is a perfect example or encapsulation of the traditional comparative value of female and male lives, and the violence of the patriarchal systems that uphold that valuation.

Violent Patriarchs

Probably the most disturbing theme in variants of ATU 514 is the brutality of the violent father – as I mention above, in nine variants the father has made a violent threat against his family if his child is born a girl. In three other variants, the father is deceitful to his children, and intentionally sets traps to foil them once they set out from home in men's clothes.

In the Kabardian tale “The Courageous Daughter,” the father “managed, unseen, to overtake his daughter, and throw a bridge of copper over a stream that she would have to cross. Then, changing himself into a wolf, he lay down under one of the arches, and waited” (Dirr 322–323). When the daughter runs back home in fear, the father is waiting there, and tells her, “Did I not tell you, my child, that flies do not make honey?” (323). His approbation to his daughter is that she is a woman, and therefore she cannot excel at men's skills. His children have set out *on their father's behalf* at great personal risk, only to have that effort immediately thwarted by the father. Even worse, in the Serbian “A Woman Became a Man,” he *kills* his two eldest when they try to leave home. In three gruesome variants, an incestuous father wants to marry his daughter for her beauty.⁸ In the Danish “The Princess Who Became a Man,” when the protagonist leaves home, the father sets his vicious dogs in pursuit, and the protagonist cuts off their breasts to feed to the dogs and secure escape.

Coding and Category Crisis

What these recurring themes in ATU 514 have in common is the assumption that a female life is of less value than a male life, which is the reason that male drag is necessary for the protagonist. These secondary

⁸ The incest motif that appears in tale type ATU 510B, “Peau d’Asne,” whose well-known variants are the English “Cap o’ Rushes,” the Grimms’ “Allerleirauh,” or the French literary fairy tale, “Donkeyskin.” Uther notes that this motif has been “documented independently since the 12th century” (Uther 295). Both ATU 514 and ATU 510B include themes of disguise, but in ATU 510B, the disguise is temporary, while in ATU 514, the protagonist remains male.

narratives may be understood as coded, as described by Radner and Lanser. They list several typical ways texts may be coded, one of which being *distraction*, or “strategies that drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message. Usually distraction involves creating some kind of ‘noise,’ interference, or obscurity that will keep the message from being heard except by those who listen very carefully or suspect the message is there” (417–418). The very loud primary narrative of the fantastic, transgressive, cross-dressing, gender-changing hero draws attention away from the secondary narratives, which describe the very real threats of the patriarchy.

In understanding the relationship between the gender transgressive protagonist and the secondary narratives, I draw from Marjorie Garber’s idea of a category crisis, signifying obscured but significant narrative action. Garber’s work focuses on cross-dressing characters in the literature, observing that their presence in a text often “indicates a category crisis elsewhere, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin” (16). The adventure of the protagonist of these tales is marginal because they are male and female at different moments of the story, and their marginality demonstrates, according to Garber’s theory, that somewhere else in the text, a significant category is being dismantled. These “irresolvable conflicts” in the secondary narratives – lack of freedom of marriage, mobility, employment, stereotypes, rape, incest, sexism, violence, femicide – are very real and personal, and frank discussion of them would be at least tense, if not impossible. The protagonist of ATU 514, however, with their transgender or gender transgressive behavior, carries these tensions, drawing attention away from the dismantling of male supremacy and the patriarchal hierarchy occurring in the secondary narratives. Garber argues that the category crisis is “disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (16). In ATU 514, these dissonances are deeply ingrained social structures: the patronizing de-individualizing gender stereotypes; the power of fathers over wives and children; the lack of agency and choice that women have over their marriages, and thus over their sexual and personal desires; the political and military systems that do not value feminine contributions, but commodify masculine skills, which leads to the inability of girls to contribute to the wealth and stability of their families; and finally, the sum of all these injustices, which creates a world wherein a boy child is treasured, and a girl child unwanted.

Conclusion

ATU 514 has typically been ignored or overlooked in folkloric discussions of gender or sexuality, and it is likely that variants of this tale type have been excluded from collections due to the profanity of its transgressions against assigned gender and gender roles. Past scholars have focused their readings of this tale type, understandably, on the primary narrative of the protagonist; recent queer and feminist scholars have debated whether or not the protagonist of these tales is best read as a transgressive figure. In this project, the work of compiling textual evidence from a large number of variants has illuminated the existence of two levels to the narrative: the primary adventure story and, below that, a coded documentation of the horrors of patriarchal oppression. With an eye to these secondary narratives, I argue that ATU 514 is and has been a transgressive tale that is simultaneously a presentation of a heroic transgender character achieving a well-deserved, a happily ever after, *and* an occulted utterance of grief and rage at the lived realities of women, those who don’t fit their assigned genders, and others oppressed by traditional patriarchal culture.

That ATU 514 has been continuously told and collected for so long and across such a broad geographical area is evidence that the narrative has been compelling to audiences across cultures and eras; the presence of many modes of entry, indicated by the fact that it has been debated by scholars for over a century, is a testament to its complexity. The persistence of ATU 514 demonstrates an ongoing human fascination with gender; it is not a modern inclination to observe conventional bodies, identities, and behaviors and ask, “is that all there is?” ATU 514 and tales like it deserve further scholarly attention and questioning so that we may deepen our understanding of the history of the human relationship with gender.

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